

The Crew

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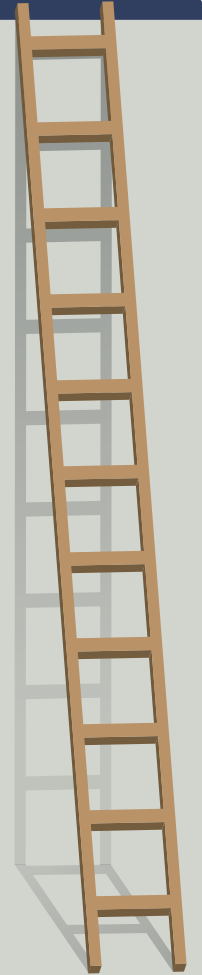
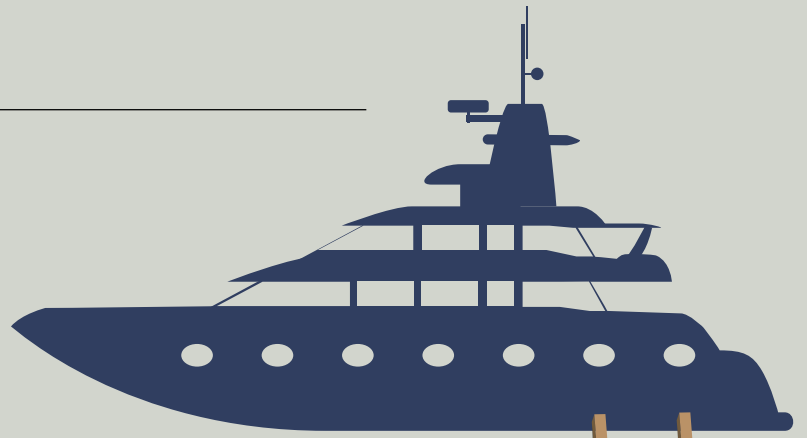
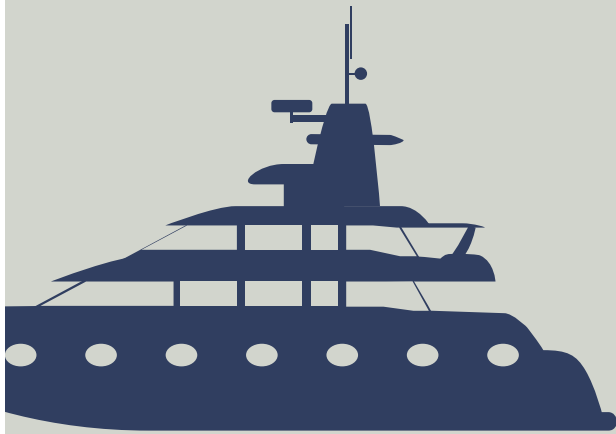
REPORT

FIRST OFFICERS' QUESTIONS
Superyacht captains answer questions from first officers about climbing the career ladder.

YOUR YACHTMASTER
With the Yachtmaster a prerequisite for many crew starting in the industry, we look at the real value of the command ticket.

THE COMMODITY CAPTAIN
We look at the long-term, shore-based career prospects for today's captains in this competitive market.

GOLDEN TICKET
Our Superyacht Golden Ticket crew competition is back. Win a treasure chest of goodies for you and your yacht.



QUESTION TIME

That final step from first officer to captain can be daunting. For those considering making the move, the various questions surrounding owner relationships, crew management, handling regulatory authorities and dealing with yacht managers can be unsettling. So we asked a number of the industry's first officers to provide us with questions about the jump to captain to which they wanted answers, and we put them to today's captains.

HOW DO YOU GET A GOOD CREW TEAM TOGETHER? AND WHEN THERE ARE PROBLEMS HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH IT?

Captain Dave Evans, S/Y *Clan VIII*

Finding a good team is a real measure of a captain in my opinion. The very fact that you are living, eating and working together adds many more variables than an office manager would have to deal with.

