With the Right Work Attitude You Will Thrive

Keppel Shipyard's Managing Director, Mr. Chua Chor Teck must have taken a gamble to move me from Ship Repair to Commercial for after all, I was specifically trained to do repairs. What would have happened had I made a mess of the Commercial Department? And looking back in the 40 years that followed, he was right that I was better suited to do commercial work rather than ship repair work.

The repairs to be effected for a ship is usually numerous and so complicated that it was too much to expect each Charge-hand (most of whom did not speak English) to record the work done by his team on every repair item. Thus at the end of each day, the Charge-hand had to verbally tell the Work Recorder, what work his team did and on which repair item that day. This recorder is called a Storywriter.

All the stories from these storywriters on work done by all workshops and sections were then combined by an overall Storywriter into the work description of the repairs. Next, the recorded cost charges on each item of repairs were tallied and checked against the story of the repair for that item and the Billing Officers would try to come up with a repair cost that could be defended. Obviously the more accurate the story, the more the Billing Officer would dare to charge.

Who were these story writers? They were mainly someone who understood ship repair work and could write in English. Hence most of them were apprentices that did not go to sea or who were not being trained to be Foreman. These story writers were therefore our Technicians and mostly my old apprenticeship friends.

When I was a Ship Repair Manager, I took the trouble to sit with these old friends and tell them what happened on the ship I was in charge of — something other Ship Repair Managers normally did not do; either they felt so high and mighty or that they did not realized how important that was for the profitability of the company. Also, as I was one of them, the storywriters accepted my interference and dared to come to chat with me, whenever the stories they had been told by the Charge-hand did not seem to tally with the costs recorded.

Similarly, I also had this habit of going to the Billing Officers (also mainly ex-apprentices) to tell them why the costs were expected to be high and asked them to charge for this or that non-usual work. As an old comrade of theirs, the billing officers were comfortable in challenging me why an item was charged more than normal. They would have had their heads chewed off had they challenged other Ship Repair Managers.

These things did get talked about and Chor Teck must have heard that I was a very cost conscious Ship Repair Manager, hence he switched me over to take charge of the whole Billing Department as the Chief Billing Officer (CBO) and hence I was made responsible for that whole set up of all the Story Writers Network and the Cost Gathering Network in the workshops. My old friends (the Storywriters and the Billing Officers) were delighted that it was one of their own fellow old apprentice that was in charge and hence we had a more cohesive and closer working Billing and Estimating Department. Not only did the profitability increased, the time taken to render a Bill was much reduced too.

Also as Ron Pereira and many Superintendents would tell you, I tried to be honest and fair too and hence the Superintendents left Keppel with some satisfaction that they had not been ripped off. They would then return for their next repair. It was this reputation that I built up that after 2 years as CBO, Chor Teck then asked me to take over the Marketing Dept, to build on that TRUST element, so necessary to get Customers back into the yard for future repairs.

Not many people know this, and they just thought that I was lucky to get these chances given by Chor Teck. He was actually so astute to know that as I came from the ranks and that I could work well with all the Storywriters and Billing Officers who served their apprenticeship with me.

So it is really WORK ATTITUDE. One's life is in a sense fated, but good work attitude can cause one to influence one's own fate.

And if I can somehow get to share this message with new graduates or new shipyard employees that would really be one of the things that I can further do for the Maritime sector that I so love.

David Chin Soon Siong
April 2013

David Chin while doing his apprenticeship also got his Diploma in Mechanical Engineering from the Singapore Polytechnic. He then won a Keppel scholarship to read Mechanical Engineering at Newcastle Polytechnic in the UK. He graduated with a B.Sc degree with 1st Class Honours in 1971. He returned to serve his bond as a SRM and rose up the ranks to be the yard's Marketing and Commercial Manager. He then left in 1985 to join the Trade Development Board, served in various capacities and was Director General (Trade) when he retired in 2006.

During his career, David also served in numerous corporations and professional organisations. His contribution to Singapore was recognised with two awards - the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 1993 and the Public Administration Medal (Gold) in 2000 by the President of the Republic of Singapore.

David was recalled from retirement to serve as Executive Director of the Singapore Maritime Foundation where for his lifetime contributions to the development of Singapore as an international maritime centre earned him on 11th April 2013, the International Maritime Centre Award (Individual) by the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore.

