Mariners Have To Grow Up Quickly

In the 60s, 70s and 80s, most of the Singaporeans who went to sea were typically in their late teens and they would be leaving home for the first time in their lives. The young mariners would find themselves in ships that were usually old and small and not comfortable (even for those who got over their sea sickness!). They would find themselves among strangers. The lucky ones would have father figures providing some form of guidance and protection. The unlucky ones would meet at best the unsympathetic and at worst, the bullies. To survive, they would have to fend for themselves and quickly learn how to get along with others on board others as they would not be able to get away from them!

Thus, when I began my career as a teacher, I decided that my marine students shall learn to be adults and they should do so by being treated as adults. And one of the adult things to do was to know about rules and to decide what to do with the rules. “Should I comply or should I break them?” “If I break a rule, what would be the consequences?” I wanted each student to be faced with such questions and learn to take responsibility for his own decisions and actions.

At the beginning of each year, I would devote my first lesson to explaining my rules for my classes such as:

1. Rules set by Singapore Polytechnic e.g. no long hair, no slippers, shirts buttoned up etc, Comply or you are out of my class or examinations that I happen to invigilate.
2. Lateness for class: No one to enter to my class later than 5 minutes pass the hour – irrespective of why (including valid reasons) one is late.

And I would enforce my rules WITHOUT exception even though it may appear irrational and harsh to teenagers.

The first rule resulted in the “Yeong Tow Foo Scissors” incident as remembered by Dennis Chua. His account of the incident is captured in this eBook. Those with similar memories are welcome to share with us please!

To explain the rationale for my rule on lateness, I told my students that ships would sail on their scheduled time when the minimum number of certified officers (Captain, Chief Officer, Chief Engineer and 2nd Engineer) is on board. And they would not be looking for missing Cadets. One of my students (I forgot whom) called me from Sydney (I think):

Cadet, “Sir, I missed my ship. It sailed off to Fremantle without me! What to do?”

Cheng, “I am in Singapore and hence cannot help you. I suppose you understand why I got you to practice turning up for class on time. What do you propose to do?”

Cadet, “If I take the train to Fremantle, I should be able to catch my ship. I suppose I got to pay for my own fare.”

Cheng, “Of course you do! I certainly will not be paying for your ticket to Fremantle.”

I heard no more of this incident. Till today, I cannot recall who the cadet was! Would the cadet concerned please identify yourself and tell us what you remembered of this episode?

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