

BEFORE IT WALKS OUT THE DOOR: CREW MANAGERS

A pragmatic guide to marine crew management

*A field guide for new crew managers
on busy maritime projects*

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A NOTE ON THIS DOCUMENT

This guide is a “project archaeology” working sample prepared for melecoronato.com.

The source material came from a fictive interview of a maritime crew management practitioner. The scope of the guide is not to describe what a crew manager does – this can be found in countless sources online. Rather, to highlight and explain which pragmatic heuristics impact a crew manager’s decision making. And which tacit agreements, dependencies and understandings let a crew manager decide and act in a certain way.

Also, the guide aims to draw a clear picture of the stakeholder landscape a crew manager is part of. By describing the processes at work and the rationale behind these, it also encourages a new crew manager to scrutinise information provided to them, assess its validity and handle a challenging operational situation quickly and pragmatically.

The fictive guide would be intended to transfer operational knowledge before it gets lost between the departure of one crew manager and the arrival of a new one.

After answering a set of fictive questions about field experience of a crew management practitioner, the material was consolidated into this reference format. Names, employers, dates, nationalities and vessels have been generalised or put together so that no individual case, ship or organisation is named. What matters here is the pattern and instructional content – the useful lessons and resulting recommended best practises, in a word, not personal particulars.

What you see below is also just one of many options to collect and transfer industry knowledge. And it can have many possible forms and uses, among which:

- *As quick start & howto guide for newbies to the industry, tailored to specific functions.*
- *As startup guide for the same target group, going into much more operational detail.*
- *As glossary, a terminology database, industry contacts as internal business directory.*
- *Recommendations on what to feed and how to check output of internal AI agents.*
- *To identify features a new software should have, from indispensable to ‘nice to have’.*
- *Best practise insights on how to be efficient and effective as crew manager.*

The guide following here illustrates the first option: A quick start & howto guide. It consists of 4 parts:

Part 1: The essentials of the job in a nutshell. And what impact factors are at play.

Part 2: The human factor and how to stay well, both for crews and their crew manager.

Part 3: Lessons from the field which usually are not written down anywhere.

Part 4: Some info resources for crew plus recommended reading.

Why This Guide Exists

Maritime crew management (or sometimes called crew coordination) is one of those work types whose daily practice entails more than the job term might evoke. On paper and in a chic job description it is “simply” lots of scheduling, certification checks, then travel bookings and the pertaining filing, all possibly done in a cost-savvy manner. In practice it is a live and constant moving negotiation between very diverse people, weather, bureaucracy and time zones - plus a mighty player called the human factor. And a trickster-like saboteur of all plans called force majeure. Most of which never makes it into a handover document. When an experienced crew manager leaves, that judgment leaves with them. Yet anyone able to get a solid grasp of the core knowledge can pick up quite efficiently where the expert has left. And young crew managers new to the profession could get a relatively quick start and leg up to the essential basics, therewith substantially decreasing stress and overwhelm. If they only know how to get a quick picture and where to find which information.

This guide is an attempt to write some of it down, so that someone new to crew management is better prepared - and encouraged to ask the right questions, to the right people: Way before it becomes urgent, and with much more confidence.

It draws on real life experience from marine crew management. Busy technical and offshore projects, generalised into composite examples: Useful for this guide are the lessons learned and the methods proven effective in practise, not more not less.

As said above, the guide consists of four parts:

- 1) A brief summary of what the job entails in terms of who does what, when and why.
- 2) How to create healthy and safe conditions for both crew and the crew manager.
- 3) Lessons from the field, told through some sample stories which actually did happen.
- 4) A collection of resources for further information.

Part 1: The Essentials

The essentials of the job in a nutshell

What The Maritime Crew Manager Role Covers

Maritime vessel operators and service providers come in a huge variety. So it stands to reason to expect that their crew managers would be a truly varied crowd, too - which is true up to a certain point. Same goes for crew, due to the nature of the many different vessels. But there are some basic elements regarding successful crew deployment which will be more or less the same across the maritime industry, for all sides involved.

A crew manager familiar with those elements has a valuable head start.

Also, one might think that once a crew manager is hired, the following shortlist should go without saying. Yet after having seen so much that normally “goes without saying” fly out of the window in hectic moments, I figure some simple bigger picture can’t hurt.

Here it is.

Who is the “right” crew?

At its core, crew management is the discipline of matching the right person to the right position on a vessel, on time, safely - and then repeating that process continuously, as a moving target. “Right” as a crew is not one thing; I’d say it is six things that all have to be true at once, each time:

- **Qualified:** valid certifications matching the exact role - CoC, STCW-training, flag state endorsement where required. A no-brainer usually not subject to discussion.
- **Travel-ready on paper:** passport and visa in order for the destination and transit countries.
- **Physically and mentally fit for deployment:** a current medical fitness certificate from an approved seafarer medical examiner proves it. Extra eye on that mental fitness though – I get to that in a bit.
- **Available:** crew is genuinely free for the proposed period, with realistic flexibility on end dates. Spoiler alert: Interpretations of “realistic” can vary wildly, depending on whom you ask. Do your best to get an objective picture on the situation.
- **Able to travel in reality:** a workable travel route to the vessel exists including any mandatory overnight stops, with known disruption risks factored in.
- **Ready to be received:** ship Captain and crew are informed and prepared in time, local permissions, agent and transfer arrangements are in place - offshore crew changes usually run via crew tender or helicopter getting crew out to the vessel active at sea. Or crew change is organized during the vessel’s next port call.