David's article drew this comment from Kan Seng Chut:

Marine Engineers with the right attitude will thrive. I like to add that having the right policies will help.

Those involved in hull insurance would agree with me that any vessel fitted with a V-Pielstick engine should pay a higher premium for insuring her hull and machinery. Such engines had a poor record in the market for very often the crankshaft failures were total losses. In my whole career I had a few ships fitted with V-12 Pielstick engines and to avoid disasters, my policies to the Chief Engineer were these.

Policy #1 - Do not reuse any thin shell bearings once it's opened up for survey or maintenance, even when its only used for 100 hours/or 20,000 hrs. Make sure that it's thrown away or scrapped. I even tell the Chief Engineer, "If I find any old/used thin shell bearings on board, you would be sacked."

Why do I make such a policy? Once a new pair of thin shell bearings are boxed up and operated, it will be run-in after a few hours. So long as this bearing is not moved it will run without problems with the right lube oil pressure for years until next survey/ overhaul. But once the bearings are opened up, one slight error or incorrect tightening of the bearing housings/keeps can lead to disaster - the whole crankshaft can be kaput.

Policy #2 - Never reuse any piston rings once a piston is pulled out for survey/overhaul. A new set of rings must be used and the old rings scrapped.

These 2 policies for Pielstick engines were proven for during my years of operating ships with Pielstick engines I have not lost a crankshaft.

I remember when I was negotiating a time charter for my containership the charterers were very reluctant to take her because she was fitted with a V-12 Pielstick engine. However I managed to convince the German charterers based on my track records dealing with Pielstick engines that the German charterers took the vessel on for 6 months with 6 months options to test my performance. My vessel performed and the charter was extended to 1 year with 1 year option. This time charter lasted for 6 continuous years without any off-hires till I sold her to the Greeks and retired to spend time with my family.

So for those engineers dealing with engines using thin shell bearings try my formula, you won't regret it but may cost a little bit more but its very much cheaper than changing the whole crankshaft.

Policy #3 – It's very common for superintendents to send exhaust valve spindles for reconditioning to save cost. It's ok to do so if it's the first time but not the second/third time simply because the spindles would have worn down causing rattling between the spindles and their guides. Prolonged operations may cause the spindles to snap and the piston and the cylinder head may be damaged beyond repairs. Sometimes the liner may be damaged as well. It's a good practice to do a simple test to check if the spindles or guides are worn and need re-bushing. Just push the spindle into its guide, put your thumb to blank one end of the bush, pump the spindle in/out and if your thumb can feel suction then by rule of thumb the bush/spindle is safe to use. Vice versa if you could not feel any suction in your thumb after numerous pumping then it's time to change the spindle or change the guide or do both as both items are heavily worn.

Some cylinder heads are cast without using a bronze bush so you need to put in a new spindle to be on the safe side.

Superintendents/owners must have sound polices with their maintenance standard. Don't be penny wise pound foolish. This policy distinguished between good and the poor operators.

Kan Seng Chut
May 2013

After completing his apprenticeship in 1967, Seng Chut went to sea. He sailed with several shipping lines as a Junior Engineer before clocking enough sea time for him to qualify for the the Class 2 CoC examination. Unfortunately, he failed twice and decided to join NOL on the "Neptune Garnet" for 10 months as 4th Engineer. His 3rd try at Class 2 CoC in Singapore was a success and with his new qualification, sailed on "Neptune Amber" as 3rd Engineer for just 3 months for he was soon promoted to 2nd Engineer. He sailed as 2nd Engineer for 12 months and then got promoted again to Acting Chief Engineer on "Neptune Agate" and "Neptune Jasper". He got his Class 1 CoC in London in September 1973 on his first try.

Seng Chut then left the sea to re-join NOL as a Superintendent in the Technical Department. In 1976, he left NOL to join Singapore Shipping Corporation as to manage several portfolios as Superintendent cum Technical Manager cum Director. In 1992, he ventured out on his own to set up "Odesta Pte Ltd" to do ship management.

Seng Chut retired in 1998. He has been busy giving back to society through his charity and continues to share his experience with others in our marine industry.