

# Sailing with a happy ship

Keeping the crew content takes as much thought and skill as any other element of seamanship. Tom Cunliffe looks at how it's done

**D**avid Oliver runs a one-boat charter business called 'Yachtsforfun'. He is an international consultant in human relationships and motivation, so when such an authority asked me to compare notes on skippering, I was apprehensive about how my own techniques would shape up under the microscope! I climbed over our Bénéteau Océanis 36 *Cool Runnings*' guardrails to be greeted by David, his one-man crew and a glass of champagne.

After a chilly motorbike ride up an M27 populated by homicidal maniacs, this hit the spot far more than a standard safety briefing. By David's own admission, he felt he wasn't always an expert skipper, which,

with his business background, meant we had lots to talk about. The bottom line was: what could we learn from one another, having agreed that nobody is the Ultimate Fount of Knowledge on everything.

'Good', I thought. 'Give and take. There's lesson one!'



A warm welcome (and a glass of champagne) will make the crew feel at home



Photos: Graham Snook / 47Photo

## » 'SAFETY' BRIEFING

When we'd washed up our champagne flutes (glass, not plastic I'm delighted to report), our brief for the day was a positive affair lasting only a few minutes. We were kitted up with lifejacket / harnesses, we discussed how the galley and heads worked, then we gathered round the chart to plan where we'd go, how long this might take, and what conditions we'd be in for. The theme was positive all the way through. 'Downers' were minimised but touched on sensibly, with gas taps noted as part of an overall 'how to put the kettle on' scenario, rather than a finger-wagging frightener about explosions. The great time we were going to have was maximised. And we did indeed have a lovely day.



## FOREWARNING NOVICE CREW

Skippers easily forget their first day in a sailing boat. When she heels, you feel as if the world is falling over. You're also psyched out by the noise of the flapping sails before they fill. I've found that telling new crew what to expect is the key. 'See that yacht over there? Well, when we're heeling and you think life is ending, it's only really leaning as much as that. Plus, we've got three tons of lead underneath us that makes it impossible for the boat to fall over and tip us out.'

It works like a charm!

## » THEIR PACE, NOT YOURS

David was exemplary in the discipline and patience needed to run manoeuvres at his crew's pace not his own. He always made time for their comparative lack of competence, which set me thinking. The previous weekend I'd been cruising with my family, who are highly experienced but don't sail all the time as I do. It was their first trip of the year and I'd planned to weigh anchor under sail – not easy in my 20-ton gaffer with a hundredweight of ground tackle to bring aboard. Normally, they'd have relished the challenge, but because they were rusty and I hadn't given this proper credit, we bungled it. My fault, not theirs. I shouldn't have assumed they were 'on the pace' after a winter a long way from the sea.



## » KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN

David is naturally soft-spoken. I'm anything but. He has no worries about unsettling his crew by raising his voice. In my case it's an issue. It's not that I want to shout at people out of frustration or anger. I don't. It's just that they may be 50ft away and if it's windy I get loud to make myself heard. Bad idea. A raised voice can be misconstrued by someone who's feeling nervous and inadequate. We skippers can easily forget that our crews may be precisely in that state.



## » PERSONAL SKILL LEVELS

David once had a bad experience trying to set his cruising chute in a lively breeze. His crew hated it and he didn't rate it himself. He didn't mind asking me to show him how to hoist it in front of his crew. As it happened it was blowing Force 5, the Bénéteau was already edgy on the helm and I judged that the chute might send her into a series of broaches, so we gave it a miss. David hadn't been too proud to share a specific area in which his experience fell short. Good for him!



» **ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE**

This was an area where I watched David as closely as he was watching me, but he managed the last word. Approaching harbour in a strong cross-set, I encouraged our crew to sail a transit. Satisfied that he was on the ball and that David was looking out, I went below for a few minutes. When I came up we were on track and I did the right thing, but I honestly can't say I was thinking about it. I was very pleased with David's email comment:

'My crew had been instructed in his first-ever transit (he thought it was a

Ford van!) and was doing well in a chop. Tom popped up his head from visiting the special seat below and says, "You've held that transit like a true pro". I watched the helmsman's self-esteem build almost visibly and a big smile cracked his face for the first time in the day.'

It doesn't take much to praise somebody, but a little well-placed acclaim goes a very long way. Try an objective look at your own performance. Are you encouraging the team enough?



