



**CHALMERS**

# **Leadership and culture from onboard perspective**

Qualitative study about leadership and culture on multicultural tanker vessel

Bachelor thesis for International Logistics Program

Alms Moshi

**DEPARTMENT OF MECHANICS AND MARITIME SCIENCES**

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CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
Göteborg, Sweden, 2024



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## **PREFACE**

In the spring semester 2024, the following degree project has been written at Chalmers University of Technology under the program International Logistics with 180 credits, of which the degree project is included with a scope of 15 credits.

I would like to extend a big thank you to my supervisor Monica Lundh, who has been a fantastic support and guide throughout the work. I would also like to thank all the captains who have attended the interviews.

## **Ledarskap och kultur från ett ombord perspektiv**

Kvalitativ studie om ledarskap på ett multikulturellt tankfartyg

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### **SAMMANDRAG (in Swedish)**

Att leva och arbeta ombord på ett fartyg är krävande på många sätt. Arbetsmiljön är krävande, att arbeta isolerat från familj och vänner i månader kan påverka sjömannens psykiska hälsa och långa arbetsdagar. Ofta är det flera kulturer ombord vilket också kan vara utmanande och kulturella skillnader kan det leda till missförstånd och frustration. Som kapten, med det övergripande ansvaret ombord, spelar ledarskapet en stor roll ombord. Därför kommer denna studie att fokusera på hur kaptenerna arbetar ombord med sitt ledarskap i en mångkulturell arbetsmiljö, vilka ha utmaningar de upplever och vilka strategier de använder. Studien är begränsad till skandinaviska kapten som arbetar med filippinsk och skandinavisk/baltisk besättning. Studien har en kvalitativ ansats i form av semistrukturerade intervjuer.

Resultaten visade att kaptenen anpassar sitt ledarskap i viss mån beroende på vem som de möter ombord, vissa mångkulturella utmaningar uppstod informera om kulturkrockar, språkbrister och missförstånd. Kommunikation och förståelse av kulturen har varit ledarnas nyckelstrategier för att leda i en mångkulturell miljö.

**Nyckelord:** Kultur, Ledarskap, Tankfartyg, Kommunikation, Sjöfart, Hierarki, Makt, Konflikt.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Living and working on board a ship is demanding in many ways. The work environment is demanding, being isolated from family and friends for months and long working days can affect the seafarer's mental health. Often there are several cultures on board which can also be challenging, and cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and frustration. As captain, with the overall responsibility on board, leadership plays a big role on board. Therefore, this study will focus on how the captains work on board with their leadership in a multicultural work environment, what challenges they experience and what strategies they use. The study is limited to Scandinavian captains working with Filipino and Scandinavian/Baltic crew. The study has a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews.

The results showed that the captain adapts his leadership to a certain extent depending on who they meet on board, some multicultural challenges arise informing about cultural clashes, language deficits and misunderstandings. Communication and understanding the culture have been the leaders' key strategies for leading in a multicultural environment.

**Keywords:** Culture, Leadership, Tank vessel, Communication, Shipping, Hierarchy, Power, Conflict.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Shipping is considered to have a large impact on international trade. 90% of the global trade is carried onboard vessels (Lu et al., 2016). Everyone is somehow affected by it, for example to be able to purchase food, clothes, cars, fuel and more. However, since shipping is out of sight and not reachable for everyone it becomes naturally less noticeable (Lorange, 2009).

According to Hasanspahić et al. (2021) seafaring is a special occupation. Crewmember work daily in a demanding environment with risks of performing hazardous work. In addition, crewmembers are away for long periods of time with no physical meeting with friends, family and sometimes with no internet connection. In addition to this, 80% of marine accidents are mostly due to human factors from a safety perspective (Hasanspahić et al. 2021). The organization on board is strictly hierarchical, and the master is at the top of the hierarchy having the overall responsibility of the vessel. (Borgersens et al. 2013). The rest of the crew is organized in different departments e.g. deck, engine and the galley. Within each group there are different ranks e.g. officers and ratings. The leadership on board can have an impact on the seafarers' internal factors and well-being, meaning it can affect their emotions and behavior. Hasanspahić et al. (2021) proposed that the leader should be obliged to take responsibility for all actions and safety onboard the ship.

Shipping is furthermore a highly international and multicultural industry leading to seafarers becoming more multinational. Around 70-80% of world merchant fleet has multicultural crews, that leads to multiculturalism is a general feature of crews in current ship operations (Lu et al., 2016). Living on board with closed group of people from different country, language, and interacting with people of different cultural backgrounds, it is often viewed as challenging (Hoffman and Verdooren, 2018). Previous studies according to Lu et al. (2016) shows that multicultural crew on board with culture difference and lack of a common language could result in high risk of work environment. A cultural misunderstanding takes place when two or more individuals interpret and perceive a communication based on their own cultural traditions and experiences. A misunderstanding is something that can happen quite often on a daily basis. It is therefore necessary to increase cultural awareness, to recognize different peoples' cultural styles and compare them with others (Thovuttikul et al., 2019).

