

## All together now!

The team is the objective. The onboard community benefits from improved communication skills, which is why senior officers from E.R. Schifffahrt are taking part in a leadership coaching programme

What on earth are 20 grown men doing standing on a blue tarp outside on the lawn? They deliberate, talk to one another and then – amid a hurly-burly of brisk activity – complete the first part of their task in just two, three minutes. They manage to flip the tarpaulin without stepping on the grass. Now they face the second part of the challenge: the 20 senior officers have to inch their way forward on the tarp to retrieve their dessert – a box of sweets.

According to the coach, Katja Ischebeck, this stimulating post-lunch pick-me-up demonstrates the whole point of the exercise: "If the group doesn't function as a team, then it can't achieve its goal. That means everyone has to be clear on the objective, know how to go about achieving it and be aware of what the others are doing," says the psychologist. She is the leadership coach for the senior officers taking part in the Fleet Officers Meeting, which took place at Timmendorf, one and a half hours northeast of Hamburg on the Baltic Sea coast.

The timetable includes theory and role play and is designed to improve communication among the crew. Better communication skills can mean expressing oneself more clearly. It can also mean avoiding unnecessary conflicts and resolving unavoidable ones. And all with the overriding goal of functioning as a team and joining forces to achieve the set targets.

"Conflicts on board can arise when orders or instructions trigger confusion among the crew," says Ischebeck. This is when common objectives are put in jeopardy, and explains why the participants use role play to solve problems they have encountered on board. A railing has to be welded, for example: to ensure the work is done promptly, the officer needs the fitter of another team on deck, who is currently busy dealing with another job in the engine room. "In that case, it is important to reach a mutual agreement. The master shouldn't have to make a top-down decision on every issue. Tasks on board can also be allocated laterally." This means weighing up the priorities. Which of the jobs can be put on the back burner? Why does a particular task have to be dealt with immediately? "The participants are very keen to find joint solutions. It is also extremely important for seafarers in highly responsible positions to be familiar with traditional leadership skills," Ischebeck explains.

The abilities Ischebeck refers to also include so-called soft skills such as team spirit, critical faculty, assertiveness, empathy and analytical competence. "We talked about the case of a young officer who had been appointed to a position that an experienced crew member had also set his sights on." The officer was forced to grapple with all manner of bellyaching. "In cases like that it is important to define boundaries and to demonstrate the

Theory and role play – coach Katja Ischebeck put together an exciting workshop



Photo: Sebastian Walther

Flip the tarpaulin first, then retrieve the dessert. Only teamwork can achieve this without someone stepping on the lawn



How can I be a good leader and how does better communication help me achieve this? Either Katja Ischebeck has the answers – or they are developed by the group itself



E.R. Schifffahrt Group

consequences of such behaviour on board," says Ischebeck. This is where the constructive confrontation technique is needed. "Faced with such a situation, the officer has to address the problem head-on and state precisely what it is that he regards as disrespectful." Threats should always be a measure of last resort. "Before it comes to that, you always have a greater chance of getting through to the other person by giving clear messages and explaining consequences," says Ischebeck.

The coaching gave many of the officers an opportunity to acquaint themselves with all the necessary leadership qualities. Ronald Schnitter, Director Fleet Personnel, says, "That proved to be truly enriching." It was particularly important to him that situations arising from appraisal talks were dealt with in the role play sessions. "A typical cause of friction might be when a master refuses to endorse an officer's promotion." The appraised officer is naturally disappointed, and this is when the master has to be honest in addressing the applicant's shortcomings. It is also important that he makes suggestions for improvement and provides a clear picture of the desired behaviour.

During the coaching sessions the seminar room doors remained shut for non-participants. "It's important for the group to be undisturbed," says Ischebeck. "The exercises proved quite a challenge for the participants. This includes the officers describing situations they felt were problematic." Also, the level at which the topics of communication and cooperation were dealt with, was new to many.

"I am really pleased that everyone took such an active part," says Schnitter. "They had to switch positions during the role play

exercises. Suddenly, the master was no longer the supreme authority in the decision-making hierarchy, but instead had been relegated to being one among many – and vice versa. The colleagues, who all took part voluntarily, did a really good job."

Discussions on issues unrelated to their specific professions also proved challenging during the coaching. "None of the participants are English native speakers, so discussing topics that have nothing to do with shipping caused certain difficulties," says Ischebeck. Matters were complicated further by cross-cultural sensitivities. This is similar to the situation on board, for example when there is little time for subtle undertones and orders are often barked. "Please", "Thank you" and a friendly gesture can often work wonders!

"There are a lot of new things to learn here," said Second Engineer Almir Canovic, whose most recent posting was aboard the "Zim Beijing" ("E.R. Beijing"). The days spent learning by the Baltic are a stark contrast to work at sea. "It's interesting to learn about communication. Being able to exchange ideas on a personal level is a huge advantage. Usually our contact is limited to sending e-mails." When asked whether he considered the content of the coaching measures relevant and applicable to his job on board, Vyacheslav Miroshnichenko, who recently sailed on the "Maersk Sheerness" ("Mendelssohn Star") as a second engineer, replied: "Absolutely. It was really interesting and useful."

Back to the green lawn and the blue tarp: the 20 senior officers were amazingly quick to retrieve the box of sweets – all thanks to teamwork. ■

## Three questions for

Ronald Schnitter, Director Fleet Personnel

**In a conflict on board, how much of it comes down to the matter in hand, and how much is caused by personal differences?**

Most of the conflicts I can remember arose because the chemistry wasn't right. That is the impression I get from the many conversations I have had with senior officers on board. Very often you get an idea that something is amiss. If that's the case, then I address the issue and we talk about it. Sometimes problems between the generations are the focus. After all, you no longer have to spend 20 years at sea before becoming a master. Quite a lot has changed.

**Talking of change: What qualities does it take to be an ideal senior officer on board?** I think that we have undertaken a step in the right direction by introducing this type of coaching. The participants, all of whom are here voluntarily, haven't done anything wrong, but the circumstances have changed. Among the officers, greater attention is being paid to the issue of soft skills. We also have to consider that the

needs of the colleagues have shifted. A master has to be able to give feedback but be open to criticism at the same time. If a digital native, someone who is particularly tech-savvy when it comes to ECDIS, openly states that he regards the sailed course as less than ideal, then the master must be able to deal with his objections. That is what I want to see in executive officers: the courage to consider other options instead of always clinging to traditional practices.

**How are these changes affecting the crews?** Masters are now more likely to include other navigational, technical or deck officers into their decision-making process. Changes are also being felt in other areas, particularly when common objectives are defined, for example on the issue of energy efficiency. The entire crew needs to be aware of these goals and has to work together to achieve them. That can only be effective if everyone does their job. Executive officers both need and want to make more use of the full potential of their entire crew.



Ronald Schnitter, Director Fleet Personnel

Photo: E.R. Schifffahrt