

BEYOND THE BUNKERING CHECKLIST

The Human Side of Bunker Operations That Procedures Cannot Fully Capture

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THE PART OF BUNKERING THAT IS DIFFICULT TO PUT INTO A PROCEDURE

Bunkering is an industry supported by detailed procedures, regulations, specifications, standing instructions and checklists. These are essential, and there is already extensive technical material explaining what should be done before, during and after a bunker delivery. The industry does not lack guidance on the technical execution of the operation, nor is this article intended to add another procedure or checklist to that body of knowledge.

There is, however, another side of bunker operations which is much more difficult to put into a manual. It concerns the people who have to make those procedures work in practice, often under time pressure and in circumstances that do not develop exactly as expected. Communication, confidence, mutual respect, timely reporting and an understanding of the pressures faced by somebody on the other side of an operation can have an enormous influence on the eventual result, yet these subjects naturally receive less attention than the technical aspects of the delivery itself.

A bunker operation brings together people with very different responsibilities. The Barge Master is concerned with the safety of his vessel and the conditions he actually sees from the bridge. The Cargo Officer is managing the physical transfer and its associated records. The trader has made a commercial commitment to a customer. Operations is trying to coordinate product, barges, schedules and delivery windows. Technical Management has responsibility for the reliability and condition of the vessel. The tank farm has its own constraints in preparing, blending, testing and releasing product. Surveyors, agents, Port Control and other authorities each see the operation from yet another position.

All of them may be competent and experienced, but they are not necessarily looking at the same problem from the same angle. Understanding another person's responsibility is therefore sometimes not enough. It is also necessary to make an effort to look at the situation from where that person is standing.

This is the aspect of bunkering I want to explore here. These observations are drawn from many years spent first at sea, particularly on tankers, and later managing bunker operations ashore. They are not intended as instructions on how bunkering should be performed. Rather, they reflect what practical experience taught me about the human relationships around an operation and about the importance of communication, confidence and mutual understanding when established procedures meet the realities of the working day.

THE SAME OPERATION CAN LOOK VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER SIDE

After spending many years at sea, moving ashore changed more than my place of work. It changed the direction from which I was looking at the same industry. For most of my career until then, the office had been somewhere ashore from which instructions, schedules and commercial requirements arrived. I was now sitting on that side myself, looking back towards the ships, and it did not take long to realise how much of shipboard reality becomes invisible once a vessel is represented mainly by its name, ETA and position in an operating schedule.

This was not a criticism of shore personnel. Unless somebody has lived and worked aboard a merchant vessel, it can be difficult to appreciate fully the combination of operational pressure, irregular hours, machinery, hierarchy, fatigue, confinement and responsibility that lies behind apparently routine decisions. Equally, somebody aboard a vessel may not always appreciate the commercial commitments, customer expectations and wider programme being managed by the office. Each side can therefore reach a perfectly understandable conclusion based upon the information visible from its own position while missing what the other side is dealing with.

One area where this difference sometimes became apparent was in the treatment of the Master when something went wrong. The Master is in command and carries overall responsibility for the vessel, but that does not mean that every machinery failure, communication error, cargo problem or individual mistake has been caused by him. A problem may originate with another officer, an engineer, a crew member, an equipment failure or an issue which should have been addressed elsewhere in the organisation. Establishing that distinction does not reduce the Master's responsibility. It allows the actual cause to be understood before conclusions are reached and makes any subsequent corrective action more meaningful.

The same principle applies when a Barge Master hesitates to proceed with an operation that appears manageable from the office. Shore Operations may be conscious of a customer's delivery window, the next vessel waiting for the barge and the commercial consequences of delay. The Master is looking at the receiving vessel, weather, swell, traffic, manoeuvring room and mooring arrangements in front of him. Neither perspective should automatically overrule the other. A better decision becomes possible when each side understands what the other is seeing.