Behind that checklist sits a second, quieter job: holding together a set of information flows and relationships. The project office, the ship’s Captain and Chief Officer, the crew themselves, staffing agencies, travel logistics, local agents and port authorities - each needing something different, on a different timeline, with only the crew manager holding the whole crewing picture.

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The Crew Manager's Gear Wheel



Every stakeholder turns at a different speed, so to speak. The crew manager's bravery is keeping them meshed - not trying to do any one job better than the specialist who owns it, but making sure none of the gears blocks or delays the others.

Upon your arrival: Questions to ask asap

Crew management always will be a role rich of action. It can be real great and rewarding work, but you must look out for your health and speak up in time about what you need. When you start as a crew manager, you'll quickly establish the first classic basics: How many ships the company got active, what type, under which flag they sail and how many active crew are available.

The company's answers to your very next set of questions though, equally important, will tell you a lot about your actual working environment. And about your company's preparedness to invest in professional efficiency. Dare to bring these up in the first days.

Big companies with great supporting resources like external service providers are not necessarily more efficient compared to smaller, more agile ones. Knowing that in moments of high urgency one could "throw money against a problem" to solve it quickly, does not always invite people to do their jobs well. So they could have, among most capable project managers, also a few quite chaotic ones. With an allergy against accountability, in some cases. Or blissfully hallucinating sales teams, promising spectacular things to a client - and then leaving the superintendent, the fleet manager, crew manager, Captains and crews with the challenge to realise those promises.

By contrast, smaller companies can be very smart in managing their limited resources, yet simply need help in improving their efficiency. And they may struggle to see, acknowledge and tackle that in time. A rapid growth phase of their business is an especially delicate moment for them. Major admin, growing operational pressures can arrive seemingly out of the blue, like rapids, with systems not yet in place to facilitate and structure documentation. And financial planners understandably reluctant to invest limited budgets in improvements whose real efficacy is still unknown. That is a classic and notorious cocktail of factors not only impacting the work of their crew managers.

To both protect your health and help your company take the right next steps, it is vital that you speak up: About what can be done, where bottlenecks and operational impossibility appear and why. And to be able to speak up, you need a clear picture. Put briefly and prosaic: What you find as working conditions very much depends on the people already present at a given company, their intelligence and willingness to listen. What you create from what you find, depends on your very same type of capacities.

So here some basic questions to ask – proactively, as they say so nicely:

- *Where is crew recruited from – temp agencies, freelancers, direct?*
- *Which crew countries / regions are prevalent? (Western, Southern, Northern or EU, Eastern EU, Indonesian, Filipino, South American, other?*
- *What crewing software do you work with?*
- *Who books the flight tickets for crew?*
- *Do you have local coordinators on site for the projects?*
- *Who does the crew admin from a contracts / payment / payroll view?*

Examples.

Some companies have their own HR / admin & payroll departments. And have crews' flight tickets booked by an external travel agent. On digital paper, that looks like a fine setting. Yet they may expect their crew manager to keep admin records about crew time aboard the vessels, checking incoming invoices from the travel agent, producing crew contracts, etc. – all of which are not exactly done in 5 minutes. Especially if you multiply the action per, say, 60. And / or they may work with crew from many different countries. In which case you'll have much more action too with checking visas, validity / equivalency of certificates, travel routes and so on.

So you want a clear picture soon. Including those at first glance innocent looking factors. Here is your checklist in operational terms. You want to find out and keep an eye on

- how your daily workload looks like (scheduling, planning, admin, travels, certificates)
- if you get any support in that. If so, by whom and with what exactly
- if not, why
- if the company is willing to invest in intelligent improvements. If so, [since] when, how and in what precisely.
- if not, why

This simple kind of assessment, followed by your own internal decisions on how far to accept which conditions, should already give you some real protection from overwhelm.

By

- doing your best to get a clear picture,
- honestly assessing whether or not you can match what's needed,
- speaking up what you need to deliver good work (training? rest times?),
- proposing improvements where you see potential for these,

you help your company, your crews and yourself.

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The Mobilization Sequence

From “we'll need someone” to a confirmed crews’ seat on a plane, good mobilization follows a consistent sequence. Skipping a checkpoint is usually where trouble starts.

1. Keep the baseline current, before anyone asks.

Certificates, visas, contracts and youngest personal details (crew’s real current phone number, current residence, current next of kin details, sizes for PPE) should already be up to date and easy to retrieve, for every crew member, before a request ever comes in. Reactive coordinators are always one step behind; proactive ones already know who is ready. In other words, keep your records clean and current.

Warm advice: This good practise tends to get felled first when hectic comes up as it surely will. Insist to make time and keep making time, to save time later on: 15-30 minutes on a regular base. It will contribute to a clear picture for you.