According to Borgersens et al. (2013) leaders have been used as role models to followers to instill safety awareness and supporting safe behavior. However, cross-cultured studies are shown that European and Asian clusters differ in utilization of self-control, interpersonal awareness and emotionally. This contributes to, Cultural awareness is an important part for understanding the differences in each culture(Thovuttikul et al., 2019). To be a successful leader onboard, the masters need to be aware of these cultural challenges and adjust their leadership accordingly (Sandström & Yilmaz, 2016).

## **1.1 Aim of the study**

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding on how a captain or master, adjust the leadership in a multicultural environment, what challenges are present in this environment and how to overcome them.

## **1.2 Research questions**

How does the master adjust their leadership knowledge onboard in a multicultural environment?

Which challenges does the masters face in their daily leadership onboard in a multicultural environment?

What strategies does the master onboard use to overcome challenges that arise?

## **1.3 Delimitations**

The study will be limited to multicultural tanker vessels with focus on Scandinavian leader, captain, or master with European and Asian crew. The crew representing Asian nationality consist of Filipino members while the European contingent hails from Scandinavian and Baltic regions.

## **2. THEORY**

### **2.1 Seafarer at sea**

Serving onboard a vessel is demanding in many ways and is seen like a high-risk occupation (Oldenburg et al, 2010). In addition to a demanding work environment, seafarers need to be away for longer periods from family and friends, sometimes waiting to come ashore for several months. This risk leading to co-sequences of anxiety, stress and difficulty concentrating (Nielsen et al, 2013). Furthermore, it has been shown that sailors at sea often suffer from fatigue deficiency (Nielsen et al, 2013). This type of sufferings turns out to be among those in lower positions in association with higher positions. A poor working environment can also lead to consequences, which in the past has been a cause of shipping accidents (Österman & Boström, 2022).

During the past decades, the psychosocial situation and well-being onboard vessels has been noticed in research (Hodge & Widerström, 2016). The sailors have been exposed to harassment, which can lead to suffering. What is considered as common and what influence these actions is among many things the organizational culture and the leadership on board, which has been shown to accept and normalizes these types of actions (Hodge & Widerström, 2016).

According to Amante (2004) the Philippine crew makes up the largest part of the shipping market. The work usually takes place on board together with European officers or other multicultural crew owned by western or Japanese capital. In addition to this the Filipino seamen usually have a work contract between 6 months to 2 years and have a lower salary and opportunities to contradict their contract in association with other nationalities (Amante, 2004).

### **2.2 Leadership at sea**

During the 19th century, a lot of research was done into what qualities make a person a suitable leader (Skärvad & Bruzelius, 2017). A study showed that successful business leaders possessed some of the following personal qualities: Energy, maturity and integrity which are the fundamental qualities of successful leadership, employee orientation to be able to lead and coach other people, results orientation the leader must have a will to achieve results, the will to grow and develop (Skärvad & Bruzelius, 2017).

According to Besikci (2019) seafarers need a properly adapted leadership. It is important for the captain on board to adapt his leadership onboard to build a good organization and motivation for seafarers. As the captain, highest in the hierarchy and ultimately responsible, that leadership affects the behavior of the crew (Lu et. al., 2016). Xhelilaj et al. (2018) study shows that the leaders leadership style onboard depends on the demand of the situation, which is considered to have its weaknesses and strengths. Leadership is claimed to be needed and important in the maritime sector because of the harsh and complicated environment (Xhelilaj et al., 2018). A leader exercises the leadership in different so-called leadership styles (Skärvad & Bruzelius, 2017).

Leadership on board varies, in shipping Xhelilaj et al. (2018) describe the traditional leadership as designed in an authoritarian leadership style that is built on the hierarchical structure. Authoritarian is a self-driven decision maker who gives tasks to employees and clarifies tasks (Skärvad & Bruzelius, 2017). However, authoritarian leadership can also be seen as a negative image from the employees' perspective as reduced loyalty and limit open solutions (Besikci, 2019). According to Xhelilaj et al. (2018) that type of style imitates leadership and tradition of naval military organizations. Furthermore, authoritarian leadership appears to be used by young leaders onboard, as there is a lack of experience. The young leaders' use harsh behaviour against the subordinates (Xhelilaj et al., 2018). Transformational leadership inspire followers to vision by oneself and encourage to solve problems. This type of leader aim for long term, strong values and help the followers to contribute to the organization.

