



Case study – “Personal conflict”

1. Title

The conflict with the Captain

2. Executive Summary

This case study is about the conflict between the boss (the Captain) and the employee (the cook). There are five people starring in the incident: the Captain, the Chief Officer, the cook and the company DPA (Designated Person Ashore). Their personalities, their beliefs, their stereotypes, and attitudes influenced and shaped their behaviors.

3. The narration

3.1. The scenery

This is a particularly good example as far as the human element at sea is concerned. Our narrator is Chris. Chris remembers when he was on board a general cargo vessel, back in 2018 as a Chief Officer in fact.

The ship was built in 2003, so it was like 15 years old. Dutch flag and the owner. She usually carried windmill wings, but on this voyage she was carrying steel structures.

There were 15 crew members. The crew was international and came from different continents and cultures. The Captain and officers were from European countries and the rest of the crew members were from Asia.

3.2. Introducing the people involved

The Chief Officer

Chris is a Captain today. His educational background is the Merchant Marine University. He had been sailing in the merchant fleet for 11 years. He started working on a ship right after graduation. He had been working in the same company for over 8 years: at the beginning as a deck officer, at the time of the conflict as a Chief Officer. For 2 years as a Captain. Chris is a tough guy with soft heart; a demanding person and always ready to help. 35 years old, but looks younger, tall and slim.

Chris remembers and describes an incident that happened when he was on a general cargo vessel, back in 2018. He had completed two weeks onboard, was already connected with the people inside and had seen what kind of person each one was. He had observed that the Captain was shouting publicly at the



cook. From his signing in, he noticed that the relationship between the cook and the Captain was very tense.

The cook

The cook was an experienced person, who had already completed many contracts as a cook. He was a rather calm person. Every day he greeted the others with a smile. He worked hard to prepare two different cuisines for the crew. A great number of the crew members were satisfied with his efforts. 40 years old. Short and corpulent.

He was always trying to avoid the Captain. He tried not to be there when the Captain was entering the messroom, but these meetings were inevitable. That time he was terrified. The crew said he had tried to speak to the Captain before, but the Captain didn't listen, so he changed strategies and was silent when the Captain yelled.

The Captain

The Captain was a very aggressive person, particularly in relation to ratings, including the cook. In relation with the officers, he was trying to shorten the distance. However, the officers did not believe in his sincere intentions. He was regularly under the influence of alcohol and was aggressive towards the cook. He insulted the cook in front of the other crew members. He was complaining about the tasteless meals all the time. He questioned the cook's qualifications, shouted that he could not cook, that his meals were only suitable for garbage. It happened that the Captain threatened the cook with physical force. Such threats were repeated often.

The company DPA

When the ship-owner's DPA came on board the ship, he did not try to be objective and impartial, but instead he uncritically supported the Captain.

The rest of the crew

The crew was split. Officers clearly supported the Captain in order to please the employer. Ratings took a neutral stance and did not support their colleague. Probably also for fear of being signed off. Probably it was because of the fear of the Captain's threats. He threatened the cook that he would sign him off disciplinarily, and that he would also bear the expenses. Nobody wanted to support the cook.

3.3. The challenge

On the one hand, seamen are used to the variety of cuisines, as they happen to sail with different cooks from different countries. But not always, they are also lovers of diversity.

On the other hand, seafarers are very picky as meals are an important part of the ship. For lack of other "entertainment", everyone lives for what there will be for dinner. People miss home, so they want their meals to remind them a bit of home, and when they have a cook who cannot live up to these expectations, dissatisfaction appears. In this case the discontent was shown only by the Captain. The Captain humiliated the cook, accused him of not being able to cook. He threatened the cook that he would sign him off disciplinarily, and at the expense of the cook. The Captain threatened the cook with physical force.

It is worth underlining that there were no complaints from other crew members about the meals.



3.4. The dilemma

- Based on Chris' (the Chief Officer) narration

"I wanted to talk to the Captain, but it was very difficult, because talking to a drunk man is pointless. I remember how the cook presented a list of products to be ordered and the Captain crossed out the majority of the products and entered what he wanted on the list. I pointed out that the cook might not be able to handle it, and it sparked the Captain's anger.

I also talked to the cook, he asked me what "European dish" should be cooked so as not to be criticized.

Unfortunately, I don't know much about cuisines and I couldn't help much. Even when the cook tried to prepare an ordinary steak, he still used oriental spices, which were met with more criticism from the Captain. It is terribly difficult to help someone who is completely helpless and in a losing position from the beginning.

It was a very difficult month for me. On the one hand, I wanted to help the cook. On the other hand, all my approaches to the Captain were unsuccessful. The Captain was very angry each time I started the discussion. Finally, the Captain was my boss, the first after God on the ship. I was also thinking about possible consequences on my activity. In short, I could get a punishment. Actually, I entered the triangle, where the Captain was the perpetrator, the cook was the victim, and my role was not so clear for me. The best option, from my perspective, was to solve the situation. However, the company DPA did not support me in this activity. So finally, I decided to play the role of the savior. The only reasonable solution I could think of was to report it to the agent in port."

- The conflict escalated

The situation was reported by the Chief Officer to the agent in the next port of call. The agent notified the PSC (Port State Control) and the ITF (International Transport Workers' Federation) and asked for help. The aggressive attitude of the Captain was confirmed during the ITF inspection of the ship. Moreover, it was assessed that the Captain was very agitated.

In addition, the DPA who arrived at the ship as well, tried to slander the cook. In the absence of the cook, he entered his cabin and put 2 packages of sealing tape into his packed suitcase. Sometime later, he appeared with the tape, suggesting that the cook was trying to steal.

The intervention of the PSC and ITF institutions had a calming effect on the Captain. At the express request of the external representatives, he withdrew the negative appraisal he wanted to issue to the cook. The cook returned home at the shipowner's expense on the same day the inspection took place.

Preparatory Questions

1. Describe the key persons involved in the conflict and their background.
2. What is the subject of the dispute?
3. What circumstances were crucial to this incident?