

COMMUNICATION: THE CORNERSTONE SOFT SKILL FOR SEAFARERS

Singh Binay Kumar,

3rd year post graduate student,
The third level of higher education.
National University "Odesa Maritime Academy"

Sienko O. ,

Supervisor Doctor of Economics,
Professor of the Department of
Maritime Transport Management and Economics,
National University "Odesa Maritime Academy"

Communication is one of the most essential soft skills in the maritime industry, and it's one that often makes the difference between success and failure. Whether in daily operations or emergency situations, effective communication is the bridge that connects crew members, officers, and all other stakeholders in the maritime ecosystem. It's not just about talking or sending messages; it's about understanding, conveying, and processing information in ways that ensure clarity, respect, and completeness.

Understanding Communication

According to *Webster's Dictionary*, communication is "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, and behavior." Robert Anderson defines it as "the interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or other means." These definitions emphasize its universal applicability and importance. In the maritime context, where crews hail from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, effective communication ensures clarity, respect, and completeness.

Channels of Communication

The channels through which communication occurs can be classified into various categories:

- **Visual Channel:** This includes facial expressions, body language, posture, gestures, pictures, written words, and even electronic communications such as emails and mass media.
- **Auditory Channel:** This involves spoken words, sounds, telephone or mobile communications, and the delivery of audio content through mediums like radio and voicemail.
- **Tactile Channel:** This relates to touch sensations, including therapeutic touch.
- **Combined Channel:** A combination of visual and auditory elements, such as audiovisual media, or offering comfort through touch and spoken words.

In the maritime industry, where safety is paramount and crews are often culturally diverse, effective communication becomes even more critical. This soft skill is

necessary not only for day-to-day operations but also for navigating complex scenarios that demand clarity and collaboration.

The Importance of Communication in the Maritime Industry

Communication is undeniably a pivotal soft skill in the maritime industry, influencing everything from safety protocols to the well-being of seafarers. Research and statistics underline the importance of this skill:

- **Maritime Accidents:** A study by the UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch found that around 30% of maritime accidents were linked to communication failures. This highlights the critical need for clear and effective information exchange to prevent errors and mitigate risks.(1)

- **Crew Diversity:** The International Chamber of Shipping reports that the global maritime workforce comprises over 1.6 million seafarers, with a diverse mix of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Effective communication among such a varied group is essential to ensure smooth collaboration and avoid misunderstandings.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Effective communication requires an understanding of cultural nuances. Anthropological research has shown that misinterpretations stemming from cultural differences can lead to conflicts and operational errors, which can compromise safety.

- **Psychological Well-being:** Studies indicate that open communication contributes to the mental health of seafarers, reducing feelings of isolation, stress, and anxiety – issues that are common in the maritime profession due to long periods at sea.

Case Studies and Examples

Real-world examples further illustrate how communication shapes outcomes in the maritime industry:

- **Bridge Team Management:** Standardized communication protocols, such as the use of Maritime English, have been implemented to enhance coordination and reduce misunderstandings on the bridge. This has proven effective in improving navigation safety.

- **Crew Resource Management (CRM):** Shipping companies that have adopted CRM training programs, focusing on communication, leadership, and decision-making skills, have seen improvements in teamwork and safety records. These programs are particularly valuable in fostering a more collaborative and safe working environment on board.

The importance of communication is further emphasized by investigations and reports from industry bodies:

- **Human Error Analysis:** The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has noted that human error, often a result of poor communication, is responsible for approximately 80% of maritime accidents. This underscores the necessity of communication training for preventing incidents. (2)

- **Safety Bulletins:** Maritime safety organizations regularly release bulletins emphasizing the role of communication in preventing accidents. These bulletins provide practical examples and lessons learned from past incidents, reinforcing the need for constant vigilance in communication.(3)

The Core Components of Effective Communication

To ensure communication is effective, it must contain three key components:

1. **Clarity:** Clarity is essential for conveying messages accurately and ensuring they are understood as intended. Clear communication prevents misunderstandings and ensures everyone on board is on the same page.

Exercise: Recall a time when you misunderstood someone or were misunderstood. Consider the consequences of that misunderstanding and reflect on how you can avoid such situations in the future.

2. **Respect:** Communication should always be respectful. Lack of respect in communication can lead to misunderstandings, breakdowns in morale, and conflicts. In a maritime context, this can undermine the teamwork essential for operations.

Exercise: Think of three ways you can demonstrate respect through communication, such as acknowledging others' time, showing empathy for their stress, or simply expressing appreciation for their efforts.

3. **Completeness:** Incomplete communication can cause confusion and errors. It is better to communicate fully, even if the message seems trivial, than to leave gaps that could lead to dangerous situations.

Exercise: Identify three things that you tend to withhold in communication, whether due to fear, pride, or other reasons. Reflect on how your communication might improve if you were more transparent.

The Consequences of Poor Communication

Failure to communicate can result in irreversible damage. When communication breaks down, people are unable to connect, misunderstandings proliferate, and valuable information is lost. For seafarers, this could mean the difference between life and death.

Studies have shown that poor communication in the maritime industry can lead to catastrophic accidents. In fact, communication failures are often the root cause of many maritime accidents, which could have been avoided with clearer and more effective communication.(4)

How to Develop Communication Skills

Improving communication skills requires self-awareness and practice. Here are some tips for developing effective communication in the maritime profession:

- **Balance and Posture:** Pay attention to your body language and posture, as they are integral to non-verbal communication.

- **Active Listening:** Listen carefully to what others are saying, and take time to process the information before responding.

- **Feedback:** Regularly ask for feedback to understand how your communication is perceived and how it can be improved.

Recommendations and Resources

For seafarers aiming to master communication, my book *Soft Skills for Seafarers* serves as a guide. It includes practical exercises to help maritime professionals grow in their careers and navigate complex interpersonal dynamics effectively. By developing soft skills, seafarers will find a renewed sense of confidence and purpose, both aboard ships and ashore.

Conclusion

Communication is a transformative skill, integral to the maritime industry. As seafarers enhance their ability to connect with others, they lay the foundation for mastering other soft skills, fostering a harmonious working environment. This cornerstone skill not only ensures personal success but also strengthens the maritime community, uniting professionals in the pursuit of safety, collaboration, and operational excellence.

References:

1. The Role of the Human Factor in Marine Accidents.
2. Human Error Analysis and Fatality Prediction in Maritime Accidents.
3. Reducing maritime accidents in ships by tackling human error: a bibliometric review and research agenda.
4. Unraveling the Usage Characteristics of Human Element, Human Factor, and Human Error in Maritime Safety.