

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY ON BOARD SHIPS

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*Abstract: Today’s globalized market requires putting together people of different nationalities or ethnic groups for the purpose of working and creating goods for the whole world. In shipping the situation goes as such too, with a mention that getting along well in such environment is more difficult due to the enclosed space and the miniature society created aboard ships. Communication, both work-related and interpersonal, may suffer because of this more than in other companies.*

*Standard communication phrases are mandatory aboard ships, along with mastery of the English language to enable a ship to function properly and safely. Still, “the social side of shipboard interaction is frequently neglected... but is critical to... good morale, which in turn impacts on the safe operation of vessels.”*

*This study aims to present a few aspects of cultural diversity aboard seagoing vessels and the way they may affect communication*

*Keywords: cultural diversity, cultural awareness, cultural competence, linguistic competence, intercultural communication, cultural respect*

### Introduction

Nowadays, shipping industries are challenged with multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural crews. We should understand “challenge” not necessarily as a positive term, as most of us would consider, i.e. competition for a positive end, but rather as a threat, or conflict. Unless people working in multinational crews are prepared to serve in such an environment, so as to eliminate the negative connotation of the term, we will continue to understand the term as such. We consider we are right in making this assumption if we think of miscommunication instances, or even lack of communication aboard ships, which may have fatal consequences on people, ships, and environment. Not rare are the cases of marine accidents due to human error, i.e. poor knowledge of English, bad pronunciation of English words, use of the language spoken by the majority of crew members, etc., as it is common fact that English is the language of the sea.

However, with all its shortcomings, multiculturalism means globalization which, in its turn, tends to be a dominant characteristic of the world industries and trade. This is the reason why teachers who train would-be seafarers must be aware of the fact that one important outcome of their knowledge and experience transfer is to help students in creating multicultural competences, too.

The aim of our study is to raise awareness on the necessity of giving courses on intercultural communication, and of developing maritime students’ social and multicultural competences, so as to provide them with the appropriate social and cultural ‘luggage’ to take with them at their workplace. Furthermore, the rationale for this suggestion comes along with the present situation of our students, who do not have the possibility to get trained in a multicultural environment.

We considered appropriate to enlarge upon a few ideas related to what intercultural competence is concerned, in general, and aboard multicultural ships.

### **Cultural competence**

In brief, cultural competence “refers to an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in the context of human resources, non-profit organizations, and government agencies whose employees work with persons from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds”.<sup>1</sup>

We become aware of other peoples’ culture when we come to understand that we should look objectively at what is going on around us, and reshape our perception in such a way so as to be able to accept what at first we reject, i.e cultural shock; we should admit, or tolerate the others’ behavior, thoughts, customs, and values. Cultural competence should be understood as a process achieved in time. Therefore, we consider it imperative to give our students an understanding of different cultures. Members of diverse cultures living and working together may not always agree, may become confused in problem solving, since they possibly have different ways of dealing with them. However, different approaches can be very valuable and beneficial when people have learnt to fit in.

### **Linguistic competence**

The process of acquiring a culture can not be separated from language. Knowing that we do not receive any culture share at birth we have to construct, maintain and enrich it all through our lives. For this, there is no better tool, but language... “language is the tool we use to create the reality in which we live and to coordinate our world with the world of others”<sup>2</sup>. Besides job-related, technical competence intercultural communicative competence is major. Constant awareness that individuals of other cultures differ from what we are should be kept in mind. Communication failures combined with, or grown from fatigue or stress, rapid decisions in emergency situations may lead to disaster. A high percentage of maritime accidents, nearly 80%, are caused by misunderstanding, mistrust, or uncertainty. Every single member of a ship’s crew should understand that they must comply with the STCW (International Convention for Standard of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping) regulations.

Students in merchant marine academies are provided mostly with technical/professional knowledge which they need to apply to the workplace, which is of utmost importance for a successful and rewarding career. This is one set of competencies which is, by no means is not enough.

In today’s globalized world it is imperative that individuals who interact with people of other cultures gain another set of competencies, i.e. cultural awareness and cultural intelligence. Thus, they will be able to account for and understand different values and patterns of world’s culture, so as to be efficient workers and communicators.

Seafarers were among the first who felt the impact of globalization. Cross-culture teams are now a familiar reality on ships. They share the same workplace and ‘home’ away from their mother country for long periods of time. They should all agree on a common goal, and adopt a common strategy so as to be a homogenous team whose final purpose is to accomplish their task, and keep the ship and their lives safe.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_competence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_competence)

<sup>2</sup> Apud, Jan Horck, A Mixed Crew Complement, LICENTIATUPPSATS

Members of ship crews of diverse cultural backgrounds do not always agree with the way of achieving their final goal, since not all the global partnerships generate good cooperation and collaboration. Workplace lingual and inter-cultural aspects, in seafaring, have been discussed in a series of articles whose authors, among many others who have written on this topic, are members and participants in the International Maritime English Conference (IMEC), i.e. Alison Noble, Peter van Kluijven, Katherine Logie.

As stated by Alison Noble in her article "Make the Most of Diversity", Telegraph, June 2011, 26, "the move towards providing training in intercultural competences in nautical colleges also appears to have been fast gaining momentum", which is true, indeed. Students, especially after their first voyages, as cadets, come back home telling about misunderstandings, clashes and conflicts arising from the cultural differences between the members of the crew, they were unaware of. Had they been "prevented" upon, or accustomed to different ways of behaviour things would have been easier for them, they say.