Also, set up a crew management file system that works for *you*. And do not be afraid to do so from scratch. With a well running file system, finding any crew related file should not take you more than 3-4 mouse clicks. I’ve seen the most colourful creations and compositions when it comes to file naming, grouping and version control of documents.

2. Get a precise picture of the crew request - not the vague one.

Like the news and the truth, travel date and boarding date often are not the same thing and busy managers routinely conflate them. So I’d warmly recommend you become a gentle bully to your ever-so busy project manager(s): Pin down the exact needed boarding date, expected deployment duration, realistic tolerance for delay (weather, transfers). Same goes for the exact crew qualification needed. For example, not just “an engineer” but for which ship exactly? Sometimes a young engineer with the good papers will do, fresh from the maritime school. At another time, an “old fox” of an engineer might be needed, able to troubleshoot a beastly older model of an engine out at sea. Also, not just “someone for the deck”, but an AB II/5 or an OS II/4? Get the exact info about the job to perform. Your most useful source for this type of info is the vessel’s Captain.

Also, a well prepared crew manager’s homework includes having a good overview of every vessel’s specifications at hand like

- type of vessel
- (you know it’s AHTS, a multicat, a barge or cargo vessel but does the temp agency providing your crew, or the freelance crew themselves?)
- flag under which it sails, Gross Tonnage (GT), engine specs (kW) specs - relevant for flag state endorsement of the crew’s CoC
- safe manning requirements for the vessel
which will also tell you how many of a given crew the vessel needs as a minimum.

Also, where possible, check with the ship’s Captain directly: the shore-side view of “sufficiently qualified” and the on-board view of “who we actually need” for a given deployment are not always the same person. Which brings us to the next one:

3. Match candidates - and weigh fit, not just qualification.

A technically qualified candidate is not automatically the right one for a given deployment. Some postings call for calm, seasoned crew who can handle scrutiny and political pressure on a highly visible site. Other deployments suit a hardier, less “public-facing” role during a demanding transit voyage, from continent A to continent B. Both types are very valuable at their right place. Agencies will sometimes offer crew who look right on paper but lack the specific vessel-type experience or interpersonal fit the role needs. Example: A Chief Officer with years of experience on a container ship should not be your first choice for an AHTS vessel on a very busy waterworks site.

Furthermore, many very capable seafarers have their clear preferences in terms of who they are comfortable to work with. And sooner or later you will come across some crew members who have a fierce “cat and dog” relationship to each other: Character chemistry incompatible, wild competition, very different cultural values, to name just a few. While it is true that discipline and seafarers team spirit go a legendary long way, today it can never hurt to have an extra eye on those factors. On many ships, crew accommodation nowadays is quite small, with little privacy. That matters especially during long deployments and in tension-rich, physically risky work environments. Motivation at work being a crucial factor, as crew manager it is a fine idea to give some extra attention to this aspect. Officially just a “nice to have”, it is a silent yet mighty factor.

4. Get Captain’s approval, then mobilise - formally and in parallel.

Once the crew to vessel match is approved, trigger flight (request)s and visa procedures at the same time, pre-alert the local partner and then once travel docs are confirmed, inform involved parties again: The local agent, the ship, crew itself (or their temp agency) and the local coordinator of the company on site, where applicable. If an agency is booking travel on the coordinator's behalf, stay engaged - experienced agencies rarely need chasing; others do.

And extra eye on those not needing chasing, too: The “first best” flight combinations they propose are not always in the best budget interest of your company. In many cases, better ones exist and the agency might need your feedback on what works better for you in that case. For instance, seaman fare is not possible on some cheaper airlines. But if your schedule allows for some buffer days of time before a crew change, it can be worth the hassle to book a non-seaman fare ticket plus an overnight hotel stay near the site, where applicable.

Homework again for the crew manager. But it gets easier over time and can save lots of money. Be careful though not to contest and question every proposed flight combination. Travel agents employ smart and skilled experts on flight bookings, grown up people. They do not need to be “directed” or “educated” by a client company. There is a fine line between a critical crew manager asking for alternative options and an over-zealous one in terms of cost saving, treating them like tightly supervised children. What you want is a swift cooperation with little friction between parties – yet also not blindly accept every travel offer being sent through.

Also, inform the travel agent at the time of your new request of possible route restrictions due to crew having or not having a visa for the respective transit country. For instance, some crew might hold a so called multiple entry Schengen visa, yet not a US visa. Others can have a brand new UK or US visa, yet not a Schengen edition. And so

on. That of course will impact the route choices, especially with multiple connecting flights. Get smart on visa processing times, too – they differ substantially per country.

5. Send crew off with more than a ticket.

A short standard briefing - how to get to the ship, whom to contact and when responsibility for that contact shifts (usually to the local agent once crew has landed), what to do in an emergency, and basic reminders (zero alcohol aboard, personal protective equipment, keep the phone charged) - closes gaps that otherwise surface mid-transit, when it is hardest to fix them. Also, look at the resources, chapter 4.

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Once crew is underway towards the ship, they should feel supported by their well informed crew manager ashore. Again this becomes better with practice and experience. If in doubt, ask crew how they are and if they need any support from you. Some crew only will speak up when asked or invited to do so – worth to keep in mind.

