



Pilot's Column

A Pilot's Perspective

Continuing our series on the Master/Pilot Relationship, an Antwerp pilot offers a personal response

I enjoyed Captain Simicic's article on 'When should the Master step in?' (*Seaways*, November 2013) very much, and I compliment him on his very balanced viewpoint. I wish to take up the challenge of trying to give 'a' pilot's perspective (it is impossible to give 'the' pilots' perspective!), expanding on some of the main points and some of the practical difficulties.

I agree totally with Captain Simicic's point that Masters and pilots are not opposing each other. Both have the same aim: to have a safe and efficient voyage. However, they approach this goal from different perspectives. The captain approaches the goal first of all from the viewpoint of his own vessel and his owner. Although for the pilot the interest of the vessel is also very much at the forefront, there are cases where the interest of the general public and the port might take prime position instead. When captain and pilot work as a team, this will help to come to an adequate balance of all interests.

What needs to be avoided is a situation where the 'stranger on the bridge' and the 'stranger in the port' watch each other intently in an atmosphere of distrust, each ready to take over from whoever makes the first mistake. The starting point should be a position of respect between the two; and an assumption on both sides that sufficient knowledge and experience are present, until there are strong indications otherwise. Even in those, hopefully very few, unhappy cases, the Master has to work with the pilot that is on board, and the pilot has to work with the ship and crew that he is with: there is no other choice.

Taking over?

Captain Simicic gives a clear description of the relationship between Master and pilot, with which I fully agree. In the situation he outlines, where we are talking about the captain contemplating a challenge to the pilot's decision and taking over the conn, we can assume that the start position is that the pilot has the conn and the captain feels that there is an unwanted situation, an 'undesired ship state'.

The captain's assessment that there is an undesired ship state does not necessarily have to mean that the ship truly is in an undesired state. I think that most captains are very aware of that difference, and I think that explains in a large part the reluctance to take over the conn. These captains might have had a number of experiences where they felt uncomfortable with the situation, and still ended up having a very safe voyage.

However, where the captain does 'challenge' a pilot's decision, this should not be too much of an issue. I like the description Captain Simicic gives under the heading of 'The challenge'; that 'More participants mean more solutions and options, more creativity – and unfortunately, sometimes more confusion and bad ideas.' This shows that Captain Simicic is looking beyond the theory into its effects in real life. Too much challenging *can* be disturbing, distracting and thus potentially hazardous. But as I ask in pilot training, *why* would someone, in this case the captain, challenge too much? This generally

happens when the captain does not know what is going to happen – in other words, when the information supplied by the pilot in the briefing has been insufficient.

What's in a briefing?

A proper briefing is extremely important in rectifying unnecessary anxious feelings. For the pilot to develop an adequate input in the briefing requires a lot of effort. This input needs continual evaluation as crews, ships and equipment develop (see box; where the pilot's briefing failed to allow for the predictor). However, there are limits to what a briefing can do. A situation that seems very safe and straightforward when you are *talking* about it can feel very uncomfortable when you actually *experience* it. If the pilot uses unfamiliar shiphandling strategies, these might look inadequate to the crew, even where they have been fully briefed – and, where in retrospect, the manoeuvres would have worked exactly as planned.

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Even if there was all the time in the world to brief – which there is not, especially when the ship is underway – it would still be impossible to provide a briefing that covers all eventualities. There are simply too many 'ifs'. And even if all of them were covered in the briefing, it would not help, as the captain might start to lose track. A Master/ pilot briefing should focus on the things to be expected, the difficult points and the ways to deal with them, including aborting; and it should cover the relevant items that happen within a reasonable time span. Anything unexpected must be covered by 'thinking aloud' or 'dynamic briefing' as the pilotage unfolds. Briefings for the stretches of the voyage that still lie hours away should be held as they become relevant.