This is also what the authors argue in favour of, admitting that, apart from the standards set by IMO (International Maritime Organization) referring to safety at sea and marine pollution prevention, trainers of future seafarers should focus on inter-cultural relations among ship crew members.

Cultural differences may often hinder communication, since not all the seafarers know how each culture behave, or how to deal with these differences. Students who are not quite lucky to learn in a multicultural environment (the authors' students includingly) will not know how to deal with people belonging to other cultures, unless they are made aware of some cultural aspects. This is a good reason why they need to receive training and guidance all through their academic years, so as to manage clashes or conflicts that may appear on board ships due to ship crews different cultural backgrounds. It is not that we want to draw attention on the negative effects of multi-cultural, or multilingual crews! On the contrary it is for making our students knowledgeable about cultural values, beliefs and perceptions, what is appropriate in one culture or another.

We have to acknowledge that people communicate in different ways depending on their belonging to various ethnic groups, or background, education, personality, race, gender, age, etc.

In order to achieve productive outcomes in their work, members of a ship crew should avoid exclusion, discrimination, they should be flexible and adaptable, and give respect to people of other cultures. Some cultures are extremely contrasting, in social behaviour, eating habits, ways of asking or answering, or personal relationships. It may take quite a long time to get to know a certain individual, and probably a lot of misunderstanding will take place until you realize that certain facts in his/her behaviour are characteristic to their culture.

As aforementioned, not rarely do students come back from their first voyage with wrong ideas and thoughts about representatives of certain nations. Being asked how their voyage was they first mention things related to the interaction they had with crew members, or, which is worse, they associate their misfortunes, when they occur, with different individuals belonging to other cultures. Being inexperienced, from the very beginning they put up a barrier between them and the non co-nationals. Some of them are unwilling to set connections. We are not speaking about the Romanian cadets only. In their back-home

“stories” our students relate about the reluctance and isolation of some of their co-workers, who did not show willingness to interact, or took offence at some gestures or behaviour.

We reiterate our opinion with regard to people working in multi-cultural crews: necessity to get students acquainted with, at least, basics of other cultures, so as to successfully get across with people they work with.

Leadership courses are held in our academy which train students so as to achieve qualities of good leaders, which is worthy of praise. These courses are extremely useful and valuable for higher managerial positions, teaching the know-how of managing conflicts and maintaining a productive, creative and calm atmosphere. Up to that end, our students need to take smaller steps, to learn how get along well with all members of the crew so as to create conditions for accomplishing the tasks they are assigned on board.

Diversity in race, language, culture should be seen as beneficial and constructive, not destructive. If cultural diversity is ignored, and people do not see unity in diversity, the whole team, i.e. ship crews, will perform below expectations and norms, which are very strict aboard ships.

We mentioned all these to enhance our commitment towards teaching students and helping them recognize cultural differences, respecting them and acting accordingly. Once the cultural stereotypes are recognized and accepted it would be easier to understand why members of different cultures feel and act in their own way.

A further step is cultural creativity, in which each member can contribute with his/her own ideas and thoughts. This is the ultimate step to respect.

Therefore, unless people are educated about aspects of different cultures, chances are that any kind of relationships and fruitful interaction is ruined. In some cultures, little comments or jokes can be detrimental or offending. Some persons may feel uncomfortable if they are treated in the same way with the others, belonging to different cultures, especially if those certain individuals have little knowledge of English, which is supposed to be the lingua franca at sea. Such people should be given more time and understanding from a skilled speaker of English, who has more words and ways of expression at hand.

Aboard ships, more than anywhere else, team members should be united, and establish cohesion not rebellion, since they all should pursue the same goal: well-done work in safety conditions. Multicultural diversity, with all its disagreements, delay in decisions, stress, and misperceptions should not lead to confusion or difficulty in workplace relationships.

### **Do cultural barriers exist?**

It is true that people with different ethnic backgrounds will, most of the time, use a different language, have different ways of behavior, or of displaying emotions. This is in their culture. More often than not, our students come home from their cadet voyages telling about their experiences aboard ships. Among the complaints they make there are a few which prevail over others referring to stereotypes of an individual of a certain nation, to whom they ascribe the characteristics of the whole group, thus entertaining the idea of stereotype (especially if they encountered difficulties in their relationship with that individual). They already adopt preconceptions about the members of a whole group. No doubt that, for their next voyage they will try to avoid joining a crew with members of the same nationality as in

their previous voyage, thinking that they will have the same problems in communicating with them.

They would not understand that individual of different cultures have other guidelines and points of reference. This perception is fed by the impossibility of most of them to get in touch with people of other cultures. Only a few of their colleagues are given the opportunity to be trained in a multicultural environment, through student exchange programmes. Most of them find themselves aboard ships alone, not being able to accommodate or communicate effectively with other nationalities. To some of them it takes time until they understand that whoever is not like them is hard to work with or to talk to.

Also, behavioural, and emotional characteristics can cause misunderstandings, or confusion. In some cultures touching the person you are talking with is considered rude, while in others it is warm and friendly, or, being right in time for a meeting is very polite, unlike in other cultures, where this is not the norm; they should be a little late, and they will gain more respect.

Nevertheless, we should admit and recognize the values and differences between their culture and your culture, and not consider that there is not any better culture than your own.

### Conclusions

Challenges in a multicultural diversity are unavoidable. Also, daptation and flexibility are crucial. Ship crew members should be made aware of the fact that regardless of the ethnic or cultural background, people should meet on the same path, of respect and understanding of each others' values. Young people, i.e. academy graduates, future shipmates should be taught that, whatever culture they belong to, humankind should build bridges and not create gaps.

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