Also, check carefully whether, on a flight proposal, the time between the plane's arrival and a connecting flight is feasible for crew.

There is a minimum connection time needed for crew to

1. get out of their plane
2. transfer inside the airport
3. get onto the next plane

and more often than not, plane delays can eat up some of that precious connection time.

Depending on airport size and intelligence of airport signage, this can add major stress to crew. Luggage is another factor – although it usually gets checked through to the end destination, with some flight combinations an intermediate pick up of the luggage by crew can become necessary, followed by new check in. Again, make sure to build in sufficient time for that. A smart travel agent will advise you on this but in hectic moments they too might have to be reminded to do that. Usually, such a travel agent handles several clients at the same time. Reason why it's also a fine idea to briefly check the flight options they send you, before you give them the green light for one of these.

Quick reference 1 pager (aka cheat sheet)

Crew mobilization.

Things to check:

- 1) What type of crew is requested? When and where? (extra eye on *boarding* date)
- 2) Whom does the Captain want as crew? (type, qualification, deployment type)
- 3) Is the crew really available? If so, for how long? (check deployment end date)
- 4) Does crew have all papers valid? => Baseline topic.
(STCW docs, medical, visa, CoC endorsement, vaccinations)
- 5) Get the flight tickets with best route (consult with crew on best way to airport)
- 6) Visa, flight ticket, crew contract, LOG all ready? Correct crew name on all?
- 7) Is the ship ready to receive crew? (crew docs and travel details sent to ship)
- 8) Is the local agent informed? (Send travel docs to agent incl. LOG, SMB, visa)
- 9) Did crew receive their travel docs, too? (Send tickets plus extra info doc to crew)
If via temp agency: Did temp agency receive the travel docs?
- 10) Any hints pointing to possible travel disruptions? Strikes, extreme weather....

Definition crew readiness:

- 1) available as deployment time, from boarding / sign on date to sign off date
- 2) travel ready with all papers valid
- 3) confirmed fit for deployment (ask crew directly too)
- 4) contract agreed upon and signed

Something possibly brewing? Simple checks:

- 1) DPR mentions - especially those stressing "just slight temporary unfitness of crew"
- 2) Captain's casual ½ joking remarks about "sensitive" or "princess" or "weird" crew
- 3) Crew casual remarks, reluctance to speak up, evasive answers to wellbeing questions or to questions about shore leave preferences
- 4) Crew's general tone of voice (combative, aggressive, resigned, docile, shy, anxious)
- 5) Crew expressing concern about one or more of their crew mates, the CO or Captain

Part 2: The human factor & staying well

Crew deployability impact factors explained

Well functioning companies value their workforce just like their other assets. Some busy technical project managers and some temp staffing agencies, however, seem to think of maritime crew almost as a commodity to get, get rid of and exchange like pieces of equipment. In reality, success of waterworks happens in biggest part thanks to deployable crew with a strong work ethic, the right skills for the jobs and experience.

To become such a valuable addition to a busy tech project, a maritime crew member needs

- good repeated technical training and certification
- decent work conditions all around including fair payment
- swift processing of that fair payment
- the chance to maintain a healthy private life (read: shore time) and
- the perspective to advance in their career, both in terms of skills and recognition.

And if one or several of these elements is repeatedly missing, even the most trusted, respected and eloquent crew manager won't be able to persuade crew to keep accepting that.

This is a tension field you'll come across quite soon in your career: The industry laments the lack of qualified and motivated crew. Yet at the same time, it yields to all sorts of money and time pressures. Safety of ship and crew being one closely monitored aspect controlled and enforced by industry ruling authorities, the pressure usually lands on crew deployment conditions, duration and wages. As a crew manager, it is vital that you know to protect your crew from crazy conditions. Intelligent planning and good preparation of a deployment will help you with that.

If you repeatedly find that the planning you set up is atomised by one "emergency" and operational surprise after another, with crew risking to get exhausted and overworked, it is time for a clarifying talk with the managers. In such a case it also helps if you cared to have your documents in order by default: You need a digital paper trail to suggest and illustrate the need for improvements. No one wants incidents at sea and usually these still happen when crew is tired or exhausted. Not to mention that penalties for violating ILO / MLC laws can be quite spectacular.

Yes, competition between companies is real and fierce. Yet fit, capable and motivated crew members can be formed by the above named right conditions. An expert crew manager can play a decisive role here. Keep a fair and workable balance for crew and you get – and keep! – loyal and motivated crews.

More precisely, a crew manager can play a vital role in that:

- look for suitable training to offer to crew, beyond the mandatory STCW refreshers.
- listen to crew themselves about their own wishes of crew for additional training.
- listen to crew about their plans with shore time versus deployment availability.
- plan smartly so that adhoc deployments become the exception, not the norm.
- extra eye on crew composition in terms of cultures and characters. See above.
- careful administration of worked days aboard – records mostly come from the vessel.
- stay reachable for communications with crew while crew is deployed.

