

## INSIDE VIEW:

# BUILDING A TEAM OF CONFIDENCE

## A CONVERSATION WITH CAPTAIN RUNE JOHNSEN MASTER OF GRANDEUR OF THE SEAS

by

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Captain Rune Johnsen does not give the typical welcome aboard speech at the Captain's Welcome Aboard Reception. Instead, he points out that only 25 feet of Grandeur of the Seas lies below the water and asks the audience to think about why the ship does not tip over. He then proceeds to explain that because all of the machinery, fuel, and stores are located in the hull the ship's center of gravity is quite low and the ship remains stable.

"One of the things that I find so fascinating about this profession - - cruising - - is that you get to work a lot with people who have never been at sea before. They do not know what the ship is about. I enjoy putting things into very simple terms. First, try to catch the attention of the crowd and then give them something for their buck so that when they walk out of the room, although it is a cocktail party, they understand a little bit about what the ship is about. It just scratches the surface of what is going on but they have some understanding of it. It brings another dimension in for them."

The native of Trondheim, Norway is mas-

ter of Grandeur of the Seas, a Vision class ship built for Royal Caribbean International in 1996. While still a large ship, at 74,000 tons, Grandeur is much smaller than RCI's more recent ships like Freedom of the Seas (150,000 tons) and the new Oasis of the Seas (220,000 tons). However, Captain Johnsen likes the relative intimacy of his ship. "You get an amount of guests that you can deal with and that you can get around with and meet and greet. I like to have my personal touch on things. I like to walk around and meet somebody for the second time and recognize them. For me, that feels good and I think it must be a feel good for the guests as well because they have just been recognized by the captain."

His admiration for his ship extends to her technological qualities as well. "The Vision class, the ships are very, very good ships. [Grandeur] is very safe. This [ship has] a rock-sturdy stability. [She is] very strong, stronger than you will find on many later ships." This is in part due to the fact that she is all steel construction as opposed to the more recent approach of combining a steel hull with an aluminum superstructure.



While the more recent RCI ships utilize azipod propulsion systems in which the ship is both propelled and steered by rotating pods suspended below the hull, Grandeur has two propeller shafts and conventional rudders. "She is a very responsive ship. She can take quite a lot of wind into the side. We can lift into 25 knots of wind and that is good for a ship with conventional propulsion. An azipod ship will be stronger in the side-ways maneuver but she handles very well. She provides a smooth ride. She stops very quickly - - amazing hull and layout for the hydrodynamics."

RCI continually upgrades the equipment on the bridge. As a result, "in terms of electronic aids, there is a fleet wide standard that all the ships meet, even the [Sovereign] ships, have that equipment."

The configuration of the bridge is different however. "Onboard here we have more of a conventional, traditional bridge where you have the chart console, then you have the maneuvering console up front, the damage control console to one side. So, it is more split into consoles here. On the [Radiance, Voyager and Freedom classes] there is this center with the radar screens sitting [around it]. It is a different generation. You still have the same aides, they are just not presented in the same way."

### *Style of Command*

"I don't do many of the maneuvers here, very, very few. I have my officers training on that. Docking today, the staff captain took care of that one. Tomorrow, the chief officer is going to take her off the dock and bring us out of here. Getting down to the Caribbean, it is going to be some first officers practicing down there. So you see I don't get to do much," Johnsen says with a laugh.

"I only do complicated maneuvers with factors like current and wind making things difficult. I'm the one who takes care of that. So, really mostly it is just officers up there. [For example,] I don't spend all the time on the bridge going up Chesapeake Bay to Baltimore, [which is a nine hour trip]. The senior navigation officers stand watches. Of course, as the responsible party, I need to do all the legs associated with higher risk. [Similarly], when we did the approach to the Dockyard [in Bermuda], I was on the bridge all the time because it is shallow waters and we do have reefs around us."

Delegating tasks to others is often harder



*Captain Rune Johnsen*

than doing them oneself. "For everything that they do up there, I do it a hundred times in my head before they get to do it. It is like allowing your 15 year old to drive your car. It is more wearing but it is a good thing because the benefit is to have a team with confidence up there - - a team that feels that they are doing something, that they know the ship if something happens. I think that is very important."

"It is all about breeding a culture of well-trained officers that have confidence - - confidence in raising concerns at any time about anything. We work as a team up there. It is not like back in the sailing ship time where the captain was the only one who had anything to say about what was happening. These are skilled officers who are used to handling the ship. Everyone is fully versed. In my eyes, that reduces the risk of anything [bad] happening."

