**Mariners are Used to Multi-Tasking**

A first trip cadet is instructed that “if you see a job that needs doing – do it at once”; whether it is a rope that needs coiling down, or something that needs lashing up. So it goes on, with a senior officer on lean-manned ships performing half a dozen jobs at once, the Master somehow combining the conduct of a ship with the management of a business and paperwork burden that would daunt many shore-side senior managers.

But there is still a need to take notice of the annual “Most Wanted List” of the US National Transport Safety Board, which this year has flagged up “deadly distractions” as one of its main menaces to transport safety. The NTSB covers all modes of transport, but all distraction is recognised as equally hazardous, whether the person being distracted is at the wheel of a car, the flight deck of an aircraft, the controls of a railway locomotive, the bridge or indeed the machinery controls, or pump room, of a ship.

There is no doubt that the distractions to any person today is greater than in any earlier age, given the amount of connectivity provided to us by all these clever electronic devices. There is no argument about the dangers involved in using any device that takes eyes or concentration off the road in a car or truck, with no shortage of gruesome examples of fatal casualties. In a ship we are more inclined to think that because things tend to happen slower, there is no harm in undertaking “auxiliary” tasks, which may be necessary.

Some will turn a blind eye to the watchkeeper doing chart corrections or bringing light lists up to date when there is not much traffic around, always with the proviso that a “good look-out” is kept. There is always something that needs doing. The trouble is that such tasks require concentration to do them properly and the law of unintended consequences will produce the unexpected when – it is least expected!

One does not have to study marine accident reports for long before examples of distraction emerge: the chemical tanker which slowly drifted out of the channel and grounded as the Master carried out a long and purposeful telephone conversation with the agent; the Mate who forgot to alter course as he tried to sort out problems at home on his mobile telephone, the conversation only coming to an abrupt end as the vessel grounded; the collision caused by the watchkeeper being so focused on the instruments inside the wheelhouse that he failed to see the small ship he was overhauling and about to run down.

There are innumerable accidents during berthing or ship handling, when the bridge team became “overwhelmed” with all the things going on at the same time. The “classic” case of the cruise ship officer of the watch being so intent on the minutiae of the Garbage Reporting Form that he failed to properly plot the approach of another large ship, never fails to ring warning bells!

We need more examples, perhaps, of people doing the right thing, like the absolute ban on telephone conversation with the ship in pilotage waters. Or the Master of the tanker who threw surveyors, inspectors, charterers’ representatives and harbour officials staff out of the cargo control room, so his Chief Officer could concentrate on getting the discharge under way, without so many distractions.

Source: BIMCO

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