Defining roles

In general, a captain's education and training focuses on *running* ships, a pilot's on *handling* ships. The captain on an average oceangoing ship cannot experience shiphandling two to three times per working day. The

opportunity simply does not arise. By contrast, all my experience as a pilot is focused on shiphandling in the local environment (topography, meteorological condition, traffic etc). It is vital that the pilot conveys the relevant knowledge in an adequate briefing, but all details about all possible combinations of interaction with banks and bottom, traffic, wind and current can only be learned by years of experience, and this full knowledge cannot be transferred in a few minutes.

Under the circumstances, challenging a pilot's decision is an occurrence that can be expected to happen with some regularity, and could well be done using the Master/Pilot exchange checklist, or similar tool. The challenge can often be in the form of a professional conversation between captain and pilot of how they perceive the situation and how the pilot intends to go ahead. Pilots should be more than willing to engage in this building of a shared mental model and explain their intentions, limited only when it becomes too distracting, or that the situation is such that the ship requires all the cognitive space, and there is none left to talk.

Intervention

Now for the hard part; the intervention. It is very important to realise that investigation reports only deal with situations when things have gone so wrong that considerable damage resulted. There is no way to find out how often a captain successfully intervened. There is no way to find out how often a captain felt unsure, but did not intervene, and no damage resulted. So there is no way to come to a conclusion about whether intervention is in general a successful strategy or not.

Likewise, it is not possible to know what would have happened if things had gone differently. When the captain intervened and damage resulted, would there have been more, or less damage, if the captain had not intervened?

Practical suggestions

The best advice I can give a captain is to be well prepared by making sure that adequate voyage preparation has been done, and by promoting an adequate briefing by the pilot. Try to achieve an atmosphere that is conducive to dynamic briefing/thinking aloud throughout the voyage, in order to get an update as soon as circumstances require. As captain, you have the right to have adequate knowledge about the plan.

If, despite all of this, uncertainty arises, I would encourage the captain to 'challenge' as soon as he is in doubt, and ask the pilot about his intentions in a professional way (not blaming or threatening), to achieve a shared mental model. Don't wait until the vessel is in an impossible position.

If the dreaded moment comes that the pilot does not give a satisfactory answer, or does not act, the captain can do no other than take a decision to the best of his knowledge and abilities. Whatever the decision, if there are consequences some parties will try to prove, with the help of hindsight and outcome-bias, that the captain took the wrong decision. I think that it is better to defend a choice that you are convinced was the right thing to do than one that you only made because you thought that it was 'legally acceptable'. If it is any consolation, in a number of countries, such as the Netherlands, in criminal proceedings the pilot will be responsible if he has the conn and the captain could expect that what the pilot did was reasonable.

As Captain Simicic said: this issue will never be clarified with mathematical precision. Every situation is different, and every stakeholder and observer will look at it from a different perspective. It is vital to keep the debate going, so that we stay focused on trying to minimise the necessity of taking over, and stay aware of some of the pros and cons of this decision. 🐦

Illustrating the problem

Just before I read Captain Simicic's article, I overheard part of an interesting debriefing in the simulator centre where I work. I missed part of the debriefing, so I don't know all the facts, but this is what I understood: On the simulator was a relatively young bridge team – none of them captain yet – and a very experienced pilot. The run was approaching IJmuiden at maximum flood current. The pilot had explained the effect this would have on the vessel to the bridge team, including that the vessel would come out of the current once it had passed the breakwaters. Just before entering the breakwater, the pilot gave a Rate of Turn (RoT) to port, just as he had briefed the team that he would. The co-navigator observed the radar and ECDIS and told the navigator that he felt uncomfortable with the situation. The navigator agreed, took over the conn and turned the rudder to starboard. Normally that means ending in the mud near the South Breakwater, but fortunately the vessel had entered the breakwaters already so that the maximum effect of the kick of the tide, when the forward half is out of the current and the aft half is still in, had largely passed and it was possible to recover. Part of the reason for the co-navigator to be unhappy could have been the predictor, which showed a predicted position close to the Northern Breakwater. The predictor does not know that the current stops, neither does it appreciate the kick to starboard when the vessel gets off current. The pilot had not briefed the team about this effect.

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