"[The officers on the bridge] have various areas of responsibility [and] focus heavily on their responsibilities. My job [is to] oversee that they are





taking care of their responsibilities. We have a navigation policy that trains everyone into the same way of thinking, same way of communicating. What you would see if you were up there [on the bridge] is a very structured operation where everyone is talking and feeding information about what is going on. That is based upon pre-determined areas of responsibility."

In the end, however, the bridge is not a democracy. "The captain's word is law. It [must be] obeyed regardless."

As master of the ship, Captain Johnsen is ultimately responsible for all aspects of the ship's operation, not just navigation. His managerial approach to these other operations again relies on teamwork. "The way that we work here in our company is that we manage the ships by executive committee where the captain has the chief engineer, HR manager, hotel director and staff captain as part of the management committee. All decisions are debated together in meetings and addressed by [people who] are professionals in their fields. Like the hotel director and all of his division heads are specialists in their fields. Some years ago, a captain actually went out and made his own decision based on his own experience. Today, these decisions are more educated and more thoroughly debated prior to execution or a plan is made. I think that is a very good way to do it."

"Of course, there are a lot of decisions resting with the captain and he is the authority onboard

related to safety and the safe operation of the ship [but] the specialty stuff is debated by the executive committee."

Passenger ship captains are mariners who come to command through the navigation department. Captain Johnsen explained that they learn about a ship's other departments through observation and experience. "You do not get to join the company as a captain. We do not do that. You may be a captain but if you get a job in the company, you are going to start at a lower position and work your [way up through the ranks]. That gives you time to absorb through the different positions what the operation is supposed to be like. And then when you finally become the captain, you will have that knowledge."

"I became a captain in September 2007 onboard the Sovereign of the Seas. I was very anxious about that. [However,] I actually found it to be very, very easy. I fell in very naturally to the environment and it was not too much of a challenge. Of course, it is not easy to step into those shoes but once you actually take that step and if you have your preparation done by working your way through the ranks, it actually feels natural."

"Perhaps the most difficult part was meeting and greeting the guests, entertaining and so on because that is one of those things that you do not really get a chance to practice very much because you are so busy in your duties in the other jobs leading up to be the captain. But it comes along



easy. Give it a chance, catch your breath and just push forward and there you are."

With modern communications, ship captains are no longer entirely on their own when the ship leaves port. Numerous e-mails with advice and directions come from the home office. "Nobody likes to be managed but to a certain extent we have to be managed in order to allow ourselves not to become too confluent in things. It is a good tool as well because a set of eyes that is not hooked up in the ship can actually see something obvious that we just don't see."

There are also written policies and manuals to follow. However, within the limitations set forth by these documents there is still room for a captain to imprint his own character upon the ship. "To be able to feel free to apply the qualities that you have to improve whatever needs improvement I think is a good thing."

"There are different ways of doing things and within our company there are different approaches to many issues. I have very good feedback on my methods. When I get the feedback from the guests and also from the crew surveys, I know that even though I may not be 1000 percent correct all the time, at least I am headed down the right direction with regard to creating that atmosphere."

"I think this is all about the way that you treat your crew - - supporting them, in having them feel comfortable in having you around, to [have them] feel that they are part of a team and not just individuals struggling hard out there. That allows them to drop their shoulders and take a liking to what they are doing and develop a sense of pride in their duties and their jobs. In having an atmosphere like that, they will go out and they will meet the guests as relaxed, harmonic people. Flash a natural smile and greet the guests in a natural way."

"Creating an atmosphere like that is a focused effort for me.. I work very, very hard for the crew to make them feel good about what they are doing. I have been at sea for 30 years now. I have seen most of what can be seen. I have seen good ways and I have seen bad ways and I have found the path that I want to follow in creating that harmony onboard. I get feedback all the time from the guests about how pleased they are with everything. It is a good feedback."

"I think this is something natural, something that is with you. and if this was not one of my qualities, I would make the crew members uncomfortable in their jobs. They would have very high

respect [for me] but they would also have fear and how can you expect people to perform at their peak under conditions like that? I don't think that is possible. So better keep everything rolling with a smile, take the challenges as they come on, I think is the best way."

Captain Johnsen also believes the fact that Grandeur's officers are a mix of different nationalities is an asset. "Back in the old days, we had two branches of Royal Caribbean. There was one international branch and there was a Norwegian branch. We had some Norwegian-flagged ships and we had some internationally-flagged ships. The internationally-flagged ships, had a mix of nationalities. The Norwegian-flagged ships, due to regulations, had to have Norwegian officers. The fact is that those two branches performed equally well. The advantage I see of having an international crowd is that you learn a better understanding for each other. You respect each other to a higher degree and you become more a part of the shipboard environment across divisions and departments because you are used to working with and having fun with mixed nationalities. We have to work with each other. The common objective is to do a job right."