The above is an especially crucial thing to observe in our times of workforce scarcity. Yes, some crew managers will have to fight their HR departments and project managers for budget room to include crew's well-being and development in the above laid out sense. But I dare to predict that where that succeeds, those companies who get it right will have a solid pool of quality crew to choose from, for years to come.

Some impact factors for deployability are classic, well-known and obvious: Home sickness, being away from family, sudden loss of health. Yet in our modern times, an additional set of mighty factors has joined in:

Social media. What at first sight may look (and often is) a real improvement for sailors, staying connected to home and knowing what's happening there most of the time, can turn out an additional stress factor when underway. In the old times, seafarers on their ships had to rely on each other and for many weeks if not months during a year, they were physically far from home – and mentally much more, albeit if never completely. With globalization, social media and Internet aboard, whatever happens aboard can be broadcasted to the world in real time. And whatever happens at home, can reach a seafarer far more quickly than it used to quickly. Not in all cases that is a good thing.

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Internet. Political events are another aggravation served with breakfast, lunch and dinner to seafarers nowadays. thanks to social media and internet aboard. In former years, once at sea, you usually had at least a few days if not weeks of being truly “unplugged” from the landlubber circus. Today, seafarers from nations in war with each other, for example, may feel almost obliged to behave different with each other aboard than they would without the constant reminders of the media. All crew being treated equally fair and an open, respectful atmosphere fostered aboard a vessel can make major difference for crew wellbeing.

Culture shocks 2.0. Seafarers always have been a mixed crowd, culturally speaking. Yet in our times, crew is not recruited and joining directly from a port any more, where they might simply have signed off another ship. They are flown in from all possible corners of the world, to end up on a ship together mostly the very next day. Therewith, in a certain sense being “catapulted” from one very different social environment to another very special one. For many of them, that very factor is positively experienced as an adventure, a blessing. Others feel the pressure to “make no big deal out of it” – yet struggle in silence.

Example.

Someone from a non-European, non-Western region, having already taken 2 days to arrive from his native island to a major airport in their country to start with – might find themselves suddenly aboard with a bunch of (usually much higher paid) European crew, on a water works site where the employing company is European too. This automatically means a certain cultural and imbalance of power which can be quite vividly perceived. One which already starts on the journey: With layover times at airports, European crew usually does not hesitate to move around, seek out the lounges, go for shopping, lunch, dinner. Leave alone that they could make use of some airports' organised short city tours, specifically created and offered for those layover times. Seafarers lacking a visa to enter the respective country and who may travel from financially poorer regions often need to bridge that time in a much more simple way.

As crew manager, you can contribute from ashore to making crew's journey less strenuous. For instance, by reserving them prepaid sleeping spots in a comfortable airport lounge for a few hours. Or informing them which airports feature a sleeping pod and where. And prepay for these from the office where these are not free of charge. Airport lounge sleeping seats are usually accessible for travelers with premium credit cards – and many crew will not have such a chic plastic thing on them on their brave travels across the world. But they can be prebooked from afar and you then get the resulting booking details to crew.

Stay in contact, unobtrusively

During longer layovers, organise an extra overnight stay. Relaxed and rested crew is a valuable thing aboard any vessel. Once they are aboard, you'll also have a major role to make crew aboard feel safe and fairly treated. Even from a distance, it matters substantially how you, as part of the office, communicate zero tolerance for verbal or physical abuse. What to you in the cozy, far away office may feel like a funny, harmless and entertaining joke can very well be perceived as a very real physical threat to crew aboard. With extremist intolerance ideologies sadly coming up again in too many places again in our days, this does not only regard some minorities.

Also, it is a fine idea to listen to crew when it comes to organising their travels. Crew got valuable insights and advice about crew travel arrangements which make more sense for them.

Examples.

I was grateful to learn from Southeast Asian crew that some connecting flights I had planned for them towards a major airport hub were far less useful and would mean more hassle for them than a reliable ferry service connecting some of the major nearby islands to that city. A ferry I as their crew manager did not have on my radar as an option at all.

Same for crew from a South American country informing me of swifter options to get home to his native island from the vessel's location – turned out, a tiny airline which hardly features in the big flight booking portals does great work locally. And was a fine solution since crew had no haste to arrive one day later possibly anyway.

So make it a habit to listen to crew about what they know to be more efficient traveling in their own countries and regions. There is always stuff to learn and things change. Most of them are very well informed. Keep checking for insurance coverage when doing that and calculate possible extra time needed. Unconventional solutions can be a fine cost and time saver – and above all, help the seafarers travel to the ship easier.

Finally, some general advice for a crew manager who wants to be well prepared:

Reading the Room: Trust, Culture and the Human Factor

Busy technical projects generate structural friction almost by design: sales teams promise fantastic timelines that operations then have to absorb; project managers pass through a site for a few days and leave. The coordinator and the ship's Captain are in daily contact for the duration and are usually the first to sense a brewing problem.

Crews and officers from different cultural backgrounds often communicate very differently under pressure. Some more directly, some far more (in)directly, especially across steep hierarchy or power-distance gaps. A concern raised as a hint or a small aside can be exactly as serious as one stated outright and in a scheduled talk. Learning to hear it takes both experience and enough trust that people are willing to say anything at all. Add in close quarters, limited privacy, fatigue and homesickness, and small frictions can escalate quickly if no one is listening for them.