Over the years, I found this ability to look temporarily from the other person's position useful far beyond the ship and shore relationship. Operations may need to understand why Technical Management cannot safely return a barge to service simply because the programme is under pressure. Technical Management, in turn, benefits from understanding what losing that barge means to several committed deliveries. A trader needs to understand the physical limitations facing Operations, while Operations should understand the customer's commercial importance to the trader. A tank farm may have genuine reasons for delaying release of a product, while also needing to appreciate what late information means when a barge is already waiting.

Mutual understanding does not mean that everybody will always agree. Neither does it remove the need for somebody ultimately to make a decision. It means that the decision is made after considering the realities faced by the people who have to implement it, rather than viewing the entire operation from one desk or one department.

COMMUNICATION IS PART OF THE OPERATION

Professional competence is the foundation of bunkering. Masters and officers hold their certificates of competency and have accumulated practical experience. Technical personnel understand machinery and vessel reliability. Surveyors bring specialist knowledge and independence. Terminal personnel understand product movement, while agents and Port Control operate within their own areas of expertise.

Yet many operational difficulties develop not because any one of these people lacks competence, but because information fails to move effectively between them.

Communication in this context means considerably more than issuing instructions. An instruction has to be understood, significant actions have to be confirmed and the person delegating a task still needs sufficient follow up to know that the intended result has been achieved. In an operation involving several organisations and departments, assumptions can easily develop in the spaces between them.

For this reason, I came to regard reporting as part of the operation itself rather than an administrative activity surrounding it. During a bunker delivery, shore Operations benefited from knowing how the operation was progressing while the information still had practical value. Whether the barge had come alongside satisfactorily, whether the initial discussion with the receiving vessel had revealed any concerns, whether pumping and sampling were proceeding normally and whether communication between the two vessels remained satisfactory were all pieces of an evolving operational picture.

The purpose was never to control every detail from shore or interfere with people who were qualified to perform their respective duties. It was to maintain enough visibility of the operation to recognise a developing problem while something could still be done about it. Information received after a vessel has sailed may help explain what happened; the same information received while the operation is underway may prevent the problem from developing further.

There is also an important element of confidence in communication. People should be able to raise a concern without first having to prove that something is wrong. A Master, Cargo Officer, surveyor, agent or member of an Operations team may simply feel uncomfortable about a situation or want another opinion. If the working relationship encourages that person to speak, a small uncertainty can be examined while choices remain available. If the environment discourages the call, the same concern may remain unspoken until it becomes a much larger problem.

This became apparent during the early period of the bunker operations I managed. Masters and Cargo Officers were sometimes hesitant to contact shore management when they encountered a difficulty because the relationship had not yet developed. Whenever circumstances allowed, I spent time aboard the barges, particularly while they were alongside loading, speaking with Masters, officers, engineers and crew. As people became familiar with one another, the formality gradually reduced and confidence to communicate increased. The understanding became quite simple: if there was a doubt, they should call, irrespective of the hour.

For such an arrangement to work, accessibility alone is not enough. The response to the call matters just as much. If somebody telephones at two in the morning with a genuine concern and is made to feel that the call was unwelcome, he may hesitate before making the next one. From an operational point of view, the consequences of that hesitation may be far greater than the inconvenience of being disturbed during the night.

The strongest communication systems are therefore not necessarily those producing the greatest number of reports. They are those in which people understand what needs to be communicated and why, and have sufficient confidence in one another to communicate before uncertainty becomes an incident. Establishing such a culture can be as important to operational reliability as establishing the reporting procedure itself.

WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG, DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM FIRST

Some of the most useful lessons I carried from sea to shore had little to do with navigation or cargo handling. They came from watching experienced senior officers deal with situations after something had already gone wrong. The ones who impressed me most were not necessarily those who reacted most strongly. They were often the people who remained composed, accepted that the event had already occurred and concentrated first on finding the best solution available under the circumstances.