According to Skärvad & Bruzelius (2017) research has been done for several years on leadership but there is no leadership that is the best way to exercise leadership. A leader's leadership style is adapted to the situation, studies have concluded something called Situational Leadership. That assessment is made by first checking the manager's competence, personality and driving forces. Second, check the employee's competence, personality and driving forces. Third, the contexts such as norms, values, traditions and the nature of the task. The development of leadership has also moved from a traditional leadership to a more modern agile leadership where the leader points out the direction and lets the employees handle the movement. Agile leadership is described as self-leadership, flexibility, adaptability, a learning process for leaders and employees. Confidence is created in the employees' abilities (Classon & Tofte Siösteen, 2016)

It is important that the leadership one maintain is effective on board, in an environment where responsibility, stress and social isolation play a huge role (Xhelilaj et al., 2018). Previous research shows that leadership at sea has a decisive factor on working conditions and health. The study shows that there is a certain development regarding the negative impact on the hierarchy levels and that the "blame culture" on board has decreased. One reason why this has happened in recent years is that the organizational culture is improving on board. Another side of the study shows the development of an increase in production pressure, less time ashore and increased workload. Managers and leaders must pursue development at an organizational and structural level to create good expectations regarding safety and health-related leadership on board. In order to achieve these conditions, the authors claim to focus on, among other things, increased support for managers and leaders in the form of skills activities, developed leadership systems, etc (Nylen at al., 2021).

## **2.3 Culture**

Culture is something that is everywhere and nowhere. Culture can be seen as the wind, invisible yet always there (Hoffman and Verdooren, 2018). It is important to understand different cultures since many people from different cultures/countries work, live, and communicate together (Thovuttikul et al., 2019). Cultural awareness is an important part to understanding the differences in each culture have (Thovuttikul et al., 2019).

To be able to avoid misunderstandings, a good communication in cultural-specific ways is required (Thovuttikul et al., 2019). However, culture can be complex to understand. To learn communication skills for the use in different cultures can avoid misunderstandings. Some culture differences are visible such as language, behavior and food, and some are not, such as

values, humour and beliefs (Thovuttikul et al., 2019). To learn and understand the basic concept of someone's culture, the learner can adapt the new concept for other similar situations. It can be used to avoid misunderstandings when it comes to for instance, humour and greetings posture. However, what is wrong and what is right?

## **2.4 Leadership and culture**

According to Romeo (2005), several studies show that race and ethnicity affect performance. Culture has an impact on the leader's behaviour, what the leader practices can have an impact on the acceptance of other cultures. By that, the author means that if a certain way of acting as a leader is accepted in one culture, it does not necessarily mean that it will be accepted in the other. This is due to several reasons including religion, level of involvement with other nationalities, history of leadership, etc. People have a type of leader prototype and when it is not addressed, it produces negative effects. It has been shown that people who have a leader from the same ethnicity are more satisfied than those who do not. Culture can affect to a extend where it can set limit on the leader's response, which can change the leader's style. The author brings up an example where an American is straightforward when speaking and communicates without wasting any time, while in Japan it is indirect communication and harmonious leadership to avoid conflicts (Romeo, 2005).

Hofstede (1980) on the other hand, describe that Hispanic culture is more dependent on power distance compared to Americans. The author describes that people from Hispanic culture have been accepted unevenly in the organization and that someone with a higher position in the hierarchy has power over one. Hofstede (1980) assumes that people do that to absolve oneself from responsibility and risks. It is common in cultures for someone in the family to take care and reasonability of a person. In comparison with American culture, the individual is independent and takes care of oneself first.

According to Lu et. al (2016) study, power distance between leader and employee shows to have a negative effect on job performance. However, adapting transformational leadership behaviour, which is accomplished of both leaders and employees' action of purpose. It can be weakened, and the outcome is the avoidance to be strengthened onboard.

According to Nylen at al. (2021) study, it was concluded that there are clear differences in the nationalities on board. It turned out that shipping companies see challenges in reporting incidents of risks, deficiencies and incidents that are linked to foreign national cultural and unsafe working conditions. This turns out to be mostly aimed at co-workers from Asia such as Filipinos, where the culture has a clear hierarchy and authority. The authors mention that the Filipinos do not dare to report shortcomings or question, disturb their leaders, and point out something to the Swedish colleagues. To the difference, the Swedish sailors are informal communications with superiors and admitted mistakes are easier (Nylen at al., 2021).

## **2.5 Culture and Conflict**

As a newborn, one is cultureless. Growing up by learning the culture, one gets to learn how people act and talk. Moreover, that's when people shape into the culture. Another basis shaping one into the culture is socializing, such as the traditions, language, religion and more (Deutsch et al., 2006). When one finds out there is a culture misunderstanding it can escalate to frustrations and conflict. Basis of this problem is, the exception one has for the other

culture, to understand and share the same from the other culture. However, when the exception does not meet, it results to assume the other culture are misbehaving. This is not understanding each other's culture background, this is determinate others behaviour and goals.