Trust is earned step by step. Part of a crew manager's job is judgment about what to escalate and what to quietly absorb: a burst of frustration that is really pressure venting, not a formal grievance, rarely needs to reach management. A pattern of under-performance that turns out to be concealed illness or homesickness needs a different response than a disciplinary one. None of this is written into any procedure. It is built slowly, through consistent presence, reachability and respect on both sides. And it is built by a crew manager who makes themselves genuinely approachable including outside strict office hours when something can't wait. Smart companies will ensure the crew manager gets their rest and recovery in time after stretched hours. Smart crew managers speak up in time when they feel they need it, before it becomes urgent. Recharging your own batteries in time is a sign of professional intelligence and planning, certainly not a weakness.

Why Remoteness Raises the Stakes

On land-based projects, a bad week has an outlet - people go home, blow off steam, get some distance. On a ship, none of that exists. The crew lives in the same confined space they work in, for weeks or even months, with the same small group of people, often with limited privacy and no ability to simply leave. This is what makes the human -factor side of the role weigh so much more heavily at sea than it would in almost any comparable land-based coordination job: small frictions have nowhere to dissipate, so they either get resolved deliberately or they compound.

Protect yourself: Good practise basics for a bustling workplace

1) Ask questions in time and keep asking until you got your crystal clear answer. When is "in time"? When your gut feeling silently tells you "oh wait I should better check that" - and that gut feeling, in a hectic environment, can last just the fraction of a second. Before it is overridden / swept on by the great circus going on around you. Make it good practise to follow up on that gut feeling of yours at the very next opportunity and get your answers before it becomes urgent.

2) If your company works with outdated or buggy systems, speak up. It is not unusual for some otherwise capable companies to still do their crew management with Excel – an extremely inefficient and unsafe procedure, in terms of planning safety. Other solutions exist and yes they do cost money – depending on the resourcefulness of your company it can very well be worth the investment though. As of 2026 and with the rapid advancement of AI tools, new types of more affordable crew management software is also coming up. Worth following. Which brings me to #3,

3) Do your own research and keep doing them. There are some industry info sources like newsletters given out by companies who actually have done their research homework. Few and far in between the noise and regionally different ones, of course. But find them and maybe subscribe to 1-5 of these. They will tell you, for instance, which certification rules are about to get changed for what type of crew, which catch-up training is required for crew to keep up with regulations and where to get that training.

4) Try not to get caught up in office politics. You are the communication bridge between the crew, the vessels, the travel agents, the project managers. You may most often sit in the office – most crew managers do – yet a lot of your work is impacted by what happens outside of your office. Never forget to stay in touch with crew and the vessels no matter what your office tells you. Equally often, get healthy distance as quality time with friends and / or family.

5) Develop a philosophical stand with crew management. You need that to stay grounded as a person. To some lucky folks, especially those coming from a stable private background, that confidence and composure comes naturally. Many others with fine crew manager skills must acquire that self-grounding capacity on the job. Entirely possible, it can be learned. Have patience with yourself.

With humans at work in tension-rich, high-stake environments it is bound to happen: On some days, during some hours, you will feel like a super cool hero. On other days, during other hours, you might feel like a spectacular loser. In both moments, recall this smart classic saying: “Whenever met with victory and defeat, treat them as equals, as the impostors they both are.” Tensions will cook up like waves during a storm but in the end, suspense-rich tensions and lovely good times will behave like the tides: They come and go, with spooky reliability. What you, your crews and your office colleagues will remember is how you handled them. And that capability is a skill which will steadily grow with your experience. That said, #6:

6) Try not to get caught up in crew politics either. Offer a listening ear within common sense limits. But do not become the garbage bin of everyone’s frustrations, moody rants via social apps, personal battles between cat & dog crew aboard. As crew manager, you are an important factor, but eventually one piece of a larger operational machinery, not more not less. Come to speak of shared importance, #7:

7) Be reachable for crew, but within healthy boundaries. Especially if your company has active projects in several time zones at the same time, it is vital that you protect your good nights sleep in yours. There is a reason why serious companies have local coordinators on site. And as soon as crew has landed at the destination airport, the companies local agent should take over the handling of classic excitements like lost luggage, delayed arrival, re-scheduling tender service, immigration procedures and the like.

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Part 3: Lessons from the Field

The rules and advice mentioned in this guide exist because of events happen like the ones described here below. Again the point here is the lesson, not the specific case.

NEAR MISS

A crew member traveling toward a very busy site had a discharged phone at the exact moment a major regional disruption - severe weather, a transit-hub closure, that kind of event - threw the whole itinerary into doubt. With the vessel waiting and every hour of port call costly, the coordinator had no way to reach the traveler and resorted to tracking the flight independently online. It landed fine; the crew member was fine. Suspense could easily have been avoided by one charged phone.

A quick simple onboarding guide for crew is a good idea, reminding to keep an eye on such vital basics. Write it and send to crew.

SMALL OVERLOOKED DETAIL, BIGGER CONSEQUENCES

In a high-pressure stretch, a coordinator used a crew member's shipboard nickname - the name everyone actually calls them - on a flight booking instead of the name on their passport. The mismatch was caught only at the airport gate: boarding denied.

