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report

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A Client Representative's Master Class

A GUINEA PIG'S EXPERIENCE



SOME TIME AGO SYBASS EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE lack of knowledge amongst client reps (CRs) on some projects in their yards. They concluded it might be a good idea to create a course for them. To be honest that has rather an air of the fox guarding the henhouse, but by the time they approached VT Flagship (then FSYA) about the project it had evolved to be independent of SYBass. By the time I attended the beta test in February it had evolved yet further since it's quite clear that no short course alone can turn someone into a CR. What can be done is to offer an overview of the entire build process for a CR. The result is the client rep master class; more a workshop than a course.

There were a total of 17 of us and the mix was eclectic. There were five yards: Amels, Benetti, CRN, Fincantieri Yachts, and Koninklijke de Vries, along with those who had acted as owner's reps such as independents like Duncan Soffe of Evolute (also a lecturer), as well as technical personnel from Burgess, Edmiston and Royale Oceanic. There were attendees also involved in sales, marketing and charter along with three lawyers: David Reardon and Martin Penny (both lecturers) of Hill Dickinson and Benjamin Maltby of Matrix Lloyd. This offered VT Flagship a diversity of views and feedback on the course.

The question is: “Who is this workshop for and how much will it cost?” The answer to the first part was vigorously debated; the conclusion is that it would be for a maximum of 15 people per class at a variety of experienced levels so that they can also learn from and build on-going relationships with each other as well as studying. They might, ,for example, include: a non-maritime person from the owner’s company or legal team; an experienced captain with a few builds under his belt moving to larger more complex projects; and the same but on his first build. In fact so broad is the overview that some of the highly experienced may wish to attend; though that would be less likely. Certainly the class will almost always be funded as a build or refit expense by the client. The cost is £4,995 plus VAT. Few individuals will self fund such self improvement. The course duration was also discussed. We did 70% of the material in four very long days and, though some disagreed, the final duration will be eight days’ study with a day or two off in the middle.

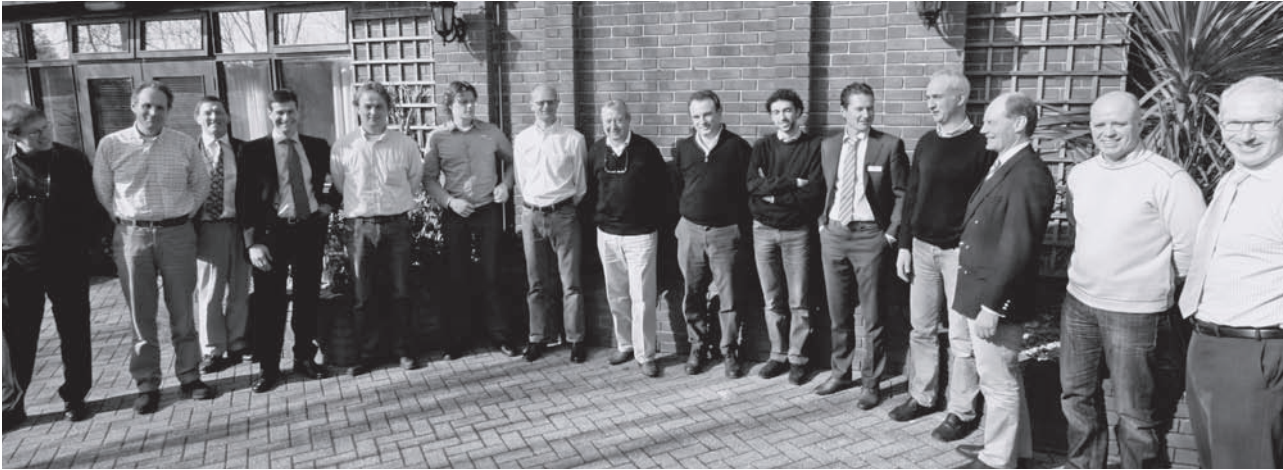
Even in four days we covered an amazing amount of ground and gained a little knowledge about a very wide variety of project issues. The representative is given information on many activities (such as moving aboard, provisioning, sea trial protocols etc) that may never be within his purview. Depending on the team size and mix the CR may not be a captain or engineer. However, he still needs to understand all the project processes to be able to run it.