You are looking for the obvious traits: presentable, cheerful, experienced and hard-working; but you are also looking for some other characteristics which mean something to you individually. Maybe you insist on good eating manners or you might like the person because they are a photographer, surfer or barbecue perfectionist – whatever the reason that made the person stand out and is the reason you brought them into the fold.

The dynamic is also important, especially among larger crews. Going for a crew walk to the hills or perhaps a beach day with a barbecue (with aforementioned aficionado's skills on show) will bring the team together, as will drills and exercises.

Problems should be dealt with discreetly if possible – though sometimes this is impossible, which is when it should be dealt with swiftly! The Merchant Navy Code of Conduct is the book to refer to when dealing with problems; it is impersonal, which is how you should be in dealing with them. Ultimately we are all professionals on a boat and dealing with problems should be done professionally too.

Captain Ron Woods, M/Y *Mia Elise*

Putting a good charter crew together takes time; a lot of interviews and weeding the crew who may have a great CV but may not be the right fit for your boat. I look for longevity on other boats; one year on board a boat shows that you can commit to a programme. The next thing I look for in the interview is personality; on a charter boat being able to carry on a conversation with guests is very important. Lastly, I look for people who will work hard under extreme circumstances. Chartering in the Med is a very long ordeal and not everyone can keep a smile on the eighth week of a back-to-back season. I once had a second stewardess walk off the boat in our third week of charter; she said we were all crazy to work this hard. So in summary, putting a great team together takes a lot of effort from the captain. Do your homework and try to find people who can get along together and are all self-starters.

The second part of the question: when there are problems how do you deal with them? Try not to shout or yell at your crew. They are all adults and are responsible for their own actions. This in general is a tough area; people have to know boundaries and rules on board. When the line is crossed, the severity of the issue will always decide your course of action.

Captain Fernando Vallmitjana, M/Y *Tales*

It is about knowing the owners, yourself and the crewmembers. There are many opinions from many captains and I think every boat will have a different answer. In my case, I try to keep the people that understood what the vessel needs and that is a great method to teach the new crew. Eventually with time, a good group of people will be together.

Another factor I consider important is dividing the tasks according to the capability of the crew and not under a strict code of job description. On my yacht, the roles are adapted to the crew and not the other way round. At the end of the day, we are all different and if we use that as an advantage it can make for a very good yacht.

Captain Ian Westman, 40m M/Y

Our selection process is very detailed, as we have a very interactive owner. He loves chatting with the crew and wants the crew to remain with him long term. I take a good look at relevant experience, interests, career path and comprehensive reference checks. It's quite easy to sort out the 'backpackers' versus the long-term candidates.

Keeping crew involved socially is also paramount, and this certainly does not mean hanging out in bars. Sports and exercise with each other creates good bonding and a healthy level of competition off the boat. We are fortunate in our case that my crew of seven get on well professionally and have a good social balance without spending every waking minute with each other.

Open dialogue regarding problems is key but, having said that, when professional relationships dissolve to a point of no return then it is no longer in the best interest of the boat to retain these crewmembers on board.

Captain David Burke, 50m M/Y

Getting a good team takes care. You have to consider many factors when selecting an individual who will be compatible with the existing team and owners. Ideally and on a practical level, in my experience you have to check at least three references yourself. Referees are much more open to speaking with a captain than an agent and will tell you things that would not be conspicuous from their written references.

However careful you are, there will always be problems of some kind. That's why trial periods are important. On paper the candidate may have everything, but if the chemistry with the captain, crew or owner is wrong then you have to go back to square one. There is a certain degree of luck involved and in general I find most crew can adapt quickly to their new environment, and the existing crew are often flexible with the new personality in the team. »

Try not to shout or yell at your crew.
They are all adults and are responsible for
their own actions.

