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EDITORIAL

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

Would you believe it. My last grumbles on official charts, the artificially inflated retail price of fish, the cost of fuel, safe ship management, pilotage and biosecurity sure stirred up the industry. And thank you. It was nice to receive a number of letters raising or supporting the issues I was highlighting on behalf of the industry.

All too often it is very easy to slip into a position where you might be speaking with bureaucratic officials on behalf of the industry and see the blinds come down.

I remain mindful that as an industry commentator one assumes the responsibility of raising the key issues facing our industry on behalf of its participants. In doing so, I endeavour to ensure that these discussions are based on facts, and are not from someone with a personal axe to grind.

If we are to make changes for the benefit of the industry, we must ensure that we take the bureaucrats along with us. Because it is they who will make it happen.

Stuff it up, and they will duck for cover and stonewall any changes in the name of the status quo. In saying this, we can all identify many recent, questionable changes to policies and safety management which have been imposed on our industry unnecessarily.

Recent unpublished letters I have received suggest that those who are trying to justify their position have been the author of some of these changes. In these cases it is easy to have a shot at the system, when in fact the truth may lie elsewhere. For my part, in most areas of officialdom, be it Maritime New Zealand or the Ministries of Fisheries, Environment and the like, but excluding the Department of Conservation, I would not like to think that this is the case. The jury is still out on the Minister and the Department of Conservation.

Another issue facing the industry is training. Have you tried to employ decent crew lately? Sure, it has been widely recognised that the offshore surface longline tuna fleet has had to resort to employing waterfront derelicts or other drug or alcohol-addicted bums at times.

Thankfully, the downturn in tuna and pending international or high-sea quotas has cleaned up much of this sector of our industry by default. Closer in shore, many of our vessel owners have to resort to poaching good crew, because no-one is training them.

The inshore industry is suffering from a sad lack of new entrants. Clearly our inshore skippers are ageing, and while the maritime schools continue to turn out a steady stream of qualified romantics as Local Launch Operators or Inshore Launch Masters, we have a distinct shortage of young people entering the industry.

The New Zealand Marine Transport Association recognised the reality of this at their last conference. If we do nothing now, we will reach a crisis state of no qualified masters to man our vessels within five years. The writing is on the bulkhead. Granted, the schools continue to turn out ILMs, but these older entrants into our industry are there for a lifestyle and not a career. It is essential that the industry promotes from the schools.

To do this, the MTA, in association with Maritime New Zealand, has developed a new qualification, to be known as Qualified Deckhand, or QDH.

Essentially, this qualification will allow new entrants or school leavers to enter our industry. Once they are registered with Competenz and the MTA, they will be issued with a training task book they will carry as crew as part of our manning levels on our inshore vessels.

Pre-sea training will include unit standards 6914 (Boatmaster), which is available to candidates locally throughout the country, for example, Coastguard units, boat clubs and training providers.

The task book includes practical training on the job, from bends and hitches to seamanship and navigation. Watchkeeping, first aid, VHF radio, radar and GPS familiarisation are all key components. Once a candidate has been assessed as being competent, on completion of their task book they will be eligible for a reduction of up to six months on their sea service, and a shortened time at the maritime schools for off-the-job training and final assessment.

This qualification and task book has been developed to meet the industry's growing needs, and should be supported. Sure, masters who will be required to monitor on-the-job training and sign off each completed unit will need to brush up their own seamanship skills.

Gone are the days of signing a deckhand's logbook over a beer in the pub. Our industry has historically been recognised for its professional and safety standards. Therefore we all have the responsibility of ensuring that our industry's safety is not compromised, and the skills of the old hands are passed on to the young.

To make this happen will require your support at all levels, from lobbying Maritime New Zealand officials to the training providers, who should see this qualification as a benefit by providing a higher skilled candidate for a final polish to the ILM master's qualification.

Keith Ingram, Editor