Political and social issues, for example ethnic conflict, terrorism, and epidemics in today's world cannot be handled by individual nations. It requires and needs more comprehensive understanding and communication among people with diverse culture backgrounds. When a problem occurs, its ideally to be solved after interacting and understanding the basic culture difference of each other. However, it can be more difficult (Deutsch et al., 2006).

### ***Power***

Power is in a relationship with leadership. It is a relationship between different actors, as in this context it exists between leaders and followers. Power is used when the actors are dependent on each other and when there is disagreement between the actors who are dependent on each other (Braynion, 2004). And Conflicts that arise usually have power involved, it can be both direct and indirect (Deutsch et al., 2006). It is shown in social relations by power distance, yet it varies by culture. Conflicts can arise when one has to achieve one's goal, yet it is also considered when power changes. Conflict can also either balance or unbalance power in relationship (Deutsch et al., 2006).

Deutsch et al., (2006) claims that inequality exist in every culture but differs in tolerance, some powerless people have accepted and normalized inequality in power and vice versa. In parts of India for example, there is a high-power distance expressed among employees implying being part of decisions and delegations is considered inappropriate. This kind of culture different is one of the reasons to misunderstanding and conflict occur with others in high and low in power (Deutsch et al., 2006).

People interacting within the same culture will often share same expectations and similarities, unlike interacting with different cultures, which can lead to unexpected events. As individuals, if one has less experience with interacting with other cultures can most likely be a problem. It can lead to spreading and thinking certain culture stereotypes (Deutsch et al., 2006). However, as a human, if one has disregarded the culture, the negative stereotypes come in mind. This results in accusing the other cultures behaviour and the other cultures perspective to be misbehaving. Negative attributions risk generating negative behaviour and emotions (Deutsch et al., 2006).

According to Skärvad & Bruzelius (2017) leadership is influenced by power. As a leader, one has the power over others to make sure that the message/order will go through and others to listen. The element power can be divided into four types: Reward power, leader dispose power through for example salary or vacation. Punitive power, leader focusing on punishment task for example salary deduction. Positional power, leader who use the formal position in organizational power. Expert power, leader using the competence one possesses. Charismatic power, leader maintaining power thru personal charisma.

## **2.6 Culture awareness**

According to Deutsch et al. (2006) communication is one of the key strategies to understand culture which has led to training programs being developed. In this study, people participated in a realistic roleplay with feedback from interculture communication specialist. Thru this

program, it was possible to identify one's culture awareness in 6 levels and the outcome of this training program is to improve intercultural communication using different areas;

- First one is *Culture chauvinism*, little Knowledge and often self-absorbed moreover egotistical of formative years.
- Second level is *Ethnocentrism*, culture awareness of one's way of thinking and acting is superior. People differences show in ethnic, religious, traditions and more.
- Third level is *Tolerance*, individuals consider communication and behaviour from other cultures don't come from themselves, it's from the living society. Moreover, the differences are not seen as negative, is simply that one believes their own culture practice is better.
- Fourth level is *Minimization*, this stage people can recognize culture differences but don't consider it important. One can think that all adult is the same, since it's at this level individuals focus on behaviour like political, historical, economic, and spiritual.
- The fifth level is *Understanding*, at this stage individuals culture awareness is higher. One can understand and see the culture difference from other cultures. Moreover, one knows shared beliefs and ideas are made and spread in the society.
- The last level is *Integration*, at this stage people's culture awareness is at its highest. One can understand personal and others culture mindset, spend time with different cultures in an enjoyable way and make microcultures (Deutsch et al., 2006).

Cultural training is about how to learn and understand yourself and other individuals from the perspective of different cultures. It's easier to capture behaviour and ideas in practical moments than hearing one say how to do it (Deutsch et al., 2006). As growing up learning social skills is as skilful as interacting with people from different cultures. As the trainee one need to learn the social factors as religion, ethnicity, language, race and more. This is relevant in the role-play situation and the training will create understanding and expansion of trainees' culture view (Deutsch et al., 2006).

## 4. METHODS

### 4.1 Methodology

This study is based on qualitative method research approach in the form of personal semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out individually to be able to make as safe an assessment as possible and so that the person interviewed was not influenced by anyone else. The people that have been interviewed was the master of the ship. The preparations for the interviews were based on previously completed research studies that will provide a good understanding of the study's goals.

