



What If?

by Capt. Bob Cerullo

What if you as the Captain of a power or sail boat were suddenly disabled or become unconscious? Would your spouse or shipmate know what to do?

If there is one absolutely hard and fast certainty with regard to boats and boating, it is that nothing is absolutely certain. From the weather to the fuel supply, nothing can be taken for granted. To that end smart boaters frequently scan the sky ahead and behind, check their weather radios, install back up deep cycle batteries, invest in an EPIRB etc. Yet far too many boaters overlook the very real possibility that one day the "captain" could become injured, have a heart attack, stroke or other debilitating event and become unable to operate the boat. In many cases the responsibility for getting the boat under control, bringing it back to the dock or simply calling for help; falls to the Captain's spouse or first mate.

Training your spouse or shipmate to take over in the event an emergency should develop starts with having them take an approved a safe boating class where they will learn the basics of safe boat handling, an understanding of ATONs (Aids to navigation better known as buoys) and an appreciation of boat operating. That, is only the beginning. Next

there needs to be a plan were the spouse actually practices operating the boat in tight quarters or in an emergency situation. It doesn't take a skilled mariner to steer a boat in open water and even to navigate through the reds and greens. But it does take training to know how to bring the throttles to idle and shift the boat into neutral. While that may seem routine to the Captain, for a person who has never done it nor has ever been taught which levers are the throttle and which the forward and reverse gears, it can be frightening. Labeling the controls will avoid confusion.

Let's say the Captain has a heart attack and falls over the rail while attempting to secure a line. Would the person at the helm know what to do in a MOB or man overboard situation? Would they know how to activate the MOB function of their GPS? Would they know how to immediately call for help on the VHF radio? More basically would they know how to stop the boat and where to find the throwable PFDs they would need to save the person in the

water? Unfortunately it is part of the human condition to tend to not think about the What ifs when everything is going smoothly. You might be boating for 30 years and never have had the occasion to call



Teach your first mate to run the boat

for help or experience a boating emergency. The truth is an emergency can occur at any time and usually happens when you least expect it. Say for example the captain was disabled because of a collision with rocks that had disabled the engines. The first mate should know how to drop the anchor then call for help.

Would your first mate know where to find the first aid kit? Would they know how to contact the U.S. Coast Guard should the injured Captain needed to be helicoptered off the boat and taken to a hospital? Would they know how to read the GPS to give the Coast guard the latitude and longitude of the boat so it can be found quickly? Would your first mate be able to accurately locate the boat and relay that information to the Coast guard or nearby boats, could make the difference between the victim living or dying.

WHAT YOU CAN DO.

As the Captain you know what to do in an emergency. What you need to do is to educate your first mate to do exactly what you would do. That starts with teaching your first mate the handle the boat right from the moment you leave the dock. Designate days when you don't have any guest to distract you, first mate training days. Remember the first mate could be your wife, your girl friend, your son, your daughter or a friend who frequently accompanies you on your boat. The basic idea is to have a back up Captain who can handle the boat. Often the Captain's ego interferes with his or her training someone in the skills they have in boat handling. You need to put ego aside and concentrate on the practical matter that anyone can have a stroke, a heart attack, a fall or get hit by the boom and become unconscious.

Be patient, you didn't learn to dock a boat in

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one day so try to understand that your first mate will need to learn how to judge the wind, control the engine or engines, furl the sails and maneuver the boat safely. You need to be sure the basics like