ARE MANAGEMENT HELPFUL OR DO THEY RUN THE VESSEL MORE THAN THE CAPTAIN? IF SO, HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH IT?

Captain Dave Evans, S/Y *Clan VIII*

I have not always seen the best side of management, and have often seen the very worst. The overall goal, which must never be forgotten, is that the owner owns the vessel to enjoy himself/herself aboard. Any management company should understand this and remember it. Ultimately that is what the whole thing is about, not power play or separating the owner from his pride and joy and the crew who run it for him. Obviously, as captain you would never bring a problem to the owner's attention unless absolutely necessary; we provide solutions not problems. In my experience, management do not see themselves as having the same role or goal. They are there to inform the owner and, in my experience and those of several others I know, they have provided one-sided and often unfounded information which can detract from the owner's joy of owning a vessel; in one case, so much so that the owner sold his yacht – one less owner is never a good thing in our business. In dealing with management, an honest, frank and open dialogue is needed from both sides. Anything except that is not management, but control.

Captain Mauro Barletta, M/Y *Invictus*

Management, in my case, helps and at the same time gives freedom of action to the captain. It is a good connection point, because management could suggest ideas and solutions already taken from other yachts under their service, simplifying the road to a solution.

Captain Ian Westman, 40m M/Y

Personally I have seen both sides of this. I have seen managers who want total control of decisions and interaction with the owner where the captain becomes nothing more than a bus driver; sadly, when push comes to shove and blame is to be proportioned for something, then all of a sudden the captain becomes the fall guy.

On the flip side, of course, I have had management who are supportive and understanding and really instil their faith and confidence into you to run and manage the boat. In terms of dealing with it, it's a tough one. With difficult management situations I have seen that the captain gets dismissed when things go pear-shaped; this retains the power base with management for sure, and a new captain comes in and has to establish his hierarchy on board. Personally, in bad situations where the dynamics and politics become so skewed that it detracts from your primary task as a captain, then it's time to move on.

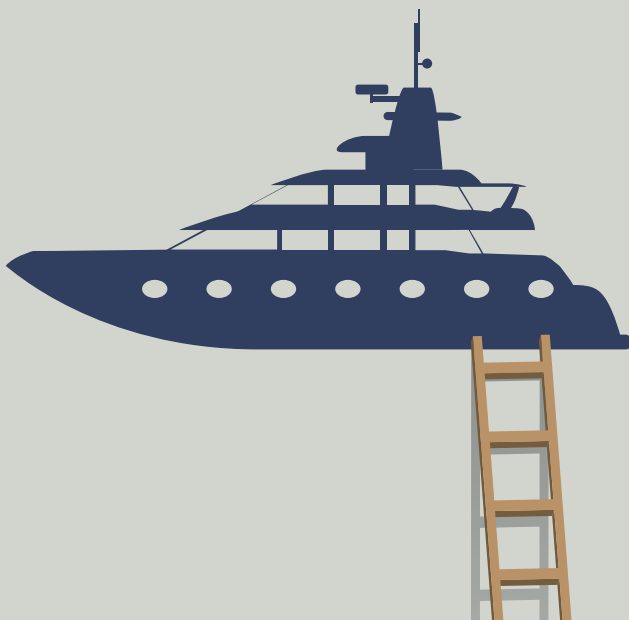
Captain David Burke, 50m M/Y

Management is an integral part of the structure of running a yacht. Like it or not, managers are the owner's representative and must be treated with respect. As in any working relationship there are positives and negatives and there will be ups and downs, but it is important to develop and maintain professional communication at all times.

I have had very hands-off managers who are basically accountants with no knowledge of or interest in the yacht and just pay the bills. This makes the captain a major factor in the decision-making process for much of the yacht's operations, but this also means that you carry much of the responsibility if there are problems. This hands-off approach also means you are not supported in many other ways, especially with regards to safety, and this is less constructive.

