



## **Crew Retention: what role does leadership play in attracting – and retaining - the right yacht crew?**

With the hospitality industries reporting difficulties in finding staff in the post-COVID world, it got us wondering about crew recruitment and retention within the superyacht industry. Are we attracting and retaining the best people? How important are salary and benefits to crew? And what role do factors like leadership play in improving crew retention?

Ahead of Quaynote`s forthcoming conference, **Improving Crew Retention**, planned for **Thursday, 10 March, 2022** in **Nice, France**, we spoke to a former Superyacht Captain who now trains senior crew in leadership skills. Micheál Pierse combined his academic and corporate career with twelve years` experience working on superyachts to become a specialist coach, working with big names like Camper & Nicholson to deliver workshops on successful crew management. He also teaches Management Helm, amongst other subjects, at Bluewater Training.

Working at close quarters with yacht crew, Micheál has seen first-hand the myths that can often feed unrealistic aspirations. Most would-be yacht crew fail to break into the industry in the first place and for those that do, a large proportion do not last more than a year. *“For every 7 guys who look for a job, one gets the job. 50% of those guys are gone in 12 months,”* Pierse observes. Not only is this sobering for those trying to pursue their dream job, but the high turnover makes us question how the reality of working on a big yacht might fall short of crew expectations.

In his course on People Matter: Unlocking your People`s Potential, Micheál tells an anecdote that illustrates what he calls the “Euphoria Curve”. He lived in Australia for many years and witnessed this first-hand over and over again. “A guy would turn up at a bar where we were in Queensland and he`d have all these stories of tax-free money, huge tips, see the world,” he explains. “And he`d have these photographs of his travels around the globe, life on board a big yacht. He`d be holding court in front of about 10 people. The question was always how do you get into that?” At this point the guy in the bar`s audience are at the start of Pierse`s “Euphoria Curve”.

Next, our yacht crew hopefuls sign up to various courses, where the trainer has similar stories to the one they`ve heard in the bar. The trainer may cross-sell a deckhand course or a stewardess course to help our aspiring crew “get ahead of the rest”. “Then, for 280 euros a month you can find a bunkbed in a room in Antibes which is full of other people who`ve never worked in yachting before,” continues Pierse, “but they`ve heard all the tales of all the money they`re going to make. Then you go to the bar where beer is 8 euros a pint and it`s full of people who`ve met people who`ve met people. The only problem they have is how they are going to spend all the money they will earn,” Pierse adds wryly. “At this point they are at the peak of the Euphoria Curve.”

Micheál Pierse points out the similarities to the Californian gold rush, “where the only people making any money were those selling the shovel.” As he explains, by the time they go to look for a job, our would-be crew may have already spent a tidy sum on training, accommodation, food, not to mention beer and travel. When they finally arrived at the crew agency, they may be in for a rude awakening. “The lady at the crew agency says to them, “You have no work experience.” This isn`t what the guy who sold him the course or the guy in the bar told him, nor the guy who upsold him courses after the STCW. Now you have to go dockwalking to get some experience,” Pierse concludes.

At this point, our guy is at the bottom of the Euphoria Curve, but when he returns home empty-handed he won`t admit that he`s failed. He`ll just say that he went for a holiday and wasn`t really interested in getting a job. And so the myth of easy money, plenty of jobs, and a glamorous life-style working on board a superyacht can continue unchallenged.

Meanwhile, for the lucky ones who do find a job as yacht crew, what is it that will keep them in the industry? *"I always ask people in my management class, what are the top 5 things you are looking for in your next job?"* says Micheál Pierse. *"Never, ever is money in the top three. It's rotation, it's the environment they work in, it's training, it's health and safety, it's the work life/balance."* Rotation has become increasingly important as a crew benefit in recent years, going from a nice-to-have to an essential component of the crew employment contract as time goes on. While rotation is specific to industries such as yachting, however, the other benefits cited by Pierse's trainees – environment, training and safety – are more universal. *"To be fair, you could ask people in management in any industry about their next job and it would be similar,"* confirms Pierse. As any employer, finding out what drives your staff is crucial. If you overlook this analysis, then your recruitment process becomes ultimately more difficult, with the wrong people recruited and continuous turnover as a result.

As with all workplaces, there are yachts that unfortunately those that do not stick to the rules regarding their employees. While the hours of rest on yachts of 60m and over are dictated by ISM, with crew simply clocking in and out, the compliance levels on some smaller yachts may not be guaranteed. Where rules of this nature are flouted the argument has often been, as Pierse put it, *"Oh well, this is yachting"*, in other words crew are well-paid for a reason. The same argument was wheeled out in the 70s in the aviation business and the 80s in container shipping but the accidents kept happening. Of course, people who don't enjoy sufficient rest can eventually break down under stress and fatigue. Most accidents on board happen because of the human element and people make more mistakes if they are tired. Beyond that, if stressed and fatigued crew leave, all the knowledge they have accumulated on board the yacht leaves with them.

The role of the captain in improving crew retention is to provide leadership, empowerment and delegation. Never forget what you are trying to achieve in management and that's getting work and excellence out of other people. Big words, easier said than done. As Micheál Pierse recalls, *"It was quite a lonely place when I was a Captain. There was quite a lot of stuff that I wasn't trained for and there was no-one to talk to about anything."* In his management class, he gets asked how to deal with drugs on board, sexual harassment, a confrontation between the engineer and the stewardess, the habitual complainer and fights breaking out. *"Mental health is a big one now and people are more comfortable talking about it."* Pierse comments. *"I discuss it more and more at my management courses."*

Yachts aren't there to deliver profits. They are there to deliver a luxury maritime experience. You need to have everyone on board bought into this. Employers are realizing that the need for employees to feel valued has two-way benefits. In the case of a yacht, delivering a fabulous, luxury client experience needs everyone to buy into it, especially those who are client-facing. In the past, senior officers may not have been particularly interested in what the junior officers or the stewardess had to say. However, if these are the staff who come into most contact with guests, then seeking feedback from junior crew validates their role in the team and offers the whole crew valuable insights into client needs. To slightly misquote the yachting maxim, Happy Crew, Happy Boat and Happy Client.



*A Business and Management graduate with a Masters in Information Systems, Micheál Piérse left London for Australia in 2006. He found his way into the maritime industry, where armed with his MCA OOW and MCA masters ticket, he undertook a series of Captain roles on superyachts, the last of which was on a 38m Palmer Johnson charter yacht. Since 2019, he has been training and lecturing at leading training establishments such as Bluewater Training academy. He specializes in management and coaching, bringing a unique insight into management philosophies that draw on his own experience as a yacht Captain.*

Quaynote will stage the one-day conference, **Improving Yacht Crew Retention, on Thursday, 10th March, 2022 in Nice, France.** To register your place or for more information, visit our website at [www.quaynote.com](http://www.quaynote.com)