

# Seaways

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The International Journal of The Nautical Institute

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*Articles in Seaways are the opinion of the author and do not necessarily represent the view of The Nautical Institute*

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# Strengthening maritime organisational health

What do you really know about your own organisation – and why does it matter?

Stephen Pennicott, James Morley-Kirk

The Blue

In last month's *Seaways*, John Lloyd, CEO of The Nautical Institute, introduced the ongoing collaboration between The Nautical Institute Foundation and The Blue. This partnership looks at how improving organisational health can boost maritime performance and resilience.

In this article, we look at what that means in practice – how greater visibility and seafarer participation can create new advantages for maritime organisations now and in the future.

## The leadership challenge

*'How do we build strong, high-performing companies in a world that's constantly shifting beneath our feet?'*

Maritime organisations today face many pressures: tighter environmental regulations, economic and political uncertainties, rapid technological changes and shifting workforce expectations. Together, these pressures shape a significant leadership challenge.

Traditionally, shipping has relied on stability, control, and strict operational processes. Many current mindsets, systems, and organisational cultures reflect that heritage, from the types of data we collect to the way we implement changes. Now, the question is whether these approaches remain adequate for today's fast changing industry.

## What is organisational health?

Many sectors facing similar challenges have turned to the idea of 'organisational health'. McKinsey defines this as a company's ability to achieve immediate performance targets while also adapting continuously for future success. It's broader than basic employee satisfaction – organisational health links leadership, structures, and talent management into one interdependent system.

Research suggests that organisations with strong organisational health enjoy a lasting competitive edge. Critically, organisational health arises from factors leaders can influence directly, such as how teams work together and how decisions are made. This is far more within a leader's control than external market conditions.

## A maritime-specific approach

While some industries have adopted organisational health frameworks, the maritime sector has been slower to do so – perhaps because there was no model tailored to its unique demands. To address this gap, The Blue partnered with The Nautical Institute Foundation to develop a maritime-friendly approach, incorporating existing research, industry consultations, and pilot studies.

## Four core areas + One Essential Outcome

The Blue's maritime model focuses on four interlinked areas and asks some critical leadership questions:

- **Guide:** How aligned is the organisation around shared goals? Do structures and systems support efficient, safe operations?
- **Engage:** Do culture, leadership, and talent management help seafarers perform at their best?
- **Deliver:** Do we have the individual and team capabilities needed to achieve sustainable high performance, while ensuring safety and environmental stewardship?
- **Adapt:** How well does the organisation learn, innovate, and renew itself over time?

Together, these four areas define an organisation's day-to-day health. However, The Blue's approach adds a crucial outcome measure:

- **Impact:** To what degree are our people both able and willing to continue in their work?

In other words, *Impact* reveals whether employees are energised or drained by the organisation's ways of working. Do they feel supported and motivated – or are they becoming disengaged? By highlighting *Impact* directly, leaders can see if short-term success is coming at the expense of long-term wellbeing.



## The need for visibility

*'How much insight do leaders currently have into their organisation's overall health?'*

Maritime organisations already collect plenty of data – performance metrics, safety audits, compliance records, and engagement surveys. However, these measures are often top-down and fragmented, and rarely show the full reality for seafarers.



Because organisational health affects every person onboard, an online survey is a straightforward way to capture the ‘lived’ experience. Yet standard surveys can be too administrative, limiting both engagement and depth of feedback. Strengthening organisational health requires an approach that values seafarers’ authentic voices and fosters genuine professional dialogue amongst different ranks, departments and nationalities.

### Participative change

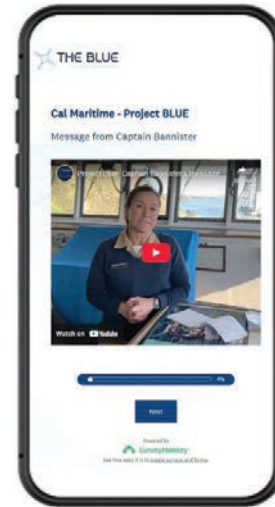
*‘Most assessments are done to employees. The Blue works with them.’*

Industry research suggests several ways for achieving superior organisational health (see graphic, below); one is ‘participative improvement’. This is the path The Blue follows. Rather than merely collecting data, we involve cross-functional teams in all project stages – mobilisation, surveying, exploration, and reporting.