I have also had the other extreme where the managers are micro-managing operations and as soon as the yacht has finished a trip are all over the yacht, and that can be quite demanding. In this case, the responsibility of the important decisions is lifted somewhat but of course this also means that you lose a large degree of control in many areas, but the corresponding support is very helpful and I think that standards, maintenance, safety management and procedures improve.

Obviously, as captain you would never bring a problem to the owner's attention unless absolutely necessary; we provide solutions not problems.



HOW DO YOU MANAGE CHANGING FROM BEING REGARDED AS ONE OF THE GUYS OUT AND ABOUT ON DECK TO HAVING OVERALL CHARGE OF EVERY DEPARTMENT AND HAVING TO MAKE DECISIONS SUCH AS DISMISSING PEOPLE?

Captain Dave Evans, S/Y *Clan VIII*

The move from being on deck to being in the office is never an easy one. I found that initially I didn't count office work as 'work', and would get annoyed that my job list was still so big and I hadn't done anything all day, when in fact the charts were updated, the charter schedule was done and the winter refit was planned. On sailing yachts I think it is easier, as you are still very much in charge of the sailing manoeuvres, so are still 'on deck' so to speak.

Dismissal is never easy on either party in my opinion. You always want to see the best in people and it is easy to think that they (or you) are irreplaceable. I agonise over this sort of decision, but if you know it is the right thing you must follow through on your conviction.

Captain Fernando Vallmitjana, M/Y *Tales*

When you become a captain you need to understand that power comes with loneliness. Your main task as captain is not to be a nice person who only says yes to everything. Someone gave me an analogy that I consider to be very good. Imagine that you have to work on an engine, and in order to perform you need a toolbox with the right tools. If you need a screwdriver but instead you have a hammer, you will not be able to perform. It is also possible for the right tool to break, and then you have to replace it. When your toolbox does not allow you to perform, you will not be able to complete the task and you will be replaced by someone who can.

Captain David Burke, 50m M/Y

The transition from being one of the guys has already happened by being first mate. You are already in a position of authority to make important decisions as to who is working on deck, with the captain's approval. When you are captain, the relationship with the heads of each department becomes critical and there is less focus on the junior crewmembers and an expansion of your ethos upon the vessel's crew as a whole.

Dismissal crew is part of the job and when the decision has been made, for whatever reason, it is important that the process has been assessed and qualified with care and in a professional manner with due regard to the crew agreement and terms and conditions of the contract. Once that is in place, you also have to act with empathy and respect to the individual. Of course it doesn't always work like that and it can be an emotionally demanding time, especially if there is a conflict, but you just have to get on with it and always be thinking ahead.

Captain Dario Savino, M/Y *Regina d'Italia*

On my vessel, heads of department have the honour and the burden to choose their staff and, if I agree with their choice, it's then their problem to dismiss the crewmember if they're not performing as requested. Any chief officer will be aware that one of his tasks is to have people behaving and performing at their best; if they don't, he will report to the captain and have them fired. Going up the ladder will include firing people directly, which is a heavy decision that changes someone's life, but not doing it is going to be detrimental for all on board. »



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HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THE PENNY-PINCHING PRINCIPAL AND BROKERS WHEN, AT THE END OF THE CHARTER, THEY STUDY THE ACCOUNTS IN DETAIL, FINDING SIZEABLE AND UNAVOIDABLE AGENT FEES FOR SEEMINGLY TRIVIAL SERVICES? GENERALLY IT IS THE CREW WHO SUFFER AS THE REFUSED LINE ITEMS TEND TO BE ABSORBED BY ANY POTENTIAL GRATUITY THAT THE PRINCIPAL MAY WELL HAVE HAPPILY SET ASIDE. PLEASE ADVISE HOW BEST TO AVOID THIS.