### 4.2 Literature search and the credibility of the sources

The research studies and articles that was retrieved from the following databases: Scopus, Google Scholar and Chalmers Library as well as from previous courses that the lecturers have uploaded. Courses from Chalmers University of Technology, such as “TEK710 Organization and leadership” and “CLS045 Global and intercultural competence”. The keywords that have been used in the literature search are Leadership, Tanker vessel, Shipping, Multiculture, Culture.

In order to establish the credibility of the sources, 4 criteria were taken into account. Meaning criticizes the clarity of the source for the reader, Validity ensures the reliability of the source, Authenticity the validity of the source's information as well as the authenticity, Representativeness critically examines that the source is not edited by unauthorized persons (Denscombe, 2014).

### 4.3 Semi-structured interviews

The study was based on semi-structured interviews, The themes used in the interview were based on the research questions (Wilson, 2014). Semi-structured interview was used because it's suitable when discussing complex topics, it allowed the interviewer to be open for spontaneous questions and answer to clarify and understand. Moreover, the interviews provided qualitative data and personal attitudes, opinions, and facts. The interviews were conducted onboard the vessels when they were alongside in Gothenburg expect for one interview which was at sea, the interview was performed through an online application. Each interview lasted around 1 hour and was recorded and transcribed.

### 4.4 Ethics

According to Vetenskapsrådet (2002) four research ethics principles have been used in this study. First principal is *the information requirement*. Before the interview was to be held, the participants received material regarding informed consent for participation. Where it is clearly stated what the purpose of the study is and ethical aspects in relation to the study. It was done when boarding the ship as where the meeting was held. Second principal, *the consent requirement*. The participants could choose for themselves whether they wanted to participate or not and to cancel at any time. *The confidentiality requirement* is the third principal. All

participants are anonymous. In accordance with the study, sensitive and undetectable data are unavailable and cannot be identified. The last principal used is *The utilization requirement*, all information collected from the participants is only for the purpose of this study only. Before attending the vessel, all captains were contacted online with brief explanation, expect the one being an online meeting which he gave his consent thru online. The other interviews with captain gave their consent when receiving all the information during our meeting onboard and the interviews could be performed. All personal information was treated in accordance with GDPR (GDPR, 2018).

#### **4.5 Background information about the interview respondents**

One of the methods for gathering data information is strategic selection (Alvehus, 2013). This method can be used when targeting specific participant in relation to the study. I could carefully thru my work as a ship agent choose my participant, designed for this case. In use of strategic selection my target was active captain working onboard a tank vessel in a multiculture environment. The selected captains for the interview were all men in with an average age of 55 years old, where the oldest was 65 and the youngest 53. The Scandinavian nationalities of the captains where; 2 Norwegian, 2 Swedish and 2 Danish, in total 6 participants. All captains have been working at sea with an average value of 36 years, the highest 40 years and lowest 29 years. Total number of the crew was 25 crewmembers expect for two of the captains' vessels which was 14 crewmembers, captain excluded. The average age working as captains was 21 years, with the highest 32 years and lowest 14 years. Another target was choosing vessels whom the leader was working on had an Asian and European crew thus being in multicultural environment.

#### **4.6 Analysis – Thematic analysis**

The interviews from the study are analysed based on thematic analyse according to Braun and Clarkes (2006). Since the interview was based on verbal data, it has been transcribed into written form in order to perform the analyses. Next phase was to become familiar with the data and find initial code that could be the interesting to analyse, which also called semantic content. The initial codes were used in a tree map to find the main themes and under themes.

## 5. RESULTS

The analyse resulted into three main themes and nine under themes, which is shown in table 1. The themes and sub-themes are be presented individual in more detail.

**Table 1**

*Three Main themes and nine under themes*

<i>Main themes</i>	<i>Under themes</i>
<i>1.How does the master adjust their leadership knowledge onboard in a multicultural environment?</i>	<i>1.1 Adapt yourself</i> <i>1.2 Power distance</i> <i>1.3 Team building</i>
<i>2.What challenges does the masters daily leadership face onboard based on the multicultural environment?</i>	<i>2.1 Language deficits and misunderstanding</i> <i>2.2 Hierarchy</i> <i>2.3 Culture clash</i>
<i>3.What strategies does the master onboard use to overcome challenges that arise?</i>	<i>3.1 Communication</i> <i>3.2 Understanding</i> <i>3.3 Learn about the culture</i>

1. How does the master adjust their leadership knowledge onboard in a multicultural environment?

The analysis of the interviews pointed out that all captains would rather prefer working as a leader in a multicultural environment instead of all being the same nationality. The Scandinavian captains also considered themselves more like individual-oriented leader and not so authoritarian. An authoritarian leadership was seen as a risk that later could lead to fear among the crew and the consequences can be severe. The interviewers brought up three main leadership knowledge which is important to consider as a captain. One is *adapting yourself* based on the person you work with onboard, the other one is *power distance* which is more common with the Filipino crew and last one, *team building* which is the one all captains valued the most during the interview, as the key to good leadership on board.

