

CHANGING ATTITUDES

By Arie Palmers

Is safety just a box to tick on a checklist?

While doing my job as a pilot, I came across a large variety of ships and pilot transfer arrangements, well over 3500 in the past 16 years. Piloting is all about safety, as we all know... It's about safe passage, safety for ship crew and cargo, and the environment and whatnot. Nowadays, emissions are also on our agenda, trying to pollute the air as little as possible, which is also high on the list of every vessel government and NGO. A few years ago, the world was held hostage by a pandemic we hadn't seen before. Shelves filled with regulations and demands for ship crews and pilots were published and in force within the blink of an eye. Crews were stuck on board for many months past the end of their contracts.

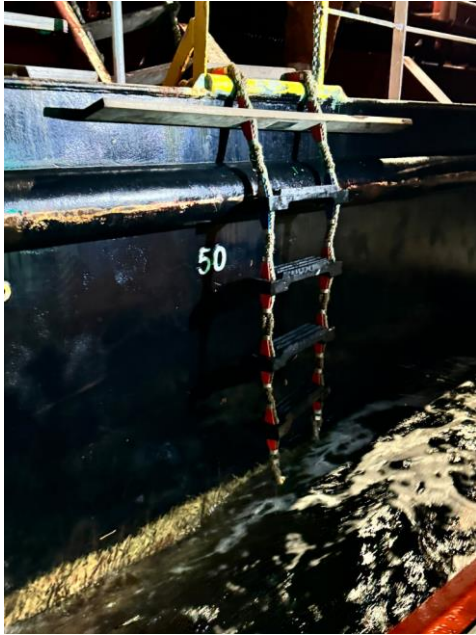
The world is changing rapidly, and a wide variety of terrible armed conflicts pop up around us. Social media provides us with the latest news and fake news 24/7, every moment of the day and night. All these things sometimes make it hard to keep focus. The focus must always be on safety onboard and around us. Our job is to guide a vessel safely to its destination despite everything happening around us.

In shipping, there have been a lot of developments, from more sophisticated equipment to artificial intelligence and remote control to even attempts at autonomous shipping. Things are changing on the bridge, and much of it is for the better; look at something as simple as ergonomics. For example, more and more bridge equipment is built around the seafarer instead of just where there is room, we'll put it.

Many changes are happening around us, but one thing has yet to change: a stable factor, and that is, of course, the (archaic, if you wish..) pilot ladder. The basic ladder looks similar to the ones from 100 years ago. There have definitely been a lot of developments in the quality of ladders. Still, the basics are the same: day and night pilots cling to this ladder and their lives to board or disembark vessels to guide them in or out, manilla ropes and wooden/rubber steps.

Another thing that has yet to change is the number of casualties while attempting to do so, and it's not only pilots who get hurt or worse using it. Also, surveyors, maintenance staff, crew changes, etc., get potentially hurt trying to board a vessel. One could ask himself how it is possible that in this day and age, where we drive carts on other planets in our solar system, people keep getting hurt climbing ladders.



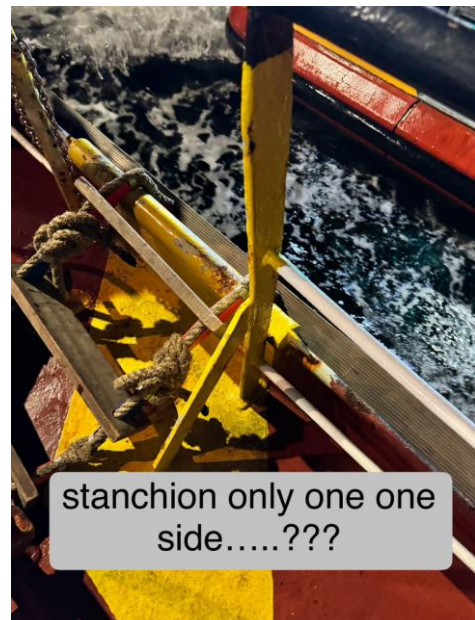


In my opinion, it can have something to do with the safety approach of all involved parties. Upon arrival on the bridge, paperwork is presented to the pilot. The number of signatures you must sign varies on every ship; my all-time high is six signatures: PMX, pilot card, pilot ladder checklist, bell book, etc. All are to be signed in the dark (please sign mr. pilot). Sometimes, the mate keeps chasing you down with a flashlight until you've signed them; when you do, the papers magically disappear. Filed, so the crew can show inspecting bodies all paperwork is done! Let's delve a little deeper into this paperwork. Rather often, the checklists come out of the computer with the boxes ticked already. On several occasions, you sign it without having a proper read (my bad). How can it be possible for me to sign a pilot ladder checklist without any deficiency while I wait until a ladder has been corrected? Maybe because the answer to incidents and accidents always seems to be

more paperwork.... Nowadays, on ship's bridges, there is an overload of paperwork trying to tackle every possible error that might occur. The captain is hurting his fingers behind his computer, trying to complete all the requested paperwork in time.