Captain Todd Rapley, new-build

Unfortunately record keeping is part of management, and you must stay within the boundaries of the agreed budget operating guidelines. First, you must be clear on the budgets and whether they are from the owner or management company. Second, you must have a system that controls these guidelines (always get a quote, use reputable service providers and don't pay invoices that are not the price agreed; if a request is for an item that doesn't fall into your budget then put this back in writing to the owner or management company so it is their decision to break the bank. Third, keep very good records and be able to justify what you have spent and the decisions you have made. I choose certain suppliers around the world for certain products due to the value they provide, not necessarily the price. The longer you are in the game, the more you build up relationships that might cost a dollar here but save thousands in the long run.

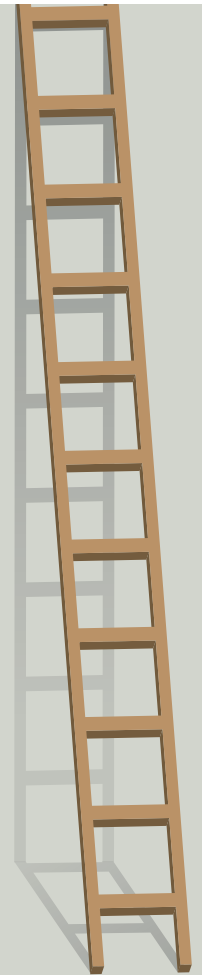
Captain Mauro Barletta, M/Y *Invictus*

I just ended the 214th charter of my career as captain and in my experience I find it important to keep the brokers and everyone involved in the charter constantly informed with quotations before and during the charter, sending an update of the accounts every two days. Any expense is always managed, discussed and approved by everyone together, avoiding worthless discussion at the end.

**Captain Dario Savino,
M/Y *Regina d'Italia***

With time and experience you will find a proper answer to this question. Very often you will be the shock absorber between different needs and requests. Sometimes you will have to compromise – but never on safety. I always found it comforting to run things with the care of a family father; and try to find the best point between fees and services. Do not be afraid to discuss quotations and make sure that you always have a second and third quotation for any service request. A bad habit in this industry is that once suppliers acquire a client, their price is no longer competitive and the client (captains) are no longer interested in searching for a better deal. Use the phone and the web and demonstrate that you can find the same quality services at a better price and save your crew their gratuity. »

The longer you are in the game, the more you build up relationships that might cost a dollar here but save thousands in the long run.





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WHAT (IF ANY) WERE THE AREAS THAT CAUGHT YOU UNPREPARED WHEN YOU STEPPED UP THAT YOU HAD NOT FACTORED IN OR HAD PRIOR EXPERIENCE OF?

Captain Todd Rapley, new-build

Demands of crew and the feeling of being mum and dad; spending so much time dealing with trivial issues in the scale of what you thought was a captain's job. And in reality, how important it is to assign that time and energy for the smooth and successful operation of a yacht, which does take continual adjustment and focus. The reality is captains probably spend less than 10 per cent of their time being the 'driving captain', which is not necessarily thought about when coming through the ranks.

Captain Mauro Barletta, M/Y *Invictus*

I remember one of the most embarrassing situations for me when I became captain: having to talk to owners and be at their level without any fear. Sometimes by the first command we all tend to always say yes, when actually we feel that the real answer inside ourselves is no. It is necessary to be able to face the owner or the charterer, and feel comfortable at the same level as them and answer politely without any fear, saying, if necessary, what they wouldn't like to hear.

Captain Fernando Vallmitjana, M/Y *Tales*

"The captain's job is very easy." That is normally the comment of the rest of the crew. One time my mentor captain told me that I will never know what the job is about until the day that I occupy his chair, and he was right!

The job itself is more complicated than it seems; when you are not the captain on board, everything seems so easy. The biggest challenge is to manage the human factor – the conflict of interest and the diversity of nationalities. To overcome that I have read many books about management and personality – at least 30 – but I can tell you that I am still learning every day, and sometimes the learning curve comes in the most unexpected ways.

