

Captain's column

Question or challenge?

Tea or coffee, Mr Pilot? This is one of the first questions a pilot is usually asked upon boarding a ship.

'What is your maximum full ahead speed, Captain?' It's a question asked by all pilots.

When VTS requires information from a ship, the message marker used is Question.

The language used in many reports and HELM/BRM courses, though, encourages us to 'challenge' each other, not simply ask a 'question'. Typical phrases used include 'Master failed to challenge the pilot' or 'OOW failed to challenge the Master'.

Many years ago, a video was produced that called the pilot the 'Stranger on the bridge'. If you are seeking directions and approach a stranger in the street, then challenging them would probably not yield positive results. Courteously asking them a question, on the other hand, might well assist you on your way.

Avoiding the combative

In his December 2018 Focus column, Nautical Institute CEO John Lloyd writes:

'On the subject of communications, courtesy and respect are things we all expect in the workplace. Of course, in our ships there is a hierarchy of responsibility and accountability, but treating others civilly and with understanding is central to a positive workplace.'

I wonder how well these thoughts sit with the vocabulary we have developed in bridge teams whenever there is a question about the

actions of the pilot (or even the Master). We tend to use the word 'challenge', with its inevitable confrontational connotations. I wonder if there is a softer, but equally effective, way of verifying an order or instruction when the team is in doubt about the actions to be taken? Something along the lines of 'confirmation of intention' perhaps.

Dictionary definitions of 'challenge' include 'a call to someone to participate in a competitive situation or a fight or a call to prove or justify something', 'invite (someone) to engage in a contest'. As John suggests, the word has confrontational connotations, setting an aggressive tone and is often interpreted as criticism by the person receiving it.

“ Use of a phrase such as 'pilotage briefing' would signify that all on the bridge at the time are included. Junior officers would be more engaged, and more likely to question a deviation from the plan. ”

Is combative communication desirable on the bridge of a ship or, indeed, elsewhere in life?

When a pilot boards a ship, an exchange of information takes place and a plan is agreed for the passage. Similar briefings take place daily on ships for a range of events, navigational or otherwise. Again, a plan is agreed between the members of the bridge team.

The aim of these briefings is to ensure that all participants can build the same mental model.

So, when situations change, as they always do in a dynamic environment, or when someone is not certain about what has been agreed, initially they are simply *questioning a perceived deviation from the plan*; they are not *challenging* anyone. The use of this phrase would confirm to all persons involved that there must be agreement on a plan before any manoeuvres are conducted.

Agreeing on a plan

Developing John's theme about the language used on the bridge, I am tempted to ask whether the phrase 'Master-Pilot exchange' is still an appropriate description of the process that actually takes place?

For years, the UK Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary have executed a briefing before arrival and departure that includes all the bridge team. This has also become normal practice for many cruise companies.

The modern day Master is often burdened with administrative duties, so has to leave the OOW alone with the pilot. On a long pilotage, the Master cannot remain on the bridge the whole time, so again has to leave the OOW with the pilot.

The phrase 'Master-Pilot exchange' implies that only these two people are involved. By contrast, use of a phrase such as 'pilotage briefing' would signify that all those on the bridge at the time are included. Junior officers would become more engaged in proceedings and therefore more likely



Creating positive communication between pilot and bridge team enhances safety. Credit: Ambrose Greenway

to 'question a deviation from the plan', should they feel in any doubt. Indeed, a pilotage briefing involves more than just the bridge teams. It might cover VTS, tugs, harbour authorities, other ships (piloted and non-piloted), river users and boatmen, for example.

From the time of a junior officer's basic training, it is repeatedly stated that, if in doubt, they should query the Master or the pilot. Despite this, there are still too many accident reports in which a lack of questioning is highlighted as an example of 'failure of communications' on the bridge. Accident reports published around the world rarely state that the Master queries anything with the pilot, even though the voyage data recorder (VDR) has often recorded the Master being unclear about the pilot's intended actions.

Avoiding the use of the word 'challenge' will not remedy this situation in the immediate future, but something desperately needs to change in order to prevent this type of repeat incident. It is hoped that a change of wording, ie not challenging but *questioning a deviation from the plan*, will ensure that:

- A plan is agreed at the start
- It is continuously updated as the situation evolves
- An open dialogue between all parties is maintained.

The goal, after all, is to eliminate the need to 'assume' anything, to update everyone's situational awareness and mental models and, in so doing, prevent errors going unnoticed, errors that would otherwise lead to an incident.

There should rarely be a need to 'challenge' and this should never be the starting point of an intervention. Only if the OOW, the Master or the pilot are unable to acquire the answers they seek when they question a deviation from the plan, will a 'challenge' perhaps be required.

Creating open dialogue

Captain Richard Madden's column, also in December 2018 *Seaways*, looks at graded assertiveness. This is the four-stage intervention strategy which was initially developed by American Airlines. The stages are Probe, Alert, Challenge and Emergency. Asking a 'question' is the same as 'probe' and this, hopefully, should be all that is required in order to clarify what the person is unsure about, as portrayed in the article.

If the Master or the pilot creates the right working conditions and atmosphere during the initial pilotage briefing, then it is hoped that the exchange of information between all bridge team members will continue efficiently thereafter.

The old adage 'we've always done it that way' cannot be allowed to prevail if the same type of accident is continually being repeated. Something has to change. Indeed, certain sections of the industry are trying to address these issues, but sections are not enough. An industry-wide approach is urgently required to ensure uniformity between ships' crews, pilots, VTS operators and shore management. Only with such a coalition can we agree a change in philosophy in two-way communication. The goal should be that open dialogue becomes normal practice on every bridge, with every member of that bridge feeling confident to question a deviation from the plan. 🚢

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