Back to ladders... I check every ladder thoroughly before using it, and as you might know from my WEEKLY LADDER MISERY social media post, over 50% of the pilot transfer arrangements presented to me need rectification before they are safe to use.

Here is an example from the wonderful world of ladders: I've written about having around 11 different sets of rules in previous articles. If something goes wrong, okay, let's make more rules! This didn't make things safer or clearer, so this June, during NCSR-11 in London, which ended on the 13th of June, the rules have been revised, unified and simplified: SOLAS V/23 has been simplified, and IMO A.1045 is also revised and renamed into 'Performance Standards' basically covering the whole lot... KISS principle (Keep it Super Simple). Sometimes, after getting more and more extensive rules, it is better to go back to the drawing board and start over. This will result in more understanding and awareness of all parties involved. I even came across a 145-page document on cyber security recently; it is ridiculous!



I always discuss pilot transfer arrangements with the deck and bridge crew. They are always open to my comments and very willing to change their modus operandi to improve the result of their efforts to rig a ladder. Unfortunately, I sometimes am told that the pilot before me did not have any problems with the ladder and that the deficiency was minor. Yes, every deficiency is minor until an accident happens...

The remark about the pilot before me keeps going through my mind... Why did he consider it a safe arrangement? Would he have thought about what could happen to the next pilot? Several



publications over the past few years have clearly shown that the safety culture among pilots is, in the best-case scenario, relatively low on this subject. If no one explains to the crew what is wrong with any arrangement, you are – as a pilot- basically teaching the crew that the wrong way is also no problem. This is the start of the chain of errors that will inevitably lead to accidents.

The problem is that we climb so many ladders, which has always been okay for me, so why would it someday not be okay? Using ladders is a daily practice for pilots; we do it all the time; it's like riding a bike... An automatism is something you don't think about a lot, maybe even complacency. It is essential to check every arrangement before you use it. One could make a nice checklist and call it a risk assessment! Let's not do that; there is enough

paperwork around already to keep everyone busy for a full day. The biggest issue around safety is complacency: it won't happen to me... indeed, it won't until it does.

It seems to me that checklists are taking the place of common sense and seamanship: as long as every document is signed and every box is ticked, we're all good when something goes wrong. When the blame game starts, I can show I did all the paperwork, so it's not my fault. I can divert the responsibility from me because the paperwork is done, and I made no mistakes. This could be another reason for having unsafe ladders: not taking responsibility by several parties involved; after all the paperwork is done, I'm off the hook.

When things go wrong, the open safety and communication culture everybody talks about is often gone, and the above-called blame game starts...There has to be someone to blame. Once found, it's the end of the contract for that person, and we can continue as we did before. That's one of the reasons Chirp Maritime is so important to the shipping industry. It is about the approach to accidents and incidents. Chirp aims to find the root cause of any incident or accident to learn from it and prevent it from happening again. In Chirp, no blame game is involved; all entries are treated confidentially and will be anonymised; it would even be hard to recognise the report you sent! ChirpMaritime would like to have more ambassadors; please take a peek at their website, www.Chirp.co.uk, for more information! On the website, you'll also find how to file a report or download the app from the App Store for even more convenience.



Altogether, we can conclude a few fundamental reasons why ticking boxes seems more important than a proper mindset to safety:

- The office demands extensive paperwork.
- Ports demand more and more pre-arrival and pre-departure reports.
- Paperwork is used to remove or shift responsibility.
- Complacency towards the situation.

- Lack of open culture.
- Blame games.

Safety management should not be approached like an emperor with no clothes, where appearance is misleading, or as a mere box-ticking exercise devoid of meaningful implementation. Safety should be a mindset embraced by everyone in the maritime industry. When you look in the mirror after waking up for your shift, you're staring at the most important person responsible for your safety. It all starts with you as an individual. An intrinsic drive to do the job you're about to do safely must be everyone's mindset.

Stay safe everyone.

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