

PROTOCOL FOR CREW AND CAPTAIN INTERACTION ON STUDENT SAILS

Introduction:

The interaction between Blue Water volunteers on board is as essential a part of the sailing and learning experience to the students as the actual sailing lessons. Our students and guests watch us closely and can mirror the interaction they see. Particularly if there is a feeling of stress, fear or shouting/screaming, the atmosphere on board can rapidly deteriorate. It is the wrong message for the students and both unprofessional, counterproductive and harmful to the ethos of sailing.

A good crew works as a team, following the captain's orders, offers suggestions to the captain when appropriate but understands that if push comes to shove, the captain is the person who has the final say. Calmly handling emergencies and problems, treating each other with trust and respect, acting together to create a safe and enjoyable atmosphere is central to our goals. As our Safety Officer once commented, during a live overboard drill, the only voice to be heard is the person assigned to speak to the student and the quiet orders of the captains as needed. A raised voice denotes failure to handle the situation correctly.

This protocol shall set out some basic rules for captain and crew interaction on board. It does not seek to address any particular situation but, instead, seeks to create the correct outlook and goal for harmonious and effective cooperation. It is an outline of conduct. It is assumed that on the average sail we have a First Captain, a Second Captain and three certified crew as a minimum.

The Basic Rules for All Interaction:

1. While all of us have differing levels of expertise and experience, on the standard Blue Water sail the First Captain is the person in charge of all boat operations and his/her final decision is to be adhered to. If the First Captain is unavailable, the Second captain assumes that role. Advice should be welcomed by the confident First Captain, but it is up to him or her to decide on a course of action.
2. The First Captain is responsible for the overall safety of the crew, passengers and vessels. That is first priority. The First Captain is also responsible for ensuring that crew and other captains adhere to these guidelines.
3. Absent an immediate emergency which requires immediate reaction by another person on board who is not nearby, no shouting or screaming should be allowed on board. Communication should be calm and polite, and arguments are to be avoided. An emergency is handled best by orders given in a conversational voice.
4. If the sea state is noisy, it is understood that shouting to be heard may be required. The shouting is to be able to be heard, not to intimidate, argue or attack and should cease as soon as possible.
5. If crew or captain have a problem with the actions of another, a discussion should ensue, but it should be private and without raised voices and involve the First Captain.
6. If a crew is having problems with another crew in performing needed tasks or his or her interaction with students or other crew, that crew should make that known to the First Captain who will decide how to resolve the problem. The First Captain has the obligation to address the issue as soon as the safe operation of the vessel allows.
7. Sarcasm, mockery or verbal assaults are to be avoided. Certain crew and captains, long time friends and crew mates, may interact in that manner in a jocular fashion and a relaxed atmosphere on board is welcome. That said, if such communication may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by students or other crew, avoid it. Recall that many of the populations we serve are not used to such interaction and may easily misinterpret it.

8. There are often two or more ways to address a task on board. Often neither is “right,” or the difference between them trivial. Each sailor has their own way of doing things. The crew should follow the instructions of the captains as to methods and methodology. Having a regular method of certain actions (order of turning on engine; reefing; coiling, etc.) is often required on vessels used by multiple crew. Crew are expected to learn the standard method and if they wish it changed, to discuss it with the First Captain.
9. If a crew/captain sees an error that is safety related, he or she should promptly advise the First Captain who will be expected to take appropriate steps. Unless there is clear and immediate danger to the crew or student, no crew should “take over” a task from another crew performing it, even if the method is not to that crew’s liking. As a past president of Blue Water stated, “If you are doing it the student is not...” That is equally true for interaction with crew.
10. Changing method for sailing or teaching is something that Blue Water can consider but is should be in the context of suggestions to the Board and Captains, not on board during a student sail.
11. Each crew has the responsibility for the safe performance of the vessel and personnel on board. If something is dangerous, the crew is to report it immediately to the First Captain and await instructions.
12. If a crew feels that a captain is being dictatorial or wrongheaded, the solution is to present that as an issue to the Board and not to argue on board or ignore the First Captain. First Captains work months and pour tremendous effort into getting that role. It is not casual. That does not mean they are infallible, but it does mean they deserve great respect, and their orders are to be carried out.
13. The First Captain has final say on whether the sail begins or continues. Weather, actions of students and crew, condition of the vessel are to be taken into account and the First Captain may cancel the voyage at any time.
14. If a student or guest is acting inappropriately, the First Captain should ask the teacher or officer to alter the situation and if he/she does not, the First Captain should decide if the voyage should be terminated. This is not a vote: the person responsible for the vessel makes the decision.
15. Before taking pictures of students, staff or volunteers, be sure to ask them if they mind. Most will cheerfully allow it, but courtesy requires consent. (Their release forms give us the right to take and use pictures...this is courtesy, not a legal requirement.)

Methodology:

1. We are all volunteers who are giving away the most valuable resource we have: time. And we are doing it for people who we feel need it the most. No one is here for personal gain.
2. Keeping that in mind and understanding the need for avoiding embarrassing or angry encounters, a good way to resolve nascent disputes is after the sail when a “round up” of captains and crew occurs and all can voice their concerns. Any First Captain feeling tension or anger on board should seek such a roundup and see if airing grievances can resolve differences.
3. A vital aspect of being a good captain or crew is putting ego aside for the safety and good of boat and crew. You may be right in how to furl or reef...but if another way works as well and the captains want it...so what? In giving way you promote comradeship and cooperation and in the long run that is the most important safety factor for any boat.
4. That said, if there is real danger that must be addressed, do it: but calmly and immediately explain why and let the First Captain calm nerves if needed.

One of our first First Captains, Captain Ben, once commented when he had two crew arguing vociferously over how to tie a reef line, “Hey, we’re all family here. You don’t hurt family over something trivial...”

He had a good point.