



Are you eager to share good news with loved ones in person or decompress with friends over a warm cup of tea after work? In most jobs, a catch-up after hours is the norm, but for people working onboard, socializing in these ways is often out of reach. Instead, fostering strong social connections at sea becomes essential for a positive, productive, and collaborative environment, notes Maria Kostala.



Maria Kostala
Claims Executive
Shipowners Claims Bureau (Hellas), Inc.
Claims Liaison office of the Managers
The American P&I Club

Crewmembers need to rely on each other and maintain bonds with those ashore to enhance their well-being. Encouraging both structured and informal activities and leveraging technology can enhance social life onboard and create an atmosphere that benefits both crewmembers and shipowners.

CALM SEAS, CONNECTED CREW: SAILING TOWARD STRONGER BONDS ONBOARD

The importance of social interaction onboard

Life onboard presents unique social challenges. Working in close quarters for extended periods, separated from family and friends can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Cultivating a sense of belonging, and strong interpersonal connections is crucial for productivity and mental health. A sense of community reduces the risk of mental health issues, improving morale and resilience. These benefits extend to all parties involved, crewmembers, their families and shipowners.

Structured social activities: enhancing crew interaction

Structured social activities in line with vessels' policies and regulations tailored to various ship environments, create a supportive framework for camaraderie and might offer a chance to connect beyond work roles fostering trust and belonging. Typically, crewmembers socialize in two distinct recreational spaces, one for officers and one for ratings.

- **Team building:** Team-building activities can aim to excel problem-solving, communication, and even

leadership skills while having fun. Navigation challenges, trivia nights, or forming game clubs, depending on the interests of the crew in question, would be beneficial. Designating a common area for game sessions (e.g., board games, cards, or video games) provides a relaxed yet structured space to unwind and interact.

- **Physical activities:** Physical activities, such as sports tournaments, fitness challenges or gym sessions, relieve stress and encourage teamwork. Depending on the available space, games like table tennis or basketball tournaments provide a healthy physical outlet and can foster new friendships and cooperation.
- **Movie nights:** Organizing movie nights can be a low-pressure opportunity for casual interaction. After watching a film, crewmembers can discuss and share opinions, opening channels for further communication.
- **Port visits:** When schedules and logistics allow, while at port, taking into consideration the fast-paced everyday work life, organized shore visits to nearby landmarks, museums, or cultural sites enhance crew

morale. These shared experiences create bonding opportunities and contribute to an overall positive atmosphere onboard.

- **Addressing misunderstandings:** There are established mechanisms (meetings, briefings etc.) for resolving conflicts to ensure a peaceful and healthy environment. The crew should be encouraged to also resolve personal conflicts amicably and foster in this way a supportive, cohesive community.
- **Positive feedback:** Providing positive feedback reinforces the value each crewmember brings to the team and enhances a sense of connection and togetherness. Recognizing achievements, strengths and amelioration and setting common goals for the team tends to strengthen morale and make the crew bond working towards shared goals.

Informal bonding: The power of everyday interactions

While structured activities have their place, informal, day to day interactions are equally vital for fostering a cohesive culture. The crew's schedule includes standard mealtimes and designated breaks but in addition, casual conversations and relaxation in communal spaces could be encouraged.

Chatting over meals, sharing a morning coffee, or unwinding together at the end of the day have a significant impact on social cohesion. All the above-mentioned activities, such as games, gym, movies could also be part of informal bonding when initiated spontaneously and not as part of a schedule organized by the management.

Celebrating special occasions, birthdays, achievements, work anniversaries or in general feasting together respecting the safety regulations and policies brings people closer. Finding reasons to come together, organize small gatherings, enjoy and spend time fostering cultural understanding and appreciation creates a sense of mutual respect within the crew.

Promoting a culture that values these informal moments builds a sense of openness and cooperation, where crewmembers feel more comfortable with one another, enhancing their overall morale and collaboration.

Leveraging technology: Staying connected with loved ones ashore

Modern technology has brought vital improvements to maintaining connections with friends and family ashore. Internet access, phone and video calls, and satellite TV help crewmembers feel connected to their lives back home, reducing loneliness and homesickness. Having these options for regular, quality communication while complying with the applicable internet / cyber policies improve significantly the state of mind of the crew. Investing in faster internet connections, where feasible, could further promote a better social life.

A connected crew equals a more productive crew

Social bonds onboard directly contribute to productivity, efficiency, and retention. Crewmembers who feel supported, respected and connected are more likely to work effectively as a team and remain committed to their roles, which is critical for long-term success in the maritime industry. Prioritizing crewmembers' social well-being is essential for creating an efficient and

safe workplace.

Building a socially connected, resilient crew requires a balanced approach—integrating structured and informal social activities onboard while supporting communication with loved ones ashore. When crewmembers experience strong social ties onboard, they are not only happier but also more motivated and productive. By valuing the social life and having a truly connected crew, shipowners can ensure smoother voyages and ultimately calmer seas.

The American Club's efforts

The American Club is here to assist the industry in our efforts to promote wellness of their crews by providing an array of loss prevention materials available to the shipowner and seafarer communities.

The Club has produced three guidance documents on mental wellness, two of which were produced in cooperation with the Seamen's Church Institute: What's on Your Mind?, Caring for Seafarers' Mental Wellbeing, and Addressing and Managing Seafarer Mental Health Challenges. Furthermore, we've provided guidance on wellness programs that help to build wellbeing and moral as found in our document, Seafarer Wellbeing Programs.

We also have produced a series of animations on harassment, bullying and sexual harassment and sexual assault that are important to establishing, maintaining and protecting stronger bonds between crewmembers. The Club will continue to produce more guidance on these issues in the future.



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