### 1.1 Adapt yourself

The interviewed mentioned that every person is different and depending on who you interact with can give you different answers and reaction. The culture also shapes a person and that implies that you as a leader need to study the of response you get. An example brought up by one of the captains was that he could be more careful when making a joke with a Filipino

crew, as opposed to a Scandinavian and Baltic crew it was easier to say a joke. The reactions from the Filipino crew could be more of a cautious and distance reaction.

### 1.2 Power distance

The interviewees brought up Power distance as something very common among the Filipino crew, interpreted as they value the captain as someone high in power and therefore boundaries are set. From the captains' perspective this is not as common around Scandinavian and Baltic crew.

*“New crewmembers from Philippines sometimes are too scared to even knock on the door and make sure they don't spend quality time with the captain for example in the same room.”*

As a captain he went entered the room where Filipino crew was sitting, slowly, one after the other left the room.

Another captain mentioned that Filipino crew loves karaoke, singing which they have a room for that and the captain himself loves that so he went inside and showed the Filipino crew he could sing and spend time with them. The captain said they really appreciated the act and he felt that they could relax more being around with him.

### 1.3 Team building

From the interviews, it was brought up by all the captains how important it is with team building for a leadership to work on board. As a good leader it's important to listen to the crew, understand their problem and do your best for them.

*“It's like a soccer team, they have a coach. My crew is my soccer team and I'm the leader showing them.”*

*“If you don't have a good team onboard then you will have problem onboard”*

*“We are all in a puzzle game. If a puzzle is missing, it is not complete. You don't have a complete ship if not everyone is there.”*

## 2. Which challenges does the masters face in their daily leadership onboard in a multicultural environment?

The results show that the challenges of being a leader in a multicultural environment is language deficits, hierarchy, culture clash and misunderstanding. The interviewed describe the Filipino crew as someone who always say “yes sir” to everything and that leads to consequences. However, the Scandinavian and Baltic crew speaks up as per feeling. Some internal cultural hierarchy can also occur onboard and some religious culture clash.

### 2.1 Language deficits and misunderstanding

From the interviews the most common challenge is language deficits and misunderstanding. For example, when a task or order given to a Filipino crew, they always say yes without hesitation. One of the captains mentioned that the Filipinos would not contradict the leader or speak up if they don't understand. It sounds very good as a leader to hear however sometimes things can go wrong because they don't dare speak up when they don't understand. Furthermore, the interviewees found out that the Filipinos are scared to admit their wrongdoings and personal mistakes, the reason being, according to one captain, that it could be because if they admit it will lead to more consequences than telling the truth. Unlike Scandinavian and Baltic crew, they speak up if they don't understand.

*“When I give a Filipino crewmember a task they often tell me yes directly and when I ask them do you understand they do not. They are too scared to admit the truth they always want to work hard and say yes to everything even if they don’t understand.”*

## 2.2 Hierarchy

The interviewed described the hierarchy as important to have onboard. If something happens, one person must take responsibility, meet the consequences and also make it right. Everyone onboard cannot take responsibility. Another captain mentioned that a certain hierarchy is needed, but it should not be authoritarian however, someone must be on top deciding. During the interview one captain brought up that the hierarchy among Scandinavian and Baltic crew are flatter than among the Filipino crew members. Then there is a culture hierarchy which is more formal. Moreover, the captain said that there was the deck crew with the bosun as leader and all deck crew was Filipinos. When the deck leader went home, the captain upgraded a another deck crewmember as a temporary bosun, however he did not gain the same respect as the other leader which led to problems among them.

*“For example, it’s a good day with nice weather and onboard we decide to paint. If all onboard is going to discuss on how to paint then a decision will not take place, Someone, have to be the leader and decide”.*

*“I don’t involve myself in the lower ranks problems and what to do, there is one responsible in each department to take care of that however I will be there as support if they need advice.”*

Another example from captain, he mentioned that he had a Filipino crewmember whose dad passed away and he did not tell the captain. The captain overheard the crew speaking and he told the Filipino crewmember to come to his room. Furthermore, the captain asked if it is true and if he wanted to go home. The Filipino crewmember was happy that the captain mentioned that. The captain adds that among the Scandinavian/Baltic crew this doesn’t happen, they are more forward and honest.

