

*Psychometric Mariners
Generic Vs Specific*

Psychist

Whilst efforts to rate new entrants and seafarers through psychometrics are laudable, it need be taken with a tonne of salt. True, Corporate manslaughter arm of the law can reach afar, questioning why the Board did not employ all means & methods –scientific included- available to select and for promoting the right calibre of floating staff. It need be drawn attention to that an old case law had denied owner's defence for having inducted a Master over drinks in a London pub!

Personality assessment, Screening and Skill set tests are best practices, but generic tests at young age to assess traits, leadership etc are far-fetched. Isn't CPD the mantra and practice these days? Questions that arise are: to what extent it is reliable, specifically for mariners who by the nature of their work, living conditions and challenges faced routinely, are unique and incomparable to other vocations and professions. Using it as a starting tool may be fair enough so that one can be made self-aware of one's predisposition and make conscious efforts to change to meet challenges as they arise.

What we need is its fine-tuning to suit seafarer characteristics, its repetitive-upgraded usage at different levels- adapting it well. Since the time amphibians became landlubbers, they have lost adaptation back to water, and so rare indeed are the breed who are born to be seafarers, except islanders and fisherfolks perhaps. But, haven't direct cadets of the '70s boom who had stepped aboard with no pre-sea training at all, fared well?

Yes indeed, psychometric tests are scientifically proven, clinically tested and practically validated methodologies. But the grouse is that they cannot be applied with the same yardstick on seafaring. How does a CEO* compare with Master's responsibility of shiphandling? Navigation, perhaps! But the two are different!! Unless one had rowed a boat, he may not appreciate the effect of tide and if not sailed, the effect of wind either. Since very few become CEOs and Generals in the management and officer class, it would be misapplication of the process to unwisely misjudge too early in life! As often said, experience is the best school master for lifetime and we all learn and change all the time.

Eliciting few examples from other career and social paths should enable open the eyes and minds of those concerned. The tests for new persons to armed forces is totally different from other industries. Herein the first question is whether one is willing to lay down life and values (considering political interference) for the love of the nation and its defence and offence (when wrongly ordered, e.g Iraq invasion claiming WMD after international inspection that was cooked up at highest level). While in India it is sought as an employment, in US youth join forces to pursue higher education streams later.

Having obtained road Driving licenses decades ago -when there were very few vehicles on the road, haven't we adapted to the traffic jams? Today, are the tests done in traffic chaos to ensure psyche fitness to handle with temperament under stress? Road rage galore! It should be so upgraded, for, a visiting US relative pointed out that they drive 'defensively', where as we do it aggressively.

A fresh intake who doesn't know anything about the sea, cannot be tested as to how he will fare in bad weather, isolation, seven day work pressure –read documentation overload- without shore leave and drinks. His training, mentoring and acclimatisation ensures that in due course he adapts. Mind you, seafaring is not for the sissies. Is it that possibilities of neuro-plasticity are being ignored? Can't the parents after passing on the genes, format the upbringing and character formation of children?

If he is ruled unfit –sans adaptability trait evaluation- we lose a potential suitor. Pray how to judge adaptability without knowing what is to be adapted for and with? Not to forget that all principles are cast downwind in the midst of market dynamics when the unfit become fit. In a crash, the fit are jettisoned or cast off as solid ballast, giving professed standards a deep sea burial ashore too!

It has been found that freshers from lower strata who need job and money adapt to any kind of job, working environment, challenges and situations, whereas the better off kids fail to make a good fit. So

is hailing from creamy layer a handicap? We all have batchmates and friends from all backgrounds who have been fairly successful at all levels and failures too. Likewise, the curse of the caste system, being resolved through reservations! It has its own fate and percentage of success and failure stories. Must confess about overcoming seasickness and fear of bad weather. Out on maiden voyage in July in Hooghly, a glass of seawater from Serang controlled the first bout of seasickness induced threat of vomiting. It in fact cured it for good & ever. A batchmate is said to have swallowed the anchor due to seasickness, on getting command and went on to head a reputable survey firm. Had we denied him due to his incompatibility, an irreplaceable marine surveyor with sea experience would have been lost.

My worries about heavy weather were quelled only after facing it for a prolonged while. That was failure to adapt quickly, but the good that came out of such belated reconciliation was the realisation that heavy weather is part of sealife, and then on it was never a bother, but respected and prepared for. Likewise, limitations of restricted visibility was mastered under tutelage of committed Master and Mate, during a summer in Dover straits.

Most of us have stories to tell, how boys grew up to men and the men were transformed as sailors. The psyche plays a large part and it did by conditioning and programming much like education and training, underscoring possibilities that one can be guided and moulded. Prior labelling or branding without giving sufficient opportunities to adapt and transform will be self-defeating to say the least.

Like Maslow's insights of industrial revolution being mal-applied to today's changed labour force, mariners shouldn't be subjects of incorrect judgments. Today's youth, especially in the micro-soft computer era want to be entrepreneurs to set up firms and offload stakes, working hard to gain self-actualisation. Hence, we must develop the appropriate tests for mental strengths for to-be-seamen, if the current crop of youngsters are found to be less committed to seafaring as a career. Similarly, if `compliant` Masters under ISM joint management is what is preferred, the test must reveal such adaptability at the cost of individuality subduing initiative.

It is not being argued that the psychometric test is no good. It must be developed as a better tool to be used more frequently in stages, appropriately, to improve the quality, standards and numbers to retain professionalism, market share and opportunities. Not all Mates may be fit to be Masters; in fact, few have opted not to be, citing that for some additional money, immense responsibilities are not worth shouldering. Hence the call is on experienced mariners to improve the test for more meaningful usage.

*The consensus amongst senior experienced outspoken mariners is that Master's & Ch.Eng's roles cannot be compared with that of CEOs and in any case ISM has diluted their authority.