

Dealing with Bullying and Harassment at Sea

“ The 2010 Bullying, Discrimination and Harassment Survey was completed online by 539 members of Nautilus International, via the Union’s website www.nautilusint.org. 42% of respondents said they had personally experienced bullying, discrimination or harassment at work in the past five years— around twice the figure for all workers in the UK and Netherlands.”

Seafaring has long been considered a tough occupation due to the masculine nature of the profession and the rough conditions that prevail at sea. Seafarers are often perceived as tough “people” in the field, but contrary to this biased perception recent findings of a study of more than **1000 seafarers report that 25 percent** of the seafarers have experienced depressive symptoms over a two week period while 45 percent did not ask for help ([sailors society](http://sailorsociety.org)). Seafarers are not invincible to adversities; they are just as vulnerable to psychological distress as the general population .

Over the past decade, considerable empirical evidence report that workplace harassment and bullying are prevalent , occur much more frequently than presumed but tend to be under reported. It has been cited that 35 to 50 percent of American employees have experienced bullying at some point in their working life (Lutgen and Sandvik et. al., 2007). Bullying at sea is no exception! In the past year, [ISWAN](http://iswan.org) processed 128 cases of abuse involving a total of 420 seafarers and this figure may be misleading since seafarers may be afraid to report bullying or harassment incidences onboard (<https://safety4sea.com/iswan-reports-increase-of-seafarers-asking-help-in-2016/>). Unequivocally, seafarers are at risk for bullying , harassment and mental health problem therefore, existing misconceptions about the profession can only take a toll on their wellbeing at sea.

Defining Bullying and Harassment

Harassment includes any inappropriate conduct with the intention to cause humiliation, intimidation, embarrassment or feelings of uneasiness to another person. Bullying is a form of harassment that involves the misuse of power or position , it may be vindictive, cruel or malicious, persistent and unpredictable. Bullying differs from joking around with friends as part of bonding, bullying entails a power dynamic where the instigator feels powerful over another person (the target) with intent to hurt, humiliate or instill fear to that person. (<http://www.ics-shipping.org/docs/default-source/Other-documents/guidance-on-eliminating-shipboard-harassment-and-bullying.pdf?sfvrsn=4>).

Succinctly, workplace bullying refers to the persistent mistreatment from others that is threatening , humiliating , intimidating leading to detrimental effects on the individual’s psychological and physical health. In general stressful experiences impair brain areas (prefrontal cortex) responsible for goal directed behaviors such as attention regulation, focusing and problem solving and strengthen areas of the brain (amygdala) responsible for emotional reactions leading to psychological distress, anxiety and dysphoria. Psychological distress is associated with both risky and impulsive behaviors (Giogi et. al., 2016) and constitutes a major causal factor for physical illness and trauma compared to other sources of work stress (Wilson, 1991). Absenteeism rates cited for victims are 1.2 times higher

compared to other employees (Kivimaki et. al., 2000) with anxiety and depression being the most frequently reported mental health conditions.

Unquestionably, harassment or bullying is always detrimental and counterproductive whether it manifests as verbal aggression, ill-treatment, cyber-bullying or sexual discrimination. It often goes under reported out of fear, and when reported it may be distorted or denied reinforcing the vicious cycle of harassment and abuse.

Defining Bullying Behaviors

- **Making verbal or physical threats**
- **Making derogatory remarks**
- **Ridiculing or belittling a person**
- **Spreading rumors**
- **Being over critical even about minor mistakes**
- **Making remarks about a person's religion, race, color or nationality**
- **Make hostile or personally intrusive telephone calls, emails or letters**
- **Make unreasonable demands**
- **Threatening another person about their job security**
- **Lose temper for trivial reasons**
- **Physically intimidate another person**
- **Assign menial or demeaning tasks that are not appropriate to the job**
- **Use sarcasm or making jokes that hurt another person**

Over the past decade, a number of organizations have focused on the subject of harassment in the maritime sector, by organizing campaigns to raise awareness, integrating fair practices and implementing guidelines for effectively dealing with the issue . Despite these efforts bullying continues to be a challenging issue in the profession because it is tricky ; it happens in private, often by a person in authority with intent to induce fear to the victim. Working at sea can make seafarers more vulnerable to harassment and bullying due to prevailing working conditions, the isolation , the tough nature of the profession and the fear of further victimization or repercussions ,if bullying is reported since victims may be labeled as troublemakers or have their contracts terminated.

Companies and management are the primary active agents of change by adopting a zero tolerance approach to dealing with bullying and harassment at sea :

- **Establishing clear policies and procedures for dealing with harassment and bullying onboard.**
- **Disseminating company's policies regarding harassment to everyone onboard (in native language of crew members).**
- **Organizing ongoing awareness programs, training sessions, campaigns, videos, conferences and other media.**
- **Establishing channels of reporting and actions to be taken when a complaint is filed**
- **Ensuring privacy and confidentiality to encourage disclosure**
- **Establishing clear job roles, and expectations and responsibilities**
- **Investing in ongoing trainings**
- **Applying fair and transparent processes for allocating tasks, job roles etc.**

- **Educating everyone for early warning signs : when a seafarer looks sad, lonely , scared, isolated, not motivated, low performance, complains of physical symptoms, avoids social interactions etc.**
- **Implementing emotional intelligence programs to encourage self awareness, social awareness and conflict resolution. Team building sessions, inspirational leadership trainings and cultural diversity working groups**
- **Organizing activities to encourage social interactions onboard**

Awareness campaigns, guidelines and practices decrease incidences by establishing strict regulations against bullying and helping people come forth and disclose incidences nonetheless, the industry is in need of more effective approaches that could include the implementation of emotional intelligence, leadership , cultural diversity intelligence programs that have been applied in school or work settings with outstanding results .

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