

RNLI – Management Command and Communication

Objectives

As the major national maritime search and rescue organisation in the British Isles and Republic of Ireland, dedicated to saving lives at sea, the RNLI charity really does need its local managers to display first-class communication and conflict management skills. This is so that when the volunteer crews are called for duty there is strong clarity of purpose and direction amongst both the afloat crew and shore-based volunteers and staff. Since 2007 we have delivered training in Communication and Conflict Management skills for operational staff and volunteers (Coxswains, Mechanics and senior crew) from lifeboat stations across the UK and ROI.

Approach

We worked closely with both the RNLI Operations Department and HR and Training Department to design a highly practical, engaging 1-day session, including group exercises, interactive drama scenarios and skills practice.

We kicked off the sessions with a series of punchy exercises designed to create engagement, and highlight important communication skills in a very practical way. One of the key challenges is that full-time Coxswains and Mechanics work hand in hand with volunteer crew members, requiring management sensitivity. Equally, volunteer Lifeboat Operations Managers, Coxswains and Mechanics can find themselves in unfamiliar management situations. Through research and discussion (including our team going out on lifeboats during crew training sessions) we developed realistic interactive drama scenarios that resonated strongly with the participants, enabling them to reflect on and debate how to best handle different conflict situations.

In the latter part of the day we work in smaller groups to practice participants' bespoke situations in a safe and supportive environment. Participants often find this the most challenging and rewarding part of the day, having the opportunity to practice a difficult conversation specific to them and to receive constructive feedback from the actor-facilitator and from their peers.

Our training is part of a 5-day course – and we have worked closely with the RNLI and the other providers to ensure consistency and avoid duplication. For example, one of our scenarios links directly into an Intelligent Leadership model that has been introduced earlier in the week. We have had regular feedback discussions with the training team and have adapted the content of the course, including developing the content to meet the needs of the Launching Authorities (LAs - station managers who authorise the launching of a lifeboat). We have been able to design and deliver a revised version of the course which fully speaks to the LAs needs and issues alongside the full-time Coxswains and Mechanics.

Outcomes

Our practical and engaging drama-based training ensures that participants increase their confidence and their ability to manage conflict effectively. We regularly get excellent feedback and participant comments which remark on how valuable the drama-based input has been. Adrian Carey, RNLI Staff Officer Operations (Training), who is responsible for maintaining RNLI operational training standards says of the course: *“The feedback from the course members is always so positive following the Steps sessions. These complex topics are not always the sort of subjects that are easy to broach but the lessons and guidance are imparted in such an engaging and collaborative manner that even the most reticent soon find it a comfortable environment in which to participate and engage. It is great fun, well researched and has had many hardened lifeboat crew convinced that the actors are real lifeboat crew themselves”*

And one participant recalls:

‘We have all been in a situation that we could have handled better. You rarely get the chance to rehearse conversations. The Steps session has given me the confidence to ask difficult questions.’