A same-fare rebooking limited the damage, but it was an entirely avoidable mistake, and a reminder that the busier things get, the more precisely names, time zones and small printed details deserve deliberate double-checking, not habit. Crew members love to address and speak about each other by nickname - it is very easy to make this mistake. You might feel silly doing simple re-checks but trust me, it's worth it.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES 1

A crew member was reluctant to raise a genuine, entirely reasonable family request - leave to attend a classic milestone event at home - out of fear it would be held against him. It came to light almost by accident, with just enough time to arrange it. In a separate case, a well-meaning but misjudged and rather rough "welcome ritual" for a newly joined crew member crossed well past the line of what was culturally appropriate; it took direct, immediate intervention - luckily grounded in an existing relationship of trust - to name the problem and stop it. Neither situation would ever have shown up in a planning meeting. Both were caught only because someone was paying attention to the person, not just the schedule - and took the time to swiftly talk to crew and their superiors.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES 2

A Southeast Asian crew member, highly capable seafarer, suffered from severe toothache yet kept silent for days, then weeks. Extremely disciplined and physically strong, he did not dare to tell Chief Officer about his medical condition, fearing he would have to leave the ship and not be called again by his agency then. The situation got

worse until it almost led to an incident aboard, due to the crew member being exhausted, severely in pain, with fever and increasingly unfocused.

Cultural factors matter! Lesson learned: Being not outspoken towards someone perceived higher up in the hierarchy can literally be a dangerous thing for crew aboard, too. A capable crew manager informs crew in time and repeatedly about their rights, stressing that even in hectic moments these deserve consideration. And also repeatedly solicits crew to speak up about possible grievances, possibly with a face to face talk.

DANGEROUS STRESS OUTLETS FOR IGNORED CREW LIMITS

On a busy waterworks site, the Cook on a vessel had to include a bunch of workers from another vessel of the company in his meal planning, on short notice. This of course meant substantially more work for him, at a moment when he already was quite loaded with action. Several also “spontaneously joining” project managers then were just one thing too much. As it turned out later, the Cook “also spontaneously forgot” to take into account some food allergies of crew. The explanation; Way too busy, so sorry. No serious harm occurred but could easily have.

Lesson learned: Watching out for crew’s fair treatment, not allowing anyone to trample over their limits is always a smart idea. Never underestimate the creative ways of crew’s self defense at work. For a hitherto very professional ship’s cook to have ignored his own working principles in such a drastic way, much frustration had already pent up until that boiling point, pun intended. And yes in that case there were some serious talks.

DEALING WITH WILDLIFE: EXTRA EYE ON THE “MOVING” CARGO

In a tropical country, a snake was discovered on a ship’s guardrail shortly before departure. Somehow it had managed to get there, crew assumed during loading. The brave and resilient crew informed the crew manager, laughing: “We made him offsigner!” Crew manager nonetheless informed the local agent who in turn consulted with local wildlife experts. Based on a photo the crew had made before getting rid of the unfortunate creature, the wildlife experts confirmed it had been a venomous species. Apart from posing a real danger to crew, wildlife getting aboard unnoticed is a problem of its own with today’s laws against wildlife trafficking and endemic species protection.

Lesson learned regards crew, even if it is more for the superintendent: Leave time for extra check rounds – and maybe invest in some special thermal detection cameras.

CONFUSING LOYAL HEROISM WITH MASOCHISM AT WORK

Or should I say: The art of setting healthy boundaries to stay functional and useful. It was 3 in the morning CET when the crew manager was woken up by an app. Known to answer any urgent app from crew, imagine their surprise when the message read: “I WILL NOT SPEAK TO THAT ASS...E AGAIN. THIS TIME I’M REALLY DONE WITH HIM. YOU NEED TO GET HIM OFF THE SHIP BEFORE I DO!!” It was one of those “cat and dog” character clashes aboard a ship. Tensions had been brewing for days. Later turned out, lamenting crew just wanted a quick outlet for his anger and had completely forgotten that his timezone was quite a different one. Same for another, new crew who sent a well-intentioned “arrived well!” app at 4 am to the crew manager. The lesson: If your company has active vessels in several timezones and your crew is aboard, make sure that

someone local answers those calls during your well deserved night rest. And make sure your crew knows that, too. This is a good item to include in the crew's quick onboarding guide which I'd warmly recommend to prepare and send to crew, together with their travel docs.

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Part 4: Resources worth a closer look

Beyond procedures and checklists, a few information sources can make a real difference to crews. Worth building a curated list, here is a start:

List of medics approved to give seafarers their fit for duty exams

<https://english.ilent.nl/topics/shipping/seafarer-medical-examination>

Most crew will get that exam done in their home country anyway. Yet depending on where that is, it may or may not be accepted by the flag state the vessel sails under. This website tells you more about it.