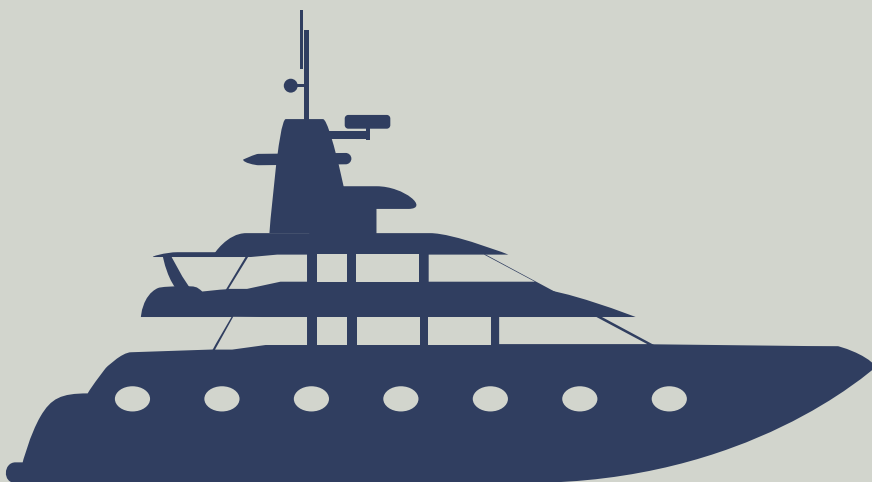
Captain Ian Westman, 40m M/Y

I think the biggest wake-up call is being exposed to the full intricacies and politics of the owner, management, home offices, PAs and so on. This could be quite daunting, especially when it's your first command. Hopefully you have the ability to take this in your stride and move forward through all aspects of your position.

Anonymous captain, 35m M/Y

New European-wide tax regimes and regulations in respect to doing charters; albeit, this is still a work in progress. Other than business as usual, as a captain these days it seems one needs to be a tax adviser, planner and accountant too. It's getting increasingly complicated for people who are financially unaware and I would sincerely wish, just like when the euro came in, that all the European coastal states would be uniform in their VAT application.

It is necessary to be able to face the owner or the charterer, and feel comfortable at the same level as them.



AS IN ANY PROFESSION, TAKING A POSITION AT THE TOP REQUIRES SACRIFICE, OFTEN OF PERSONAL TIME AND SPACE. DO YOU, AS A CAPTAIN, THINK THE POSITION OF MASTER IS BEST LEFT TO THOSE WITH FEW DISTRACTIONS ASHORE, OR HAVE YOU FOUND IT TO WORK WELL ALONGSIDE A HEALTHY 'OFF-BOARD' LIFE, FOR EXAMPLE HAVING TIME FOR FAMILY AND A SOCIAL LIFE? IF SO, HOW HAVE YOU MANAGED THIS?

Captain Todd Rapley, new-build

I have always had my wife on board, as I haven't seen too many successful relationships among senior yacht crew who have a partner ashore. There are preferences for both sides and in either situation there must be sacrifices. You will miss birthdays, Christmases, deaths, reunions, children's first steps, parents' medical situations and so on, as well as just the simple daily chatter on what is happening with friends' and families' circles of life that you are not a daily part of. Technology and social media have made this a lot more bearable for some.

Anonymous captain

No matter what the personal circumstances, you have two heads: one for the boat and the other for off the boat. If you only get two-and-a-half days' leave per month, so 30 days per year, you just have to get on with it. If you are married and have children, you have to work to support what you have, therefore there is no choice in the matter. If you don't like it or enjoy it, then [find a job on land] – at least you can sleep in your own bed at night. Make the most of the opportunities you have to get off [the boat] or to get away when presented to you. It is very tough being a captain, but if that's what you are you have to be very mentally strong to cope with it all.

