How can maritime leaders foster team engagement onboard?

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Abstract:

Maritime leaders have embarked on a journey with a clear vision: To build greater trust and psychological safety onboard the vessels.

Leaders are role models for younger, less experienced employees and are pivotally significant in establishing a psychological safe workplace.

This paper examines how leaders can build trust and psychologically safe workplaces, catalytic to a healthy engagement and higher performance. The paper concludes that trust and psychological safety are important levers to team engagement and performance onboard, thereby increasing desired efficacy.

Interviews with Top4 maritime leaders has been conducted for the purpose of this paper. Peer reviewed articles and theory within the field of maritime psychology and leadership development are included as well.

Introduction:

Most jobs are designed so that the employees naturally enjoy a break from work and colleagues during a week. Seafarers, however, are due to the contextual factors on a vessel not able to desist their collegial working relationships, which can lead to higher levels of frustration, derailment, and resentment (Seafarers Happiness Index, 2021).

Therefore, working onboard a ship for longer periods of time, highlights the importance of cohesion and trust amongst teams and a psychologically safe workplace where people can speak up, share their thoughts and feelings, and ask for help (Brooks, K. S. & Greenberg, N., 2022).

What is psychological safety?

The fundamental notion of psychological safety is an environment where every individual can be themselves and speak up without fear of being humiliated or excluded (Center for Creative Leadership, 2023; Edmondson, 2019). It's a safe climate which invites people to share their:

- Thoughts and Ideas
- Questions and Concerns
- Mistakes and Feelings
- Constructive Feedback

When psychological safety is low, people are more likely to hold back, feel uncomfortable raising any concerns and tend to hide mistake when they occur, which can in certain cases lead to damage of property or personal injuries thereby having high economic impact for the owners (Edmondson, 2019).

Building psychological safety isn't a one man's job, it's a team effort and it's a process. Nevertheless, it makes a huge impact when people feel safe to be themselves and share their view on important matters. It will influence people's engagement when people feel seen, heard, and included and as leaders we must build a climate of inclusion and safety (Geraghty, 2020; Edmondson, 2019). Leaders must recognize that psychological safety is mission critical in the sense that a fearless organization is something to strive towards continually. When people speak up, share concerns and questions, and commit to continuous development and learning, good things happen.

Teamwork and trust:

The importance of trust has been recognized in the safety puzzle and has been found to facilitate open communication and promote efficient leadership among other factors. The emphasis in this article is on interpersonal trust and is seen as a dynamic process over time. Frequent close interactions may lead people to better understand and trust each other's expertise and competences as well as care about one another in a team (Gausdal & Makarova, 2017).

According to Lencioni (2012) teamwork must begin with trust. When trust is high, team members show vulnerability, are more likely to contribute, ask for help and share mistakes with one another (Lencioni, 2012). At the same time, when people trust their team members, they are generally more engaged, happier, and productive at work.

Methodology, results, and analysis:

Face-to-face interviews followed by a short questionnaire were conducted. Six maritime leaders with different nationality, years of experience and rank participated and shared their reflections and experiences from their work experience at sea.

The results were analysed and categorized into two themes:

1. Psychological Safety
2. Trust

Psychological Safety:

Data indicates that Top4 leaders seem to be aware of and committed to psychological safety onboard the vessels. This is illustrated in the comments below:

> " Psychological safety is the foundation of a good team and well-being on board. There won't be any good teamwork if the members don't feel psychological safe."

> " Psychological safety is created by giving the crew an opportunity to speak up and most importantly you need to show that their input is important and valuable."

> " Ask for their input, thoughts, and feedback. Not only will this help the crewmembers feel included in the decision-making process, but it will also build a psychological safe workplace and lead to better performance outcomes."

The comments stress the importance of psychological safety onboard the vessels and leaders are role models and set the standard for the overall safety onboard. Being inclusive, open to feedback, non-judgmental and listening will in return benefit team engagement and performance onboard, thereby increasing desired efficacy and decreasing human errors (Gausdal & Makarova, 2017).

One of the leaders exemplifies psychological safety in practices and describes how he can recognize its presence:

> " I know that the team feel safe and engaged when I see happy faces around me and when people show true interest in their activities on and off work and finally when people come to me and share any of their concerns, ask questions or share any life story with me."

This comment truly underlines the effect of a psychological safe environment onboard the vessels.

Trust:

As leaders we can show trust in the crew's capabilities and rely on them to do their job to the best of their ability. We can build strong interpersonal relationships over time and in return it fosters trust in each other's expertise and it's more likely that we work as a team and not as individuals.

Data indicates that Top4 leaders seem to be aware of the importance of building trust and how crucial it is to rely on their crewmembers' capabilities and areas of expertise. This is shown in the comments from below:

> "You can build trust by being very honest when you instruct your team and show respect by telling them that you rely on their knowledge and skills."

> "Giving trust is not only speaking trust, but mainly in the non-verbal communication showing trust in someone's capabilities. When people see that their independence and competence is recognized an often-upwards spiral in self-confidence is created, giving room for growth and performance increase."

Non-judgmental communication and a work culture without blaming one another is also stressed by the leaders when it comes to building and maintaining trust. This is shown below:

> "The first step for us as leaders is to be honest, supportive, and understand what employees need to know to perform well and communicate facts while being considerate of their effort and sensitive to their feelings. Also, we need to avoid blaming to build trust."

Another crucial effect of trust is the effect it has on team engagement and performance onboard, which also becomes evident in the comments below:

"When we show trust, people simply start to feel more valuable to the team and they literally want to perform to their best level."

" As leader we need to show that we are engaged. We need to let the crew see that we understand, and we must learn to accept and be open to feedback. It will substantially contribute to team effectiveness, better decisions making and greater performance."

Conclusion:

This paper concludes that trust and psychological safety are important factors to team engagement and performance onboard.

Leaders are role models, and they need to continually include the crew, ask for their opinions, and feedback and thereby build a workplace where people feel psychologically safe and trust that they are important contributors of the team. As a result, it will improve overall performance and efficacy as well as reduce the risk of human errors occurring.

We are also aware that there is room for improvement where the teams are not engaged and are performing low, this is where we at Maersk Training have invested into working with the Top4 officers from Maersk A/S and Maersk Line Limited and facilitating the LEADING AS ONE course where the Top4 are guided on a leadership journey and given tools to build trust and psychological safety onboard.

Also, in 2024 Maersk will operate a series of container vessels on carbon neutral methanol and to support leaders on this journey, Maersk Training have invested in teambuilding with Top4 officers on the new vessels to foster trust and psychological safety at the early stages of teamwork.

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