That approach became particularly relevant ashore, where departmental structures can sometimes make it tempting to decide who owns a problem before deciding how the problem should be resolved. Operations may see a Technical issue, Technical may see an operational or commercial issue, and another department may conclude that the difficulty originated somewhere else. There is a proper time for establishing responsibility, particularly where corrective action is required, but during a developing operation the first requirement is normally to establish the facts, protect the operation and limit the consequences.

This also affects how people report their own mistakes. If somebody believes that admitting an error will immediately lead to humiliation or blame, there is a natural temptation to delay the conversation, minimise what happened or hope that the problem will resolve itself. None of these responses helps an operation. A person who can say openly that a mistake has been made and explain what happened gives the organisation something much more valuable: the opportunity to act while time still exists.

In my experience, this approach generally produced cooperation rather than defensiveness. A call to somebody in Technical, Commercial, Fuel or another department explaining frankly what had happened would usually bring people together around the problem. Responsibility had not disappeared; it simply did not need to be the first subject discussed.

The same philosophy applies when facts themselves are uncertain. If figures after loading do not look right, a sample creates concern or additional testing appears prudent, there is little advantage in beginning with an argument about whose fault it might eventually prove to be. The immediate requirement is to establish reliable facts. An independent surveyor, additional sampling or laboratory analysis may involve some cost, but that cost can be insignificant compared with allowing uncertainty to develop into a vessel delay, product dispute or customer claim.

Experienced operational oversight can be particularly valuable at this stage because seemingly small irregularities do not always remain small. Recognising which issue can safely be monitored and which deserves immediate verification is part of the judgement developed through repeated exposure to actual operations.

A constructive operational culture is therefore not one in which mistakes are ignored or accountability disappears. It is one in which problems surface early enough to be managed, evidence is established before positions become defensive, and responsibility is considered on the basis of facts rather than assumptions.

TRUST HAS TO EXIST BEFORE IT IS NEEDED

Confidence and mutual respect cannot usually be created at the moment a crisis begins. They are built during ordinary operations, when there is no immediate dispute and people have time to understand how others work.

The relationship between Operations and a tank farm provides a good example. A bunker barge may be ready to load while a product is still being blended, a grade may be awaiting laboratory results or the available quantity may have changed. These are normal realities within a supply operation. The important issue is whether Operations receives accurate information early enough to adjust the programme.

Having worked with tank farm operations and oil movement, I understood that a delayed product did not automatically mean that somebody had failed. There could be genuine operational reasons behind it. At the same time, the tank farm needed to understand that delayed information could leave a bunker barge waiting and eventually affect a customer's vessel. Once each side understood the other's difficulty, the conversation became less about blame and more about what could practically be done.

The same applies between Operations and Technical Management. Machinery will not fail according to a convenient commercial timetable. A cargo pump, engine or generator may require attention when the barge is fully committed. Operations cannot repair the equipment, and Technical Management cannot make the delivery programme disappear. What both sides can do is communicate early enough for each to manage its part of the problem. Another barge may be used, priorities may be changed, customers may be advised and the programme may be rearranged while Technical concentrates on safely restoring the vessel.

The ability to connect these different perspectives is particularly important in bunker operations because an apparently isolated difficulty can move very quickly across departmental boundaries. A technical problem can become an operational delay, an operational delay can become a commercial problem and, if poorly communicated, a commercial problem can become a customer relationship issue or claim. Looking at the whole chain rather than only the point at which the problem first appeared often reveals more options for managing it.

Independent surveyors occupy a similarly important position when facts are uncertain. Their value is not simply the measurement they take or the calculation they produce. They can provide an independent record while the vessels, samples and people involved are still available. Once the receiving vessel sails and the bunker barge proceeds to another operation, reconstructing the same facts can become considerably more difficult.

Seen in this way, claims prevention does not begin when a formal claim arrives. It begins much earlier, through communication, accurate records, preserved evidence and relationships in which people are prepared to raise an issue before their positions become fixed. Much of the value of experienced operations management lies in recognising these connections early, while the organisation still has choices available to it.