Traveling to and from the vessel

- **Airport navigation, layover options:** layout and transit-time guides for major hub airports crew are likely to pass through:
<https://travelvient.com/tools/airports/>
<https://dmcquote.com/blog/post/airport-transit-guide-connection-hubs>
<https://layovertime.com/>
- **Sleeping pods at 32 airports** <https://grrrltraveler.com/airport-sleeping-pods/>
- **Free drinking water at airports:** <https://www.wateratairports.com/>
- **In-flight comfort: seat-selection by aircraft type** on common routes, to ease long or awkward transits. <https://seatmaps.com/>
- **What3words – find places worldwide without knowing the local language**
A genius tool based on Google Maps. Pick a location anywhere, the site generates 3 words, that trio of words is the pinpoint to send to your mates!
Worth remembering indeed: Latin based alphabet and writing is not the only one.
<https://what3words.com/shark.awoken.maximum>
- **Time and Date World clock** plus some real smart calculators:
<https://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/>

Living aboard: Some spirit food

- **White noise / sound masking:** Free resource for crew who need to decompress in noisy shared accommodation or transit. <https://mynoise.net/>
- **Marine Conservation Society: Citizen Science at sea**
Seafarers underway can be a valuable info source contributing to marine citizen science. Getting busy to look out for wildlife and reporting sightings can add something special to seafarers day: Contributing to the conservation of the seas.

<https://www.mcsuk.org/what-you-can-do/volunteering/wildlife-sightings/wildlife-sightings-data/>

- **Local and citizen journalism:** Free 1st hand information written by citizens of the respective country – then translated by volunteers into 54 languages. No paywall.
<https://globalvoices.org/>
- **Uplifting news from around the world:** <https://reasonstobecheerful.world/>
No paywall.
- **Marine Traffic - Where are the other crew mates on a different vessel?**
Free website showing the live position of ships worldwide: fishing vessels, sailboats, tankers, container ships, AHTS, ferries www.marinetraffic.com
Another page doing the same is www.vesselfinder.com
- **Sea time calculator** – Free calculator for crew to keep own records of their sea time, featuring STCW thresholds: <https://metacad.io/en/reference/sea-time-calculator/>

Recommended reading / watching

Book

Malcolm Gladwell wrote a genius book called “Outliers”. One chapter therein, describing how in the aviation industry plane crashes happen due to the human factor, made me think a lot about comparable situations in the maritime industry. My warm advice is to read that chapter titled “The ethnic theory of plane crashes – ‘Captain, the weather radar has helped us a lot’” - and draw your own conclusions. ISBN 978-0-316-01793-0.

Marine Insight

A very rich info source about seafarers and their work conditions. Offers free technical training content and industry insights written in big part by seafarers themselves.

<https://www.marineinsight.com/>

Extra eye on fine clear explanations of topics like work-rest hours aboard a ship:

<https://www.marineinsight.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-work-hours-rest-hours-on-ships-including-stcw-2010/>

or how a freshwater generator aboard works:

<https://www.marineinsight.com/converting-seawater-to-freshwater-on-a-ship-fresh-water-generator-explained/>

Seatrade Maritime News

Another interesting news outlet. Reporting, among other, about Filipino seafarers and their fight against forced labour in the strait of Hormuz, presenting a guide to mental health for seafarers or a survey to support neuroscientist seafarers at work:

<https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/>

Glossary of terms

- **agw** – all going well. You'll read that often in the estimates of planners.
- **BST / AFF**: Basic Safety Training / Advanced Fire Fighting - mandatory STCW safety courses.
- **CoC**: Certificate of Competence - the core qualification for a given rank aboard.
- **DPR**: Daily Progress Report. Usually written by CO on the vessel then sent to office.
- **GT / kW**: Gross Tonnage / kilowatts - vessel-size and engine-power bands that determine which CoC a role legally requires (e.g. <400 GT versus unlimited).
- **LOG**: Letter of Guarantee - a formal document confirming a crew member's assignment and identity details. Needed at airports and immigration offices.
- **Mobilization**: the process of preparing and dispatching a confirmed crew member to a vessel.
- **Next of kin**: Often abbreviated *nok*, this stands for contact details of a person ashore who should be contacted in case of an emergency with crew. Can be a bloodline relative or a friend -if the latter, that friend should be authorized in writing to take medical decisions (resuscitate / life prolonging measures / type of therapy) for crew at a hospital in case of need.
- **PPE**: Crew's Personal Protective Equipment. From safety shoes to helmet to working overalls to safety harness and life vests.
- **PSCRB**: Proficiency in Survival Craft and Rescue Boats - another STCW certificate
- **Seaman fare** is a flight ticket with special conditions for the seafarers, accommodating their usual work circumstances which demand more flexibility. A seaman fare ticket allows, for instance, flight changes at short notice or flight cancellation altogether where the company then "only" needs to pay the agent fee for the canceling. Also, luggage allowance usually is 2 x 23kg cabin hold plus 1 x 10 kg hand baggage. That because crew often needs to take their own PPE with them and many are on a ship for months.
- **SMB** – Seaman book. Crew's seetime is recorded therein, then signed by the CO.
- **STCW** – stands for Standards in Training, Certification and Watchkeeping.
- **Superintendent**: person responsible for overseeing technical and operational performance of a vessel or fleet. Usually shore based, but can travel extensively between vessels.

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