By engaging people from different roles and ranks, we generate deeper insights and build shared ownership. The survey itself goes beyond ‘yes/no’ questions and rating scales, inviting participants to comment on daily challenges and opportunities for change. This approach takes a little more preparation, but it generates positive momentum even before any final report is released.

The aim is for a project that not only diagnoses issues but also begins to improve them. The process of sharing personal insights, discussing cultural factors, and proposing solutions helps build connections and trust – key elements of organisational health itself.



The Blue’s survey uses customised client videos to engage with seafarers

### Rich insights

The Blue’s survey delivers a wealth of first-hand evidence. Quantitative data is complemented by many opportunities for seafarers to speak pragmatically on operational issues. This helps go beyond reductive scores and captures authentic human voices.

For example, when exploring company culture, we ask participants to name the behaviours that are encouraged and discouraged. We then illustrate the results as word clouds. These visualisations often highlight key values like *teamwork*, *safety*, *communication*, and *responsibility*, showing at a glance what truly matters within the organisation.

From the various open-text questions in the survey, for every 100 participants, we typically receive around 600 specific comments on strengths, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. These contributions can range from praising high-functioning systems to pointing out missing tools or recommending ways to enhance safety and environmental practices. Such professional engagement is a very positive sign – people care enough to offer concrete feedback, which can be turned into actionable insights.



### Pilot projects

The Blue has piloted this approach with leading maritime organisations including BW Group and Anglo-Eastern, refining the approach, questions, and methodology based on direct feedback. The pilots confirmed the power of inviting seafarers to share their experiences. Projects with the California State Maritime Academy and Columbia Shipmanagement are also under way.

*'This is a good tool for company improvement and for the crew to speak up freely.'* Senior Officer, BW Group.

At California State Maritime, cadets are using The Blue's framework to improve operations on the training ship Golden Bear – while using the organisational health framework and process as a vehicle for building leadership skills they'll use throughout their careers.

*'It's really nice to be asked about our actual work experiences.'* Cadet, Cal Maritime.

Meanwhile, Columbia Shipmanagement is investigating how cadets and newly graduated officers experience life at sea, viewing them as the future of maritime. Early meetings ensured the survey would be relevant to cadets' daily realities and encouraged them to speak up. The consultations in the initial 'mobilisation' phase of the project have been especially useful in clarifying the context and approach to engaging their cadet population.

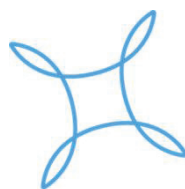
### Moving forwards, together

'Organisational health' offers a robust framework for maritime companies striving to adapt amid rapid changes. The Blue has crafted a practical, participative method that delivers insights at both strategic and operational levels, revealing how to strengthen leadership, culture, and performance – while supporting seafarers' wellbeing and retention.

Although current projects focus on seafarers, shore-based teams will soon follow. In line with The Nautical Institute's commitment to knowledge-sharing, we plan to share ongoing findings, real-life case studies, and trends emerging from current and future projects. We also look forward to collaborating with international researchers and academic institutions on deeper explorations of organisational health in maritime contexts.

We invite you to help shape the future of maritime organisational health. To learn more, run a Blue project in your company, or collaborate on research, please contact The Nautical Institute or email Stephen Pennicott on [s.pennicott@the-blue.org](mailto:s.pennicott@the-blue.org)

By giving seafarers a voice and examining how leadership, culture, and operations come together, maritime organisations can find hidden opportunities, boost performance, and become more resilient – whatever the future brings. 🌐



# THE BLUE

ORGANISATIONAL HEALTH

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