

# Leading for Safety



*A practical guide for  
leaders in the Maritime Industry*



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# About this Guide

This guide issued by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) is intended to help leaders and senior officers in the maritime industry improve their leadership and people management skills in order to ensure safe operations. The guide contains tips and best practices for ten core leadership qualities for effective safety leadership, split into five categories.

## Why do I need it?

There is well-established research both in the maritime and other hazardous industries that confirms the huge impact of leadership on the safety of operations. Whilst the International Safety Management (ISM) code has been a major step forward in improving safety standards, its effectiveness depends heavily on how leaders approach its implementation, and this in turn depends heavily on the skills and qualities of leaders – both at sea, at the ship-shore interface, and on-shore.

Virtually all maritime leaders want to do their best for safety, this is not in doubt. But sometimes real life makes things difficult – time pressures, economic constraints and everyday circumstances sometimes seem to conspire against good safety leadership. This guide is based not just on theory but also on real life, including consultation with over 65 seafarers and shore managers about everyday safety leadership challenges. You will see that some of it is common sense, but nearly everyone can benefit from a reminder.

## How should I use it?

We suggest you read through the guide and consider how each piece applies to you. You could also ask a colleague or one of your subordinates to give you feedback on how well you are doing and how you could improve. We also hope that you keep the guide for future reference. Of course this guide is just paper. What really counts is how leaders behave in everyday situations. Your crews will draw inferences about your safety leadership based on what they see you do and what they hear you say, far more than what you might declare in a speech or a written communication.

## Where can I go for more information?

You can find out more as well as provide feedback on this guide by contacting the Risk, Analysis and Prevention Branch, Tel: **02380 329 100**. You can also log on to the MCA website **[www.mcga.gov.uk](http://www.mcga.gov.uk)** to download copies of this guide or find out about other Human Element work by the MCA.

# The Ten Core Safety Leadership Qualities

## Confidence and Authority

- 1 Instill respect and command authority
- 2 Lead the team by example
- 3 Draw on knowledge and experience
- 4 Remain calm in a crisis

## Empathy and Understanding

- 5 Practise 'tough empathy'
- 6 Be sensitive to different cultures
- 7 Recognise the crew's limitations

## Motivation and Commitment

- 8 Motivate and create a sense of community
- 9 Place the safety of crew and passengers above everything

## Openness and Clarity

- 10 Communicate and listen clearly

# Confidence and Authority

## 1 Instill respect and command authority



The ability to instill respect from, and command authority over, the crew is probably the first thing that comes to mind when people think of leadership. In many ways it happens on its own when you get everything else right. Leaders get respect and command authority when crews believe that you:

- ▶ Are willing to exercise the power vested in your position
- ▶ Possess the necessary knowledge and competence
- ▶ Understand their situation and care about their welfare
- ▶ Are able to communicate clearly
- ▶ Are prepared to act confidently and decisively.

### Why is it important?

Without authority and respect it is difficult for leaders to influence the behaviour of their crews, including safety-related behaviour. Crews may establish their own individual or group values, attitudes and behaviours, or else follow other de-facto leaders lower down in the hierarchy. This can lead to poor compliance with standards and excessive risk-taking. Research shows that some Masters feel that their authority is being undermined by increasing governance from shore-based managers under ISM (e.g. through the Designated Person Ashore requirements). Also, some Masters feel that the increase in the volume of management standards and procedures is undermining their authority. These areas are important to address.



## What can I do?

Leaders need to tailor leadership style to fit their individual personalities, but there are some common features:

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Have confidence in your decisions and stick to them
- ▶ Admit mistakes when you are sure you are wrong
- ▶ Demonstrate staff care and respect through everyday actions
- ▶ Earn respect through your actions
- ▶ Try to achieve better mutual ship-shore management understanding (e.g. through meetings, informal contacts or job rotation).

