

A Culture of Compassion

West Member Wallenius Wilhelmsen has a strong reputation for supporting its crew members. Waypoints takes a closer look at the company's crew welfare policies.

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Wallenius Wilhelmsen controls 130 vessels which operate on 15 trade routes to six continents, and its workforce encompasses an estimated 2,700 seafarers. However, one of the most impressive statistics of all is that its crew retention rate is a massive 99.7%.

"When I talk to other companies which are in more or less the same business as us, they're happy if they have 70% retention," says Capt. Filip Svensson, Senior Safety, Quality & Security Manager, Marine Operations, Wallenius Wilhelmsen. "This shows to me that we take good care of our crews, that they feel safe and know they will receive support."

So what exactly does the company do in practical terms to achieve such results regarding crew welfare? A culture of compassion, starting at the top, has been a core principle from the very beginning, says Kristin Schjødt Bitnes, SVP Legal & Compliance & General Counsel, Wallenius Wilhelmsen. "It's important to point out that Wallenius Wilhelmsen has a long history of taking care of seafarers and employees too," she observes. "We're very different from other companies because we have such a strong, dynamic and deeply embedded support structure for our crews. It is our policy to ask how crew members in need are doing, to ask ourselves what we have done for their families, and to ascertain what we are doing as ongoing support."

COVID-secure

The pandemic has understandably been a critical trigger regarding crew mental health. This topic quickly became a pivotal concern both within and beyond the maritime industry, when travel restrictions prevented many seafarers from either getting on or off vessels. The image of crew members stranded on ships for months on end proved potent and emotive, but Wallenius Wilhelmsen's staff confronted this harrowing state of affairs rapidly and proactively.

The company is a leading member of the Norwegian Shipowners Association (NSA), and at the start of the pandemic all major NSA members agreed to meet up virtually on a weekly basis to discuss what they had learned throughout the preceding days and share best practices on how to handle the situation.

As a means of making cargo transfer operations in port as COVID-secure as possible, a ship-shore safety checklist was drawn up for vessel and terminal operators. This constituted an extensive series of precautionary measures including restricting the number of essential shore personnel boarding vessels or crew visiting the terminal to a pre-arranged minimum.

For crew members prevented from leaving their vessels because of regional restrictions and company policies, Wallenius Wilhelmsen supplied extra bandwidth for satellite communications, enabling them to stay in touch with loved ones on land. Conversely, there was an issue with relief crews stuck at home: "The challenge is that many seafarers aren't permanent employees," says Capt. Svensson, "which means they don't get a rolling salary; if you're on board, you earn money. If you're at home, you don't."

"We quickly realised that those who had to stay home for a long time would soon run into financial problems," he continues. "As a result, we offered them free loans so they could receive a salary when they were at home, and when they were back at work this would be repaid in small amounts each month."

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Best practices

A key factor was the early realisation that certain aspects of the company's infrastructure had to be reorganised to reflect the all-pervading nature of the crisis. "This is the first situation of this magnitude that we've ever faced," muses Capt. Svensson. "We've had tsunamis, but they have only affected certain parts of the world. With COVID, everyone was and is affected. So we set up an online portal on our home page where our customers could see what we were doing to protect personnel, employees and customers. Instead of getting emails they'd be redirected to that page so they could see exactly what our pandemic actions and initiatives were."

The Wilhelmsen Task Force was also mobilised, taking best practices from ports all over the world and working proactively to streamline global processes and procedures. As part of this activity, an interactive online map of COVID-19 Global Port Restrictions was created (see COVID-19 Global Port Restrictions Map (www.wilhelmsen.com) which enables users to click on a port or country and find out at a glance what the legal requirements are within that area, whether the spread of COVID-19 is increasing or decreasing, whether it's possible to receive a vaccination, and so on. "This was shared with all companies, and that was really helpful for the industry," Capt. Svensson remarks.

Wallenius Wilhelmsen and several other members of the NSA (in tandem with the IMO) have been influencing authorities in different countries to align local rules, accommodating crew welfare elements such as limiting time on board and maximising the potential for changeovers, etc. Here again, the focus on mental health is paramount. "We have had a few cases where crew members have exhibited the onset of mental problems," reflects Capt. Svensson. "I think people have become better at detecting those small nuances: we've had a lot of training on this in officer and crew seminars. In the cases we've had, we'll have meetings with the relevant persons online, making sure they're being properly taken care of and not being left on their own. We'll also seek advice from local physicians and try to get those crew members ashore as soon as possible."

Health insurance

Wallenius Wilhelmsen also supports its crews by paying for a health insurance scheme which covers families with up to four children. “Since we buy the insurance in such large volume, we get very low premiums,” Capt. Svensson explains. “As an example, let’s say we pay \$500 a year: but if any individual took out that insurance, it would cost them \$5,000. It’s reassuring, therefore, for them to know that if something happened to them on board, their family would be well looked after.”

The company has even set up its own vaccination program for seafarers in Baltimore. “Some of our local employees had family members who worked at the hospital,” Capt. Svensson adds, “so we set up an agreement with them to come on board and vaccinate all the crew. We’ve paid for between 800 and 900 crew to be vaccinated just in Baltimore alone, and that has been extremely appreciated by crew members from countries such as the Philippines, India and Myanmar, where the rate of vaccination is extremely slow. We have also lobbied the WHO very strongly to make seafarers among the first to get vaccinated in these countries.”

The example set by the likes of Wallenius Wilhelmsen is driving a wider understanding of the vital role played by seafarers, who enable the international trading of food, medicines and countless other commodities to continue. Global trade and the lifestyle we all enjoy depends on them.



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