Way of a Ship

When people hear about crewing a schooner, many think “Wow! What a dream job.” They are correct. It is a dream job, but for different reasons than they probably believe. When many people think of sailing a beautiful schooner out on the bay, the vision that comes to mind probably stems from their personal experience aboard a recreational vessel or what they’ve seen in the movies: “Here we are out in then warm sunshine, leisurely gliding along with big smiles on our faces, enjoying refreshments and telling one another what to do in a wonderful egalitarian style.” While this may be a slight exaggeration of the layman’s perception, the reality is that most people do not realize the amount of responsibility, social structure and labor demanded of the crew of a schooner carrying the utmost of precious cargo; the students.

Inland Seas requires a responsible crew that understands what is at stake. There is inherent risk in sailing the boat but in all things the crew must manage this risk to an acceptable level. An important part of risk management aboard the schooner is keeping her in top working order by keeping up with maintenance. Things break, rust and wear out and it is good practice to address such issues BEFORE they fail.

While underway, the crew must be engaged at all times with the operation of the vessel. The crew STAND watch, meaning that they rarely take a seat and continuously keep an eye out for anything requiring attention. External threats such as traffic or flotsam must be brought to the attention of the officer on deck in order for him or her to make a timely decision about an appropriate response. Likewise, crew must respond to internal threats such as an open hatch or loose gear that could pose a hazard to those on board. The threat must be addressed immediately and sometimes reported to the officer of the watch. Overall, there are standards that must be kept in order to maintain good (i.e. safe) habits. Following some rules may seem onerous or needless on calm days when everything runs smoothly, but they are there to prepare the crew for the time when things change for the worse.

The crew must deal with issues demanding timely response, sometimes under less than ideal circumstances, as Inland Seas often sails in inclement weather. Even though a crew member may be uncomfortable, cold or unenthusiastic about certain duties, he or she must keep a positive attitude and be prepared to react responsibly. It is the mettle required of crew in order to maintain a culture of professionalism at all times. Without it, the mission of the vessel and, most importantly, the safety and well-being of those on board, are compromised.

While a democracy may be an ideal system for governing a nation, on board a vessel this is not the case. The maritime environment is potentially hostile sometimes causing imminent threats which requiring an immediate decision. A decision under such circumstances must be implemented without debate.

Like all well-run vessels, Inland Seas abides by a chain of command in order to facilitate timely decisions and appropriate actions. Generally the chain of command is a conduit through which information flows up to the captain and decisions flow down to the crew. Experience has taught that a despotic dictatorship is not the best social structure aboard the vessel; allowing some flexibility in the hierarchy minimizes the possibility of crew hesitating to bring bad news to the officer or failing to take immediate action in response to a threatening situation for fear of being reprimanded. It must be understood, however, that the captain is a licensed officer who is ultimately held responsible by law for the safety of the vessel and those aboard. While open to questioning at times, the captain cannot allow critical decisions for which he or she is held accountable to be made by others.

Aboard the Inland Seas, crew hierarchy is analogous to a sports team where each person has a role under the leadership of a coach. Crewmembers are responsible to each other and to the passengers, for learning his/her role on board. Crew members not only do their part, but help shipmates to do theirs. The crew must work together in order to achieve the goal of safely educating students aboard Inland Seas.

So, as a crew member, if you're not kickin' back in the sunshine getting paid for leisure time, how is it that with all this hard work and structure, crewing is a dream job? Although it may be a cliché to say "The more you put into it, the more you get out of it" the statement definitely stands true aboard the Inland Seas. Surmounting each challenge or completing each difficult task provides a learning experience that is satisfying. It is enjoyable to be an integral part of the vessel and participate in team camaraderie. Being immersed in the responsibility of sailing a vessel gives one an intimate understanding of the maritime environment that could not be achieved, for example, by sailing with friends every other weekend under relatively ideal conditions. Furthermore, serving aboard the Inland Seas is more than providing folks a fun ride on the water. It fulfills the greater mission of creating stewards of the Great Lakes.