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Demanding respect from subordinates
- ▶ Using the power vested in your position as a threat
- ▶ Refusing to listen when challenged
- ▶ Acting unnecessarily tough when there is no justification
- ▶ Ignoring shore-based management
- ▶ Blaming shore-based management for the consequences of decisions
- ▶ Shore-managers being too prescriptive with Masters.

“ Commanding respect is a combination of having the right knowledge, skill and attitude, where attitude is self regulated ”

*Passenger ferry*

# Confidence and Authority

## 2 Lead the team by example



Leading the team by example is the combination of two things: being seen to be practicing what you preach, and pulling your weight as a key part of the team.

### Why is it important?

It is well-known that people are less likely to follow any rule or practice if you do not follow it yourself – this is especially true for safety rules. Traditionally, Masters may have regarded themselves more as authorities to be obeyed rather than team players. However, with increasing safety requirements and fluid labour markets, sometimes with high crew turnover, it is increasingly important to use leadership styles that demonstrate shared safety values through actions, not just words.

## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Always be seen to follow simple, visible safety rules during everyday activities
- ▶ Be seen to be playing an active role, not just behind the scenes
- ▶ Occasionally be seen to assist in subordinates' tasks where necessary.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Applying hard discipline for non-compliance whilst flouting rules yourself
- ▶ Avoiding 'getting your hands dirty' with subordinates' tasks.

“ They must themselves  
follow the rules;  
they cannot expect others  
to follow if they do not  
do this themselves ”

*Dry cargo*

# Confidence and Authority

## 3 Draw on knowledge and experience



It is self-evident that adequate knowledge and experience are prerequisites for effective leadership. In the context of safety leadership this means in particular:

- ▶ Good knowledge of safety-related regulations, codes and standards
- ▶ Experience and skills not only in technical and operational issues but also in people management.

### Why is it important?

Without factual safety knowledge, leaders cannot convince their crews that they are on top of safety issues and take it seriously themselves. Without people management skills, effective implementation of written safety regulations, codes and standards is very difficult. Research indicates that people management is an area for further improvement in the maritime industry. There is little dedicated formal training in this area at present.

## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Ensure that you are up-to-speed on safety requirements – do a refresher if necessary
- ▶ Consider your own strengths and weaknesses in people skills such as communication, motivation, team working, conflict resolution, crisis management, coaching and appraisal, discipline. If necessary apply for coaching or training in these areas
- ▶ You can't be an expert in everything – so be prepared to acknowledge your own knowledge gaps and seek advice when you need to.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Concentrating only on technical safety knowledge without considering people skills.

“A good Captain has to be prepared to ask some stupid things: it's still a two-way learning process – you don't know everything just because you're a Captain”

*Passenger Ferry*

# Confidence and Authority

## 4 Remain calm in a crisis



People need strong, clear leadership in a crisis and rely more on their leaders than would otherwise be the case. Calmness in a crisis situation is a core requirement and will rely on many of the other leadership qualities described in this booklet including commanding authority and drawing on knowledge and experience. In particular, it is important to have confidence and trust in the crew's abilities and emergency preparedness. Attendance at safety training and at response drilling is essential for all crew.

### **Why is it important?**

Calmness in a crisis is particularly important in view of the additional complications of different languages and nationalities that make up the crew. These complications tend to be emphasised during emergencies.

## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Develop excellent knowledge of, and confidence in, the crew's abilities
- ▶ Implement a firm policy on compulsory attendance at emergency safety training and response drills.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Infrequent or inconsistent emergency drills
- ▶ Failure to address language issues in emergency planning.

“ You need trust, which has to be there before the accident – it needs to be there in the first place ”

*Tanker crew*

# Empathy and Understanding

## 5 Practise 'tough empathy'



'Empathy' is all about identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives. It requires the capacity to put yourself in another's place, and the cultivation of good listening skills. Good leaders empathise realistically with employees and care intensely about the work they do – but this doesn't mean that they always agree with them or join in with concerns and grumbles. Instead they practise 'tough empathy', which means giving people what they **need**, rather than necessarily what they **want**. Another way of looking at this is 'care with detachment'. An example is providing staff with safety footwear that is comfortable and safe, rather than spending more money to provide a more 'fashionable' style.

