

Don't Cannonball The Crew By Mike Elhihi

Stepping into a new crew as a company officer can be a lot like jumping into a swimming pool. You can ease yourself into the water, feel the temperature, and understand what is already happening around you. Or you can cannonball into the middle of it and send waves in every direction. Some officers do that intentionally because they want everyone to know there is a new captain in the house. They don't even yell "Cannnnnooonnnball!" first either.

This article is not for them. It is for the newly promoted officer who creates those same waves without realizing it. The problem with a cannonball is not just the splash. It disrupts everything that was already happening in the pool before you ever got in. No different than the firehouse.

Before Telestaff moved you, these people already had relationships built. Routines. Trust and history. You're not going to see it all on day one. It's impossible! Before you start changing things, learn the people. Start building leadership capital. Start earning the right to have meaningful conversations. You cannot understand what is happening beneath the surface if you are the one creating all the waves. This does not mean avoiding leadership. It also doesn't mean lowering your standards either. In fact, if something is unsafe, dishonest, or clearly wrong, handle it. But most of what you encounter will not come from malicious intent. It will be people doing things differently. Behavior with context that you will not have on day one .

Listen to how the crew talks. Pay attention to who they trust and who they turn to when something needs to get done. Watch them on calls, during training, and around the kitchen table. There is information everywhere. Different does not automatically mean broken. Sometimes newly promoted officers feel pressure to prove they belong in the seat. They want to make an impact. Show initiative. Put their own stamp on the crew. So they start changing routines before knowing why those routines exist.

Pause. Ask why. Find out whether something is actually causing a problem or if it is simply different from how you would do it. Most decisions do not need to be made on your first shift. You probably have a lot more discretionary time than you think.

One of the best ways to enter the water slowly is through a real expectations conversation. Not a speech where you tell everyone what you expect from them. A conversation. Ask each member what they expect from you as their officer. Ask what they expect from themselves, both professionally and personally. Side note: please don't force it on day one. Start with the most junior member so their answer is not shaped by everyone above them. Then share your expectations for the crew and what they can expect from you. Remember, expectations have two owners.

The same thing applies when people start talking about generations. It is easy to walk into a crew and immediately label people. Old school. New school. Entitled. Resistant. Lazy. Stuck in their ways. Those labels save us from doing the harder work of getting to know the person. People are people. They want to know that their voice matters, that the standard is fair, and that their officer is willing to understand them before judging them. You do not have to agree with every perspective, but you should be curious enough to hear it.

Most accidental cannonballs come from good intentions. You are excited. You have ideas. You want to prove you are ready. But please slow down. Learn the people. Understand the relationships. Ask why before assuming something needs to change. Then lead. Not because you are afraid to make waves, but because you should understand what you are moving before you move it. You do not need to announce your arrival. They saw the schedule. And if there was still any doubt, they saw you!