**LEAD FROM THE FRONT**

It's axiomatic that a good skipper will never ask a crew to do what he or she is unwilling to tackle personally. Less obvious is to take the lead on domestic issues. Someone who's hanging back from washing up, cleaning the heads or sweeping out can be a drag on general happiness. You could tell them straight, but an easier option is to



start doing the jobs cheerfully yourself. This sort of leadership can leave them with such a bad conscience that they take up the slack voluntarily.

» **STRENGTH IN DELEGATION**

I noticed that after David had instructed his crew on coiling and stowing, he left him to it even though the result wasn't as neat as it might have been. It takes a firm grip on yourself to keep your nose out. I often find it trying myself, but do it we must – and sometimes speak well of a less-than-perfect job – if our crew are to have a satisfying day.



» **COMMUNICATION – THE NAME OF THE GAME**

When skippers don't make themselves clear, crews are often too shy to ask for clarification. They then do their best but fail to carry out what the boss thought he had told them. I was skippering *Cool Running* as we shaped up towards a mooring buoy in Langstone Harbour. The tide was running hard, but the wind gave the option of a close-hauled approach straight into the stream. An easy pick-up, so long as you chose the correct tack.

Although David had been obliged to practise this for his Yachtmaster exam, like many skippers he hadn't bothered since. He was helming and I gave what I imagined were clear suggestions. His remarks were:

'One of the less satisfying moments was trying to pick up a mooring buoy in Langstone. Tom thought I understood the way he wanted the approach to be made but a basic communication went wrong. I discovered afterwards that Tom wanted me to stand in shoreward of the buoy, then go about between the shore and the buoy and hook up.'



'In my mind I was processing the tack the opposite side of the buoy. Tom's instructions, and my interpretation were not in harmony, I missed the buoy and we sailed on to try again. This time I made it my business to ask and keep on asking until I was clear about the approach required. We made it!'

I'd wrongly assumed that as the highly competent skipper he was, David would have realised I meant him to head into the tide for the pick-up, rather than choose the tack with the stream walloping across the buoy. Here's my reply to David:

'The initial failure to grab the buoy was,



as I now see it, clearly down to my lack of detailed briefing. You understood everything I said all day, so I think I must have assumed you'd realise we needed the "offshore", up-tide tack to make the approach. I was a step or two ahead and you were gent enough not to say, "If you'd just told me..." Many thanks for that. I had a similar incident not so long ago, and you've helped me identify what I now recognise as a personal shortfall creeping up on me. It was worth coming for that alone.'

**MAKE YOURSELF CLEAR**

When you're off watch, people must fully understand their responsibilities, especially someone left alone at night. Noting your orders down helps a lot. Do they call you for any ship, or just one on a steady bearing? What about wind shifts? And how much sugar do you take in your coffee when they give you a shake?



» **'TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE...'**

The superficial conclusion from the incident with the buoy is that I have isolated a technical area in which I can improve – I have been forgetting to insist that orders are repeated by the recipient to remove any possibility of ambiguity. Less obvious but equally important is that I have faced up to a personal shortfall and considered what I can do about it. When I'm examining, I often find candidates making excuses for something that just hasn't worked. Self-justification is as natural a reaction as kicking your knee up when the doctor hits it with a toffee hammer. It has its places, but the deck of a boat isn't one of them, and it's worth taking a few minutes alone after a passage to debrief yourself. Were you pleased with your performance? Were there areas where, deep down, you know you could have done better? I'll bet there were.



**'Self-justification has its places – but the deck of a boat isn't one of them'**

I've found that it's only by facing myself honestly like this that I can improve my act. Sometimes, after the internal argument with 'Captain Justification', I have to admit to myself that I was wrong. As soon as I've accepted this I can forgive myself, analyse the problem and

learn the lesson without angst. What's more, I can have a beer with the hands knowing that things can only get better.

**NEXT MONTH: Securing your boat alongside a wall or pontoon. Are you guilty of cleat misuse?**

**LIGHTEN UP, SUNSHINE!**

When the burdens of being skipper weigh heavily and others start looking downcast in reflection of your mood, remember David and his glass of champagne. However bad things seem on the boat, the world out there is full of much more concrete horrors. Yachts are for fun. Our duty as skippers is to run a happy ship.

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