### Why is it important?

Tough empathy is important in order both to convey to your crew that you understand their situation, feelings and motives, and to enable you as a leader to take the right courses of action which take due account of these desires, feelings and concerns whilst focusing on achieving appropriate overall objectives. In a safety context, this is especially important for encouraging compliance with safety rules by the crew.



## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Encourage crew to provide feedback on their situation, feelings and motives, both in everyday situations and formally in pre-arranged communication sessions
- ▶ Be prepared to acknowledge, mirror or summarise feedback to demonstrate understanding, then to explain your conclusions and intended course of action. If this is significantly different to what people have said they want, take the time to explain the case and illustrate why you are adopting this course of action.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Making a point of listening to what people say, but then taking a different decision without any clear demonstration that you have heard and understood, or explanation of your rationale
- ▶ Over emphasising 'listening' at the expense of 'decision-making' – this can lead to loss of respect and authority.

“They need a balance of empathy and strictness”

*Passenger ferry*

“A good leader is... strict but fair”

*Passenger ferry*

# Empathy and Understanding

## 6 Be sensitive to different cultures



Good leaders are sensitive to differences in the social and behavioural norms of national cultures, yet at the same time value all crew members equally irrespective of their nationality. They know how to interpret different behavioural signals, and how best to react in order to exert the strongest influence.

### Why is it important?

Crews of mixed nationalities are the norm. It has been clearly demonstrated that different national cultures may have different values and attitudes towards safety – for example in terms of fatalism, following rules, risk-taking etc. These values and attitudes can certainly be adapted, but sensitivity is needed to understand how best to proceed.

In some cases, mixed nationalities can lead to splitting into different social groups, often on the basis of language. This can be a serious barrier towards effective and consistent implementation of safety-related requirements, and social well being of the crew as a whole. In emergency situations, language is of course also a potential risk area.

## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Ensure as far as possible that one 'working language' is used even in social situations, and that crew have adequate training in this language
- ▶ Try to avoid a large 'critical mass' of one nationality developing, where possible
- ▶ Learn the key features of typical behavioural signals exhibited by the nationalities represented on board – training in this is available
- ▶ Consciously seek to build trust, familiarity and integration of disparate social groups through organised or semi-organised social activities on-board.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Ingrained value judgements about different nationalities
- ▶ Overdoing 'political correctness' in terms of dealing with different nationalities, so that relations become forced and unnatural.

# Empathy and Understanding

## 7 Recognise the crew's limitations



Good leaders have a clear understanding of how operational and other demands can be realistically met by the crew, and are able to judge whether fatigue levels are such that action should be taken.

### **Why is it important?**

Commercial pressures continue to be intense in the maritime industry. Minimum manning levels and increased demands for reporting and paperwork mean that working hours are long and fatigue is a key issue. It has been shown that excessive fatigue and stress has an adverse effect on safety, and is one of the key causal factors of human error and poor decision-making.

## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Monitor and be aware of the signs of excessive fatigue in crew members
- ▶ Ensure that working hours are adequately supervised and recorded
- ▶ In the case of recurrent problems, discuss possible solutions with shore management
- ▶ Be able to decide when it is necessary to slow or halt operations temporarily.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Relying on crew members to tell you if they are suffering from excess fatigue
- ▶ Accepting that high levels of fatigue are an acceptable norm.

# Motivation and Commitment

## 8 Create motivation and a sense of community



Research has shown that people in work are typically motivated by satisfaction or pride in completing a good job, and the feeling of being part of a team – not just money. Leaders have an important role to play in creating the conditions to encourage and maintain these ‘healthy’ motivators. Demonstrating respect for staff is often a key part of this. Meeting someone’s basic needs is often the key to keeping their motivation high.