## 2.3 Culture clash

A possible religious culture clash was also brought up by the interviewed as something to take into consideration during the interview was religious culture clash. One captain told that one Filipino crewmember passed away in hospital and that lead to the cabin owned by that person was now a place none of the Filipino crew dared to go inside. They thought it was some kind of unlucky spirit inside. As for the rest of the non-Filipino crewmembers, they went inside and did not think that way. As a captain, he said that as a leader we had to summon a priest and not just any, it needed to be a catholic priest as the Filipinos themselves. The priest blessed the room and the problem was solved, now every crewmember could dare to enter.

*“We see the Filipino crew always pray before eating”*

Another captain mentioned that he is from a Christian, priest family and himself have taken the role of praying on holidays and act as a father onboard for the Filipino crew asking religious consultation.

In the interview, it was also raised whether they would rather be a leader on board a multicultural environment or an environment where everyone shares the same nationality and culture. The responses from the captains were very similar where they described that on board a ship with the same nationality there are many complaints however on the other hand in a

multicultural work environment as per current situation with Filipinos it is always a "yes sir". As a leader this is easier to work with.

*"From a culture perspective, being with same nationality i had my moments sharing the same interests in movie/language/food. With same nationality in this case Scandinavian the hierarchy becomes flatter unlike a multicultural vessel where it's easy to put yourself above someone."*

*"I had Swedish crew on deck question me when I gave an order, that its typical swedes however, a Filipino would never do."*

### 3.What strategies does the master onboard use to overcome challenges that arise?

The interviewed mentioned three themes; communication, understanding and learn the culture. As a leader one cannot be hard on the crew, then they will just get scared, and it will make the situation work. The captains said that they always communicate first and then understand each other, then maybe learn the cultures onboard and not misunderstand each other if the culture clash appear in a situation.

#### 3.1 Communication

When challenges appear, as a leader one has to act. And the most important strategi brought up from all interviewed is to communicate. As a captain one cannot be hard and force the crew member that could lead to fear, however the captain said that he made sure the crew understand the system onboard and if they don't understand, they have to admit. Another captain mentioned that he always tries to communicate first, however not directly after the situation have occurred because then himself can feel very frustrated, he makes sure to do it later. Especially when it involves being told among Filipino crew, they feel embarrassed and ashamed.

*"But either way I cannot change their culture, for example the power distance, it can be easier thru time but it's still a part of their culture."*

#### 3.2 Understanding

As a complement to the above, understanding was seen as another important strategy. An example considerate important by one of the interviewed captain was that, since all onboard do not come from the same family, traditions, and culture. As a leader one has to at least understand the culture different of the crew.

*"I try to ask them to repeat what I say so I know they have understood."*

#### 3.3 Learn the culture

This can be applied as previous situation (2.3) when the leader had to summon a priest for blessing the room. The captain said he needed to find a solution for this culture challenge that appeared, he learned that a priest could be of help and it needed to be a priest having a catholic background. Another example mentioned is that as a captain, one doesn't need to act everyone's culture onboard. However, it's important to learn their culture and act as a leader when something needs to be done. All interviewers said that they have never received any culture training before coming onboard a multicultural vessel. Moreover, the captains have been searching up information online about culture.

*“One time I searched up how to greet on another culture, because I wanted them to feel welcomed.”*

## 6. DISCUSSION

Filipino crew usually have a longer work contract than those left on board of at least 6 months according to Amante (2004). This leads to Filipino crew being exposed to higher risks of stress, anxiety and difficulty in concentrating which leads to challenges on the leadership onboard that the leader must manage. The results in this study indicate that the captains have not received any culture training before signing on a ship with a multi-cultural environment. Instead, they had to learn by searching for information themselves. In order to reduce the cultural challenges that arise, training is important. Deutsh et al. (2006) mentioned that one key strategy is to introduce training programs in the form of role play. By practicing different situations in role play with experts who helps, one can learn in case similar situations would arise.

In the result, it appears that the captains do not support an authoritarian leadership that Xhelilaj (2018) addresses as a leadership built on hierarchy structure similar to a military-structured organization. However, the captains agree that someone must be there to make the final decision. The captains made sure that they did not need to have a harsh authoritarian leadership, for example as yelling or abusing the crew members. Xhelilaj (2018) mentions that authoritarian leadership is most often used by young leaders with a lack of knowledge. The captains who were interviewed were older leaders with several years of experience as leaders. Furthermore, it is mentioned in the results that the captains believe that culture shapes a person, which means that as a leader you must act and adjust depending on who you deal with on board. This agrees with situational leadership that needs to be applied where the captain's competence as well as the crew's and the nature of the task take into consideration (Skärvard & Bruzelius, 2017). The result also shows how important it is with team building, listening, and understanding and acting in the best interest of your team. This type of leadership shows that the captains do not apply a traditional leadership style.