Captain Ian Westman, 40m M/Y

A position as captain is a non-stop 24-hour commitment. Your phone is never turned off and I believe there is a sacrifice you make for all the rewards you receive. Balancing a healthy professional commitment and a personal life is paramount to your health and mental well-being. There is a lot of stress involved with the responsibility that you shoulder and you have to offset this through exercise, time away and turning your brain off momentarily. »

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HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH PORT/REGULATION AUTHORITIES AND WHAT SHOULD YOU DO OR NOT DO?

Captain Todd Rapley, new-build

Research, understand, prepare, be polite, be honest and then plead ignorance – works every time. If authorities know you have tried to do the right thing, are not hiding anything and have taken all steps to comply, they will work with you to resolve whatever you didn't get right.

Utilise your network of captains and other yachts; you are not the first to go somewhere or do whatever you are trying to do. Yacht agents generally are worth the money they charge to ensure a smooth process, as they not only know the rules but they usually also know the officials. Sometimes saving a dollar not using an agent can cost you many dollars flying crew out for visas, disposing of quarantine items or paying fines for getting it so wrong.

Anonymous captain

Be professional. If you are doing your job correctly, are organised and have the correct paperwork and certification on board, then there should be no fear factor. There is no point in bluffing as the authorities will soon see through it.

Captain Ian Westman, 40m M/Y

Continual on-board education for crew with regards to the ever-changing regulations is paramount. This keeps them aware of the changing face of the industry and the structures that are being put in place to keep the industry as safe as can be. The biggest mistake to make is trying to cut corners and hoping that nothing will go wrong by doing this. As luck goes, this is generally when things do go wrong and then there are uncomfortable questions that need answering.

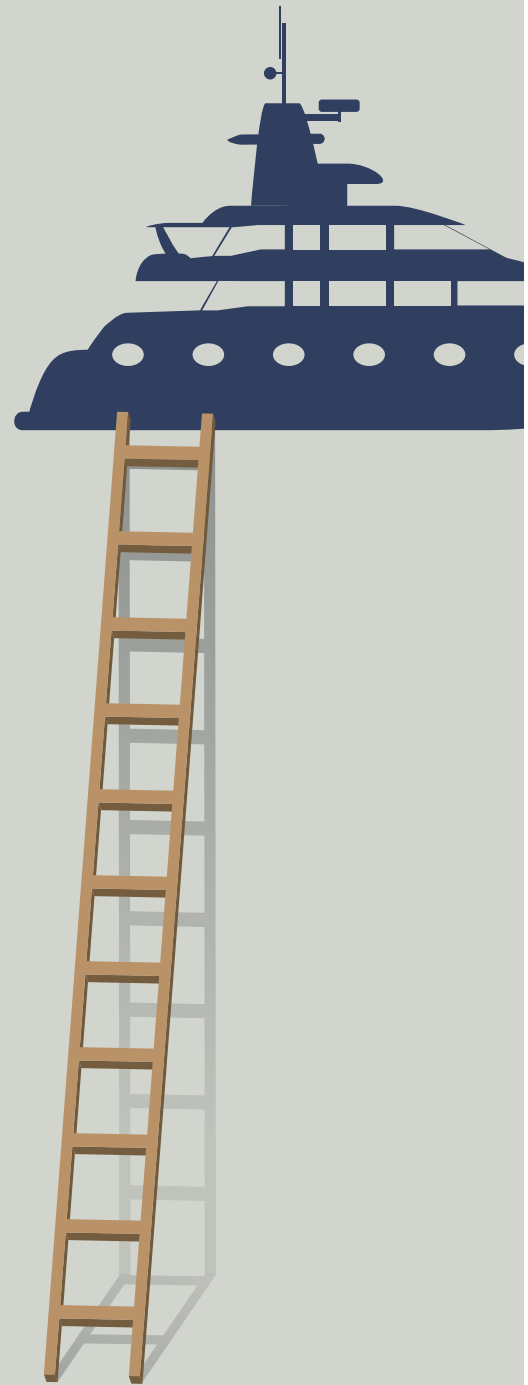
WHEN WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE WELFARE OF THE CREW, DO CAPTAINS HAVE THE GUTS TO SAY TO MANAGEMENT COMPANIES THAT THE CREW REALLY DO NEED A FEW DAYS OFF? OR CAN'T THEY FOR FEAR OF LOSING THEIR JOB?