THE HUMAN BEING BEHIND THE JOB TITLE

Understanding another person's position also means remembering that the people carrying out marine operations do not stop being human beings when they board a vessel.

A ship or bunker barge is both a workplace and, for extended periods, a home. Crew members may spend months away from their families, working irregular hours and living continuously within the same confined environment. Operational demands, fatigue, interpersonal pressures and personal difficulties can all exist behind the professional titles appearing on a crew list.

This was one reason I considered informal contact with the people aboard important. Whenever circumstances allowed, I visited the barges, walked around, spoke with Masters and crews and occasionally sat and ate with them. Sometimes I would take something simple such as pizzas or buckets of KFC. The food itself was unimportant. What mattered was reducing the distance between "the office" and the people aboard, while also providing an opportunity to understand the atmosphere on the vessel in a way that no formal report could convey.

One incident remains particularly clear in my memory. At about two o'clock one morning, a Barge Master telephoned and apologised for disturbing me. The son of his Chief Officer had died in the Philippines. The officer was understandably extremely distressed, and attempts to arrange his normal sign off had not succeeded.

From an organisational point of view, the matter belonged primarily to the shipowner, Crewing and Technical Management rather than Bunkering Operations. From a human and operational point of view, however, that

distinction did not solve the immediate problem. There was an officer aboard a bunker barge who had suffered a devastating family loss and urgently needed to go home.

The agents were asked to arrange a boat to bring him ashore and accommodation was organised while the administrative difficulty was investigated. It subsequently became clear that his passport was with Immigration because a residence visa process was underway. Together with our company PRO, I went to the Immigration office and explained the circumstances to the responsible senior officer. He responded with understanding, the documentation was dealt with promptly and, following coordination with Technical Management, the Chief Officer was able to fly home that day.

The incident did not change the formal responsibilities of the departments involved, nor does it suggest that Operations should take over the functions of Crewing or Technical Management. It demonstrated something simpler. Real problems do not always arrive neatly labelled according to an organisation chart. Sometimes effective operational management requires somebody to recognise the wider situation, bring the appropriate people together and remain involved until a workable solution has been found.

Human understanding in marine operations should therefore not be mistaken for lowering professional standards. In many circumstances it supports them. A person who feels respected is more likely to communicate openly, while management that understands the conditions under which people are working is better placed to assess situations fairly and respond effectively.

THE NETWORK BEHIND THE VISIBLE DELIVERY

The need to understand another person's responsibilities extends beyond the vessel and the company. A bunker delivery also depends upon people and organisations who may be almost invisible when everything is proceeding normally.

At a busy anchorage such as Fujairah, Port Control is an active participant in the operating environment. A bunker barge cannot simply weigh anchor and proceed to a receiving vessel without regard to traffic and port requirements. Vessel movements have to be coordinated, and relevant information has to pass between the barge and the control tower as the operation progresses.

Agents perform another function whose importance is often most noticeable when something is missing. Vessel particulars, certificates, permissions and other documents must reach the correct people at the correct time. Both vessels may be physically ready to begin, yet an outstanding document or permission can still prevent the operation from proceeding.

Professional relationships with Port Control, the Harbour Master's office, agents, terminals, surveyors and other authorities therefore form part of the practical operating environment. Such relationships should never be confused with seeking special treatment or bypassing requirements. Their value lies in mutual understanding. When people know one another's responsibilities, communicate honestly and respect the procedures each party has to follow, genuine problems are usually easier to explain and resolve within the proper framework.

I remember one late night when Port Control at Fujairah was having difficulty communicating with the Chinese Master of a vessel at anchorage because of a language problem. The vessel was not our customer and had no commercial connection with us, but the control tower knew that some members of our scheduling team spoke Chinese and asked whether we could assist.

