

Familiarization on Board

Captain Shahrokh Khodayari

► Introduction:

In many accident investigation findings it is quite common to see "Lack of Familiarization" as one of the root causes of the accident. In a wider view; human factors & elements are considered to be the dominating reason for accidents. A statistical figure of about 80% confirms that statement. Familiarization is a human element issue & depends on human interface. The following notes will try to analyse some general & specific concerns on the issue.

1. Why familiarization is required?

ISM code; clause 6.3 states that: *The Company should establish procedures to ensure that new personnel and personnel transferred to new assignments related to safety and protection of the environment are given **proper familiarization** with their duties. Instructions which are essential to be provided prior to sailing should be identified, documented and given.*

So there is a regulatory requirement that every Safety Management System must have established procedures to familiarize the personnel.

On the other hand once a person is supposed to carry out a task, it is obvious that we must explain him/her what are the needs & expectations & the ambient work conditions/area. The various equipments/gadgets if involved must be known, seen & learnt as well. This is the case with every job whatsoever, but if the activity involves some sort of hazards or risks, the process should be carried out very carefully & systematically.

A core element in risk assessment approach is the familiarization.

Very much related to but a stringent requirement in any hazardous operation is the existence of contingency plans. One must have plans "B" & "C" etc when involved in tasks that require high fidelity & contain inherent possibilities of failure due to numerous variables or phenomena under Force Majeure & Acts of God categories. The so-called contingency plans must be included in the familiarization process & defined levels of management & decision making.

2. Familiarization versus Training:

This is a common mix-up that many make. Familiarization is not training although it may contain and include sessions of training or adept teaching. When a person joins a new ship; there are actually three possibilities, he/she may be an absolute beginner meaning that he/she has never been on board a ship. Second possibility is that he/she has been on board but the position or task is new like after a promotion or change of status, etc. The last category is that the person is an old hand and has done the job & associated tasks oftentimes before & this is his or her next ship in the line of duties.

In whichever case the general expectation is that the person should already know the basic & overall tasks & the familiarization is a process to show the person the very-ship-specific points & if things are a bit different.

Of-course when the fellow is an absolute beginner, the procedure must be different. The basic safety & urgent matters should be covered first & then the familiarization should be continued perhaps for a longer period till he/she is fit to be left & let alone.

A common mistake is that when we talk about the familiarization; we are not supposed to start teaching from the very beginning the whole workmanship on board. The joiner must have learnt the job theoretically as well as partially practically through simulators & cadetship or trainee service times; then we shall familiarize him/her with what are specific & different here. Admitting that we have no time or asset to do all the teaching from A to Z nor we are expected or required to.

The process with elder hands & those just promoted may be a lot easier as many basics are already present in the personal practices & database.

In fact training sessions on board are required in a different concept as memory refresheners or introduction of new requirements & legislations. This concept is very valid but not to be mistaken with the familiarization in whole although there are common areas & roots.

3. What should be familiarized?

Basically this revolves around safety. The primary concern is to explain the joiner what are the safety aspects of the very ship, the position & operation of the various Life Saving or Fire Fighting Appliances and equipment as well as the duties & what to do-s in an emergency.

Next; comes the job description & tasks familiarization. This area might be taking longer depending upon the person who has joined, experience & many other factors not fully under control or thoroughly definite.

Taking matters easily or complacently is a great problem in realizing the important points about safety as well other areas of activity. Once you have seen as many lifeboats, you may start believing that they are all the same but the truth is different. The person giving the familiarization should bear this in mind. There will be some remarks about various problems encountered with the familiarization later in the following notes but it is important to stress upon the fact that no matter how old & experienced hand we are, we still need to be reminiscent & mindful & check through. This is surely a human element problem, on many airplanes belonging to various airlines and nationalities, you see flight attendants that are very complacent for the pre-flight demo. They do it very heartlessly & in mumbling tones as if this is just another routine that should be done, or well; I have done it a thousand times before. But mind you; theirs is for the passengers. The passengers are supposed to know the very tiny basics & be helped & guided in an emergency. The case is not so with the ship crew members. The personnel on board the ship are very few & each given a specific & mostly vital task which can not be dispensed with or eased-off. No-one is going to do your job or else; rarely help you to carry out routine or emergency duties. Taking the familiarization easy or just ticking the check-list is harm on our way. Nobody is really sure about the time that urgency arises; where & when you find yourself helpless. It is a common foul for all of us that when we need something to be done on urgent basis, either the computer will not start or the devices get kaput or we just forget what & how to do. The devil accelerates this with panic & in emergencies.

4. Adequacy & Time:

Likewise many other matters similar to handing/taking over; familiarization needs to be adequate & some time is required for settlement. The familiarization in the essence of ISM & Safety Management System is usually verified by the auditors and unless satisfying the minimum requirements, it will not be accredited.