In the result, the captains mention that they find Filipinos use power distance to distance themselves from the captain. This is something found in the Asian culture, Filipino crew do not dare to report incidents, point out or question (Nylen at al., 2021). Power distance leads to a negative effect on job performance however, according to Lu et al. (2016) study if the leader applies a transformational leadership, it has been shown in previous studies to be a positive effect. One strategy to reduce the power distance and build trust the captains use, is to socialize during the spare time onboard, e.g. going into the karaoke room and sings with all the Filipinos and turned out to be a very appreciated thing. This type of strategy shows how the captains go outside the traditional leadership role to get closer with the crew.

Another challenge faced among the captains is that Filipino crew always say yes even if they don't understand and afraid to admit if they have made a mistake. Unlike Scandinavian crew, where studies show that Swedes are inclined to be informal in their communication and admit mistakes (Nylen .2021). This statement was exemplified with a captain mentioning that "a Swedish crew questioned me when I gave an order and a Filipino would never do that".

Romeo (2005) mentions that culture affects the leader's behavior and the results here indicate that when there are different cultures on board it affects the leader's views. This is one of the reasons why the captains who were asked if they would rather be a leader in a ship with the same nationality or a multicultural one. Firstly, it is mentioned that Filipinos always say yes

which can lead to consequences e.g. misunderstandings, but later they also mention that as a leader it is comfortable that no one questions your orders.

Cultural challenges can also manifest themselves in the form of religious events. Where the captain mentions a religious situation when a man on board passed away and none of the Filipino crew did not dare to enter in the deceased person's room. This led the captain to think about how to solve this cultural aspect that only got a reaction from the Filipino crew and not the Scandinavian/Baltic one. He was taught that a Catholic priest had to come on board and bless the room. It agrees with Thouuttikul et al. (2019) where the captain had to learn and understand the culture of the situation to solve it. This also leads to the captain being able to use the same strategy for the similar cultural situation. The results show that language deficits and misunderstandings are a challenge for captains in a multicultural environment. In shipping, English is spoken as the main language, however in a multicultural environment, everyone comes from different countries with their own home languages, this leads to the language not being enough in certain situations or to extend that they do not understand each other. To be able to respond to these situations, the captains mention that communication is a strategy used and this agrees with Thouvuttikul et al. (2019) who mentions that good communication is an important strategy in a cultural perspective.

The result indicate that the captains find that hierarchy among Scandinavian and Baltic is flatter than Filipinos. There are also internal cultural situations among the Filipino crew. Mentioned by one captain, there has been a situation onboard when deck crew received a new bosun. The person's previous rank was an able seaman and was chosen by captain. However, it did not go well as the deck crew did not accept him as a leader. When the respect that has been built up to a person in a higher position is broken, it can escalate in the whole group. This may be because in foreign cultures, it is common for someone to take care and responsibility for the other (Hofstede,1980). This could have contributed to Filipinos building a strong relationship and respect and loyalty for the bosun on deck as mentioned in the results.

If I may make an assessment of the captains' level based on the result and interview of cultural awareness according to Deutsch et al. (2006), I would put it at fourth-fifth of six levels where the captains are considered to understand and see cultural situations. However, not at level six where it appears that one spends time changing cultures in an enjoyable way and making microcultures.

### **Method discussion and delimitations**

The method used may have its shortcomings in the study. As the sample was relatively small and limited to Scandinavian captains and crew from the Filipino and Baltic region, the results cannot be generalized outside a similar context. Regardless of this, this constitution of mixed cultural environment onboard is common in Scandinavia, and thus could present some value. The study could however have benefitted by adding interviews with the other crew members subjected to the captains' leadership. This could have given a more nuanced picture of the challenges multi-cultural leadership faces and what strategies to use to overcome them.

Semi-structured interviews were used to give the respondents the possibility to elaborate on their views and knowledge on the topic. Given the nature of the study and the purpose to gain an understanding a qualitative approach was the obvious choice. The results does not provide

any results on the magnitude of the challenges found which would require a mixed-methods approach adding on a quantitative study building on the results found in this study.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In summary, it can be said that a leader adjusts to a certain extent depending on whom is being treated on board in a multicultural work environment. Some challenges have arisen from a multicultural perspective as of culture clash, language deficits and misunderstanding. However, communication and understanding the culture have been the main strategies that the captains have used to overcome the challenges. The culture awareness onboard is high however some culture training is needed before coming onboard a multicultural vessel, to be ready if anything culture related challenge arise and to create a better understanding of the cultures on board.

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study is limited to Scandinavian captains and the same with interviews. This means that the opinions of the crew do not include in the results for example how the crew feel or think about leadership and culture. For further research it would be interesting to interview the crew and see from their point of view. If someone wants to further research on captains' perspective another recommendation is to study non-Scandinavian captains work as there is a lot of talk about how for example Indian or Greek captains have a more authoritarian leadership.

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