One of our schedulers was already at home, but communication was arranged between him, the Master and Port Control. The misunderstanding was resolved within a few minutes. There was no commercial benefit to us from becoming involved, nor was one expected. It was simply one professional helping another to solve a practical problem within a port where everybody ultimately depended upon the safe and orderly movement of vessels.

Relationships built in ordinary circumstances often prove their value in more difficult ones. Mutual respect develops when people see that assistance is not always calculated according to immediate commercial benefit and that professional cooperation can work in both directions.

This wider network is easy to overlook because, when it functions properly, much of its work remains invisible. Yet knowing how these different parts of the operation interact, where communication can fail and whom to involve when circumstances depart from the normal routine can make a considerable difference to the speed and quality of operational decisions.

WHAT PROCEDURES CANNOT CREATE BY THEMSELVES

The purpose of highlighting these experiences is not to suggest that relationships can replace procedures, technical competence or clearly defined responsibilities. They cannot. Bunkering involves valuable cargoes, safety critical operations, contractual obligations and environmental risks, and the formal framework surrounding the operation is essential.

The point is that the framework does not operate by itself.

A technically competent Master may still hesitate to report a concern if experience has taught him that shore management reacts badly to inconvenient information. A competent Technical Manager and an experienced Operations Head can still work against one another if neither understands the pressures facing the other. A trader may make a perfectly reasonable commercial commitment without knowing that an operational limitation is developing elsewhere. A tank farm may have a genuine product constraint whose consequences become unnecessarily serious because the information reaches Operations too late. Even an experienced team can create difficulties if assumptions replace confirmation.

The opposite is equally true. When people understand one another's responsibilities, communicate early, respect the expertise on the other side and feel sufficiently confident to discuss uncertainty, the entire operation becomes more resilient. Problems do not disappear, but they tend to become visible sooner, when more options remain available.

This is where experience gradually adds something that is difficult to reproduce through formal training alone. Repeated exposure to real operations develops a sense of what information matters, which apparently small concern deserves another look, when independent verification is worthwhile and when a second opinion should be sought before proceeding. It also teaches that the first version of a problem seen from one's own desk, bridge or department is not necessarily the complete version.

For organisations, this experience has value beyond dealing with individual incidents. The same judgement can help strengthen reporting lines, improve communication between departments, identify where responsibilities overlap or leave gaps, develop more effective escalation practices and reduce the likelihood that a familiar operational problem will repeatedly return in a different form. The objective is not simply to solve today's difficulty, but to leave the operation better prepared for tomorrow's.

Perhaps that is the less visible discipline behind good bunker operations: the willingness to move, mentally at least, from one's own position and consider what the operation looks like from the other person's side.

A checklist can require a report, but it cannot create the confidence to make the call. A procedure can allocate responsibility, but it cannot create mutual respect between departments. A standing instruction can specify what should happen when something goes wrong, but it cannot ensure that people will listen to one another before assigning blame. Regulations can define the framework within which the operation must take place, but they cannot by themselves create the relationships that allow competent people to work effectively within that framework.

These qualities develop through professional behaviour, repeated interaction and experience. They are difficult to measure and sometimes difficult even to see, but their effect becomes apparent in the way an organisation responds when an operation does not proceed as expected.

That is why the human side of bunkering deserves attention alongside its technical and commercial disciplines. It is not an alternative to them, and it is certainly not a substitute for them.

It is the connection between them.

Procedures provide the framework. People, communication, confidence, mutual respect, experience and judgement make the framework work in practice.

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He retired as General Manager, Bunkering Operations (UAE) with Vitol Bunkers, where his responsibilities included complex marine fuel operations, operational risk management, claims handling and coordination across commercial, technical and marine functions.

Drawing on experience from both shipboard and shore management perspectives, he now provides independent advisory support to shipowners, bunker suppliers, traders and maritime organisations on bunker operations, operational risk, claims prevention and marine fuel disputes, with particular emphasis on practical decision making, communication and the human factors that influence operational outcomes.

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