But the adequacy of the familiarization should be checked on board & through the process. Learning lessons from the accidents, near misses or past experiences can be a good guide for amending of & adding to the efficiency of familiarization process.

From another view; we need to allow sufficient time for the familiarization. On many ships the primary actions are done in a few minutes & the joiner is given so much of information that he/she may not really be able to grasp. Some SMS-s have provided certain period for time-taking familiarization like procedures & usage of forms, etc but in reality the ship schedule may not permit this. A new second mate should prepare the voyage plan as per the company system as soon as possible & he will not be allowed to take much of a time, so is the chief engineer who takes over the vessel's machinery just few hours prior bunkering.

On these instances the senior positions should let others assist the joiner but what will also be required is the management from shore who should not expect people to act like "Bits & Pieces" of equipment. The people are not bolts that you change in a few minutes & the bolt will hold the sections together. Consideration for time is a must. Some parts of the specific familiarization should be done slowly & while an operation is being carried out, pushing too hard or fast will leave loop-holes that can prove dangerous or cause malfunctions.

5. Noting the Tricks:

Quoting the tricks can also be done while handing over as well as familiarization. If we go on with the general remarks it may be not so useful, it can be boring & trigger the behaviour pattern to go complacent. Okay; to bring down the life-boat you release lashings, let go of the harbour pin & lift the brake handle. This is what we all know and expect to be so & shorten the discussion but once you mention that the forward pin comes out after a slight jerk or in another case; so & so pump in the engine room will loose suction when you have a list over 2 degrees; these remarks will activate the joiner's brain to note it or to start asking for more details.

The tricks of workmanship especially on older ships must be stated during the familiarization process which is a part of handing over. It would be more efficient if written down & somehow registered in a notepad.

The essence of familiarization is to remind & clarify the already known or blurred and if ever different than what is expected or considered normal.

6. Cultural & Communication barriers:

Like any other human being interaction; cultural & communication barriers are to be taken into account. In some cultures becoming complacent is very common & like an epidemic problem. The first year medical student acts as if he or she is the most experienced physician in the area, so would young ship's officers & crew. The result

may be not taking the matters as seriously as they should & acting over-confident, and then the familiarization becomes less effective.

In some societies accepting the new-comer is a dilemma, like a chicken-house when the new hen arrives everyone starts beating and rejecting the poor creature, once it is whole bloody & tormented & a few days pass; that very guy starts acting the same and at times more cruel! to the next new-comer. This can happen on board a ship; if the joiner is not really accepted or welcomed (as yet) the familiarization process will be very difficult as the person is struggling to primarily fit him/herself in, rather than learning the bits & pieces. The element of survival will always come first.

The other crucial problem is the multi-cultural and multi-national crew. This issue is very wide & quite often spoken about; we are just reiterating the fact that such barriers can be hindrance to understanding each other or carrying out various duties on board. In some societies due to estranged prejudice or unknown back-ground; the new-comers are left to suffer & learn rather than being helped & accepted.

The communication in general & language in particular are troublesome barriers. The matter has been looked into by working groups in the IMO & many other institutions in a widespread arena. It is equally as important in the issue under discussion here. The way one explains something can change the whole understanding. The language competency has been looked into by the STCW 2010 & must be reiterated here. Some of the joiners in the rating's division & a few amongst officers may not be very able at the company's official language used. Although the general conception is that a minimum level of English should be achieved by all seafarers but in reality this may not be the case, so it is advisable to let the personnel with common mother-tongue to familiarize each other if possible & practicable.

The mariners in different societies act nearly the same and the various researchers' as well as author's findings confirm many similarities in the way human being reacts in the maritime concept; but it seems that the way a language is used to write, read & speak plays a far more important role in co-existing & co-working conditions.

The text of the check-list for familiarization might not be very clear; the various phrases may be misleading, the person in charge of the familiarization may not be good at English or whatever language the company has adopted and furthermore if all of these possibilities were in favour; there are still the problems with intonations & the cognitive way one expresses a matter for another person.

There should not be any haste exercised, the joiner should be let to come again and clear his or her misunderstandings & simplicity plus brevity should prevail in most conditions.

Conclusion:

Familiarization should be considered as a key process for shipboard operations; if there seems to be not enough time for a proper & thorough familiarization & in cases where the joiner is an absolute beginner; he/she should be closely supervised and accompanied during hazardous operations. So far as possible no crew member should be appointed & given a job or task unless the superior positions are satisfied that the person knows what & how something is to be done in a safe & effective manner. Due regard has to be paid to the human element issues & fatigue as well as the role displacement matters that affect a seafarer who has signed on.

Shahrokh Khodayari
Master Mariner
MSc Nautical Sciences
Maritime Accident Investigator
Maritime Management Systems Lead Auditor
Maritime Human Elements Analyst
Maritime Lecturer (IMLA life-time member)