There were war stories galore from attendees; my favourite came when discussing how long a sea trial should be. One CR piped up with a tale of where a sea trial ran for 42 days; must be a record of some – albeit unpleasant – kind! Real students will do practical and role-playing exercises in groups of five tackling typical problems; one will likely be the overpriced change order. A tale on this topic was where a yard offered wildly overpriced VTC (Variation To Contract or Change Order) specifically not to get the owner’s agreement – the representative even recommended (and dearly wished) that the client refuse too. But to everyone’s horror he signed it off.



Our lecturers were Sir Tim McClement (opposite right), Hugh Clark (opposite left) and Rob De Silva of VT Flagship, Greg Evans of CISR, Roy Temme of Inserve Yachts, Andrew Alderson (in future Paolo Moretti) for RINA as well as those mentioned above. For the real course a major shipyard and Broker will spend a half day with students adding their viewpoint to the exercise mix. For us by the middle of the first day it was clear that the workshop would not make a CR into a biddable boy (or girl) who agrees mindlessly with the yard. Indeed some yards grumbled over some of the CR’s comments on some topics. The discussion on the degree of access a CR needs to class and yards meetings and communications, for example, was quite heated. The final syllabus is available as a Synfo Extra.

There will be clever little psychological tests, tricks and activities to break the ice. My group was tasked to count cards by suit and the teacher kept torturing our team leader; taking away the watch; making him ask his team stupid questions while they worked; continually reducing the reporting period between repetitions and more nastiness. Even though fun, it was highly stressful and accurately mimicked the time leading up to the end of a build. Further, the team leader was ill briefed, under empowered and thrown in with no pre-planning time in mid project; sound familiar? Another counting game showed how single mindedness decreases the broad view a client rep needs. We counted basketball hand contacts in a video; so concentrated were many that few noticed a man in a gorilla suit walking in between the two teams and doing a dance.



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Is this workshop valid and a worthwhile spend for a project? If the CR has 20 years’ experience then most likely no. However, for those with less experience it offers a lot. The cost is high, but so is the quality of information and the lecturers’ experience. New contacts for those returning to their projects will be useful. It will suit that hypothetical inexperienced owner’s employee; make clear who he needs on his team; what competencies they require and indeed when they should arrive in the team. I suspect every attendee – no matter how experienced – discovered something new.

However, it is highly important that marketing of the course reflects what it is and what it is not. In fact in common with the CR it must manage owner and CR expectations and perceptions: the workshop is not going to turn a green newbie into an expert CR; it is going to offer someone who has just taken on a project a broad view of what he must consider including his role and contract. I wish it had existed before my first project.

Vitality it must be seen by the owner as something to enhance the skills of the person they have hired and not an indication their CR doesn’t know his stuff. Rather, it indicates he wants to know more stuff. If it only avoided one pitfall in a project it would likely justify the cost and time. This was amply proved in the session on VTCs; the yard’s VTC cost was inaccurate, sloppy and overpriced by some 30K. The CR is advised to go away, research the quote, recalculate it (and also consider the yard cost is not the same as if he took up tools and did it) then go calmly back and renegotiate.

The course is seeking PYA accreditation and also recognition by ISS and SYBAss. It will take place in or near Flagship in Portsmouth but later go on the road near a yard to visit in perhaps Germany, The Netherlands, Italy or the USA. The first class was announced for mid March but that was over optimistic. Latest thinking is to offer the class without dates then tailor timing to suit those who sign up; likely around mid-Med season. We will of course follow up and report the reactions of the first group of real, rather than beta test, students.

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Images: istock and Tork Buckley
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