



Unknowns

Industry businesses continue to press through COVID challenges

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I know I'm supposed to be writing about some complicated naval architecture or marine engineering problem, shedding insight on how engineering geeks make difficult subjects seem easy. But it's hard to do what I "normally" do when all around me—and you—it is anything but "normal." It seems like everywhere we look, on the web, in print, on the TV and in every social media source, the only thing being talked about today is COVID-19. We simply cannot get away from it. So, I might as well add my two cents as it relates to my little piece of the maritime industry.

All over the world, there have been millions of infections, even more millions of positive tests, hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations and, sadly, hundreds of thousands of deaths. It has changed the way we live at home. It has altered the way we spend free time with our families. It has even impacted the way we work, where we work and, in some cases, if we work at all.

The full impact of this pandemic has yet to be completely felt; and as someone who is working hard to keep their business strong and continue to serve clients as they've come to expect; managing this extended crisis is not something any of us have been trained to do.

Pushing past clichés

They teach you in business school (I've never been there, but this is what I'm told happens.) that business crises, especially those that threaten the very survival of our businesses, are an opportunity for great leaders to guide their companies and employees through the minefield and generate success by steering a course away from the rocky shores, out of the storm and into the calm seas; making proverbial lemonade out of lemons. But it is not as easy as they make it out to be. The course ahead to get us through the COVID crisis seems anything but clearly defined.

We've been under various stages of lockdown and quarantine since mid-March, and as I write this, it's mid-August; five full months of some of the most disruptive time in our memory. There seems to be no end in sight.

How will we ever get back to whatever "normal" is, or was, or could be? Like most of us, I do not have any answers, but I do have tons of questions.

What we know

There are certain aspects of this COVID pandemic that are starting to show themselves. Better understanding them will be useful in helping us learn from what has happened for whenever we do get to move into the recovery phase. Here are several points for consideration:

It's always about people. Lockdown and quarantine may be a big part of how

we have managed to somewhat control the spread of COVID. However, it is not all peaches and cream. Isolating ourselves has proven what we have all known intuitively but have often taken for granted: we need each other. During the worst of the lockdown and quarantine, all we had was each other. We had to find new ways to work, new ways to relate to people, new ways to get things done. In many instances, those new ways were not nearly as effective as the old ways and, sometimes, those shortcomings caused other difficulties.

It's one thing to hold a virtual meeting with someone you know well. It is quite another to meet with someone for the first time. Building a relationship with someone new is so much better and easier in person; but when there are no other

options, we learn to make do. I am not sure this is a long-term sustainable way to foster human relationships, but we have come to accept it as status quo.

Maybe all industries think this way about themselves, but the marine industry is particularly a person-to-person business. In so many of our business relationships, whether we are buying or selling products or services, mov-

ing cargo from the mine to the mill or regulating commerce, COVID has made it impossible to continue our historically person-to-person business. While the long-term effects of a lengthy pandemic are yet to be measured, in the end, it is the person-to-person relationships that are missed the most.

It's about establishing new measuring sticks. Despite radical changes to the way we operate, and the new "normal," our business culture is still focused on how we measure success during these times. Budgets for revenue might be out the window given the disruption to business, and while expenses might be down due to less travel, the reductions have come in a painful way: through a reduction in force, to use the euphemism of corporate America.

These rapid and unforeseen changes have made it difficult not only to adjust, but to know how to adjust, and to measure the effects of those adjustments on the businesses and the people involved.

In many cases, the metric of success is simple: survival! Over the centuries, many businessowners' sole focus has been the survivability of their business.

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This unprecedented crisis has brought that reality to the forefront once again because, unfortunately, many companies will not survive this pandemic. On the one hand, we can take that to acknowledge that the capitalist system of supply and demand is working its inexorable impact on the business world. But on the other hand, and I know for me in particular, this crisis has been a valuable reminder that when it is all said and done, it is the welfare of the people in our businesses that should drive us, not the business itself.

So, whether you own a business that's working to survive, you're an employee of a company doing the same or you're a business that relies on the products and services offered by other businesses, all successful business is ultimately about people.

Doing what we can

That said, those of us in the maritime business should consider ourselves fortunate. While this might not be true across the board, the maritime industry, at least from where I sit, has not been hit nearly as hard as other segments of the economy. As an "essential" part of keeping the world from grinding completely to a halt, the maritime industry has done what it does well—despite the storms. The mariners and those who support them are doing everything they can to keep the economic engine moving forward. Perhaps a little slower than before, but at least it's moving forward.

So, whether you own a business that's working to survive, you're an employee of a company doing the same or you're a business that relies on the products and services offered by other businesses, all successful business is ultimately about people. The sooner we can return to a society that encourages, rather than discourages personal interactions, the sooner our businesses, our economy and our society will be heading in the right direction.

Stay safe, and let's all get back to normal ... soon! ■

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