Captain Todd Rapley, new-build

I've always made sure I have the say on crew hours of work and leave. In 90 per cent of my commands I have used a six-day work system where the seventh day of the week is a day in lieu if worked, which I find the fairest way, so everyone has their days recorded and then everyone gets the same time off over a year. You have to be clear with the owner and management company on the guidelines and who can make what decisions. Often I have chosen to use an ocean-crossing transport company to give leave if a season has been very busy and too many leave days have been accumulated. There is a crew cost of doing an ocean crossing which at some point must be paid, either in crew leaving because they are burned out or paid-for leave owed. You should understand and know these costs and arguments.

Captain Ian Westman, 40m M/Y

Perhaps from the point of view of both the management and the boat owner, the lure of money and charter bookings might skew all reasonable judgment at the expense of crew welfare. However, I have not heard many crewmembers complaining when they are sitting with an extra 15,000 or 20,000 euros in tips after a charter season. Generally if a captain has enough fortitude and drive as a leader, he should keep the crew pressing through and make them look forward to the rewards. But trying to achieve the unreasonable, if the health and wellbeing of a crewmember is sacrificed, is certainly not acceptable.



Generally if a captain has enough fortitude and drive as a leader, he should keep the crew pressing through and make them look forward to the rewards.

WHAT ACTIONS WOULD AN EXPERIENCED CAPTAIN TAKE WHEN HE IS BEING TOLD TO GO TO SEA WHEN IT CLEARLY IS NOT SAFE? WHERE IS THE LINE BETWEEN MAKING A SAFE DECISION ON THE WELFARE OF CREW AND APPEASING MANAGEMENT AND OWNERS?

Captain Ian Westman, 40m M/Y

This is a very simple answer for me. I will not and haven't done it regardless of the pressure pushed onto me by the owner or guests. The boat is insured and can be recovered – this is without question. The life of a person that I am responsible for is my responsibility alone and is not shared by anyone else. Having the conviction to make this decision is hopefully why you have been placed in a position of command and this, in an ideal world, should suffice enough for your decision to be respected. Where I see the problem, perhaps, is with younger or first-time captains who might push the boundaries a little more to keep an owner happy and ensure their job stability.

Captain David Burke, 50m M/Y

I have been lucky enough to have never been put in that situation. I had an experience as a crewmember where the captain was put in a difficult situation to go to sea to make a shipyard deadline and had a fatality en route due to severe weather conditions. Since then I have had a very careful approach that luckily has been respected by my management and owners.

If put in a compromising position, I think it would be important to communicate your concerns verbally and in writing, in a formal way, to the management and/or owners and to be careful to interpret their 'pressure' correctly. It is often the case that management does not understand the inherent dangers of going to sea in very rough conditions. The limitations of the yacht and crew must be assessed and directly communicated to management.

Anonymous captain, 35m M/Y

On charter it's easy [to say no], but not so much with owners! It has happened once with me and after that first experience, I studied the scenarios of what could have been: the costs of a major accident in terms of injuries and fatalities. I collected all the data (flag state limitations, insurance liabilities and so on) and the next time the owner asked I presented him with the 'financial' liabilities and they rescinded. I cannot for one moment believe this will work across the board, as owners are all individual and taking risks is part of everyday life for them, but sometimes showing what it will really cost works!

Captain Dario Savino, M/Y Regina d'Italia

Safety first. You can say no if the weather is really bad, but no excuses please. They are owners and managers, not stupid and ignorant. ■

TO COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE, EMAIL
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