### Why is it important?

Team spirit and pride in one’s work are primary contributors to the morale of a team. Morale has been shown to have an adverse impact on error and violation rates, hence attention to these aspects is an important part of safety leadership.

## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Involve staff in aspects of management, for example development of detailed working and operational practices
- ▶ Ensure that feedback is always given on staff suggestions or questions
- ▶ Demonstrate interest in, and care for, crew welfare issues
- ▶ Take part in and encourage social activities involving the staff.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ One off staff morale-boosting initiatives or reward schemes that could be perceived as condescending or trivial
- ▶ Involving staff in theory, but in practice taking little note of their inputs.

“A Master should have the ability to get people working together and pulling their weight.”

*Dry cargo*

“One should involve people in daily decisions, but within a clear discipline framework.”

*Oil tanker*

# Motivation and Commitment

- 9 Place the safety of crew and passengers above everything



It is universally accepted that commitment from the leader is an absolute essential for good safety. Leaders need to demonstrate this commitment clearly to their staff through their actions, rather than just through formal declarations or policy statements. In practice this means showing that the safety of crew and passengers is placed above everything else – ‘nothing we do is worth getting hurt for’.

## Why is it important?

The commitment of the Master is vital to ensuring that operational pressures do not compromise safety. Clear demonstration of commitment is also essential to reinforce the shared values of the team with regard to safety and to help embed safety issues into everyday actions rather than being seen as an additional chore.



## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Make it clear to both superiors and subordinates that you are empowered to act according to your own judgement on safety matters, without sanction from others
- ▶ Ensure that safety issues are integrated into other everyday operational activities, including walkabouts, meetings and one-to-one discussions.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Declaring that safety is your highest priority, then contradicting this in your subsequent actions (e.g. by compromising safety in response to operational pressures).

# Openness and Clarity

## 10 Communicate and listen clearly



The ability to communicate clearly is important at all levels in an organisation. For a Master, the key issue is most often how to encourage better two-way rather than one-way communication, balancing authority and approachability. Being open to criticism is a part of this.

### Why is it important?

Clear two-way communication and openness is necessary to achieve a 'just' culture. A 'just' culture is one in which individuals feel free to speak up about problems or mistakes without being blamed. In a 'just' culture, safety incidents are not automatically blamed on individuals – however for repeated violations there is a transparent and well-defined progressive discipline policy. Without the openness inherent in this 'just' culture, safety incidents and near-misses may be suppressed and unnecessary risks taken.

“A Captain needs to be more approachable than historically he was. He needs to be relatively the same as others and not put himself on a pedestal. He needs a balance of being known by the crew but at the same time detached”

*Passenger ferry*

## What can I do?

### Things that tend to work

- ▶ Hold safety tours and informal discussions with all levels
- ▶ Ensure that your listening skills are adequate. If necessary obtain training or coaching in effective listening
- ▶ Implement an 'open door' policy for crew members who wish to see you
- ▶ Ensure that there are no barriers preventing the open reporting of safety incidents and near-misses. If necessary consider using a confidential reporting system
- ▶ Give positive feedback on what lessons have been learned through reporting of incidents and near-misses without apportioning blame, and demonstrate commitment to addressing root causes
- ▶ Cultivate an atmosphere of openness through your own personal management style and everyday interactions.

### Things that tend not to work

- ▶ Holding safety tours which become primarily an excuse to check up on crew and chastise them
- ▶ Declaring a 'no-blame' policy without acknowledging the need for discipline
- ▶ Suggestion schemes which are poorly followed up and maintained.

“ He is a good Captain and he is down to earth – you can go to him ”

*Passenger ferry*

“ People will only believe you and follow you if you talk to them and show them why things must be done that way ”

*Passenger ferry*

# Leading for Safety

## A practical guide for leaders in the Maritime Industry

This guide issued by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) is intended to help leaders and senior officers in the maritime industry improve their leadership and people management skills in order to ensure safe operations. It contains tips and best practices for ten core leadership qualities for effective safety leadership.

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