

A compulsion to educate - the naming party at last week's ceremony in Felixstowe.

WIMBLEDON week imminent, strawberry and cream weather, and a seasonal damp pall of grey cloud hung over England. No blue sky in sight as, at Felixstowe's Trinity Terminal, the Essex Police band manfully worked through its repertoire as rainspots spattered the glittering brass of their instruments and made their sheet music soggy.

Plenty of blue in evidence however, with the view over the Havens obscured by the polished sky blue side of the latest addition to the Maersk Company fleet, to be named by the wife of the deputy prime minister, while cheerful cadets in blue boiler suits rushed about with blue umbrellas.

So the weather did not diminish the enjoyment of the occasion as the Gosport Maersk was duly named, gifts were exchanged and the distinguished guests departed for their lunch in Constable country. In his speech before Mrs Prescott shattered the champagne bottle, Maersk's chief executive and partner, Jess Sørderberg, considerably emphasised the commitment of the company to training and education, which surely brought even wider smiles at the back of the marquee where the ship's cadet force was ranged. And as we walked around the ship they continued to be much in evidence, smart, cheerful and optimistic about their career opportunities in their sky blue yonder.

The commitment of Maersk and its various subsidiaries to training and education has been something of an inspiration to trainers and educators who sometimes feel that they are regarded at best as a necessary evil. It has been consistent and comes from the very top of this singular company, which has traditionally grown its own talent and believes in the value of strength in depth.

There is a heavy cost to this, which one barely senses aboard Gosport Maersk, with her dozen cadets and training officer, and their accommodation and training room, none of which would be seen aboard the 'ordinary' lean-manned, cheaply built ship, with scarcely a cabin spare.

It is interesting to note that The Maersk Company is one of the few British shipping companies that has shown its enthusiasm for new schemes that will mesh the statutory qualifications with university degrees, thus removing one of the serious recruitment problems that actively prevents clever people who would thrive at university from seeking a marine career.

Once again they are looking ahead, at the industry's obvious need to recruit potential high flyers, who can marry the operational skills learned at sea, to the intellectual demands of management that are increasingly required ashore. The Copenhagen parent company has always been something of a mould breaker, with its own training establishment selecting the very best from Danish universities and providing them with a demanding shipping course.

It also is quite rare in that it believes strongly in continuing education and pays heavily to provide mid career development for its management. There are some youngish people who are moving into top positions in this extraordinary company and it has not happened by accident. Talent spotting and career development are realities, where other companies merely poach.

"What can we do to help middle management cope with the extraordinary changes that are taking place in industry today?" This question was posed by Carsten Melchior, a former Maersk manager who is now the managing director of the Maritime Development Centre of Europe, which might be thought of as one of the byproducts of the Øresund Bridge that now unites southern Sweden to the Copenhagen area. The MDCE is the cluster concept writ large and applied to the Danish and Swedish maritime industries is a platform for communications that will hopefully unite the 130 Danish and Swedish companies and organisations that are already subscribers. It provides an internet based website for potential partners and customers, and is designed to attract foreign companies to this fast-changing region.

Answering his own question, Melchior suggests that middle managers can probably be helped a good deal by a part-time Master of Business Administration course which is now being offered by the Copenhagen Business School. Developed in conjunction with a group of prestigious Scandinavian universities and a reference group from marine related industry, the course addresses the need for what Melchior describes as a "generation change" in this old industry, where a technical revolution is presently raging and so many processes are undergoing drastic re-engineering.

Few shipowners have yet confronted the demands from this revolution as they are battered by conflicting claims of e-commerce and globalisation, astonishing expectations from customers about logistics, and all sorts of concepts of which they understand about one tenth.

The sheer pace of change and the amount of information swirling around, along with the day-to-day demands of any managerial role make it next to nigh impossible to train 'on the job' any more.

What this middle management course will endeavour to do, suggests Melchior, is to produce a 'hybrid'; a highly educated operational person who will be able to grasp the challenge of technical change. He looks forward to attracting bright seafarers, who are well versed in the technical elements of their jobs, but will profit from the teaching in finance, management, auditing and commerce that will turn them into the sort of people that the industry desperately needs and cannot do without for much longer.

Just think about this imperative to train and educate. Look about you at the amount of senior management that will need to be replaced in the short-term. Consider the compulsions of this generation change. And perhaps take a look at which companies are starting to grasp this challenge for continuous education, which offer careers rather than jobs, and more importantly which are motoring on much as before.

Look at the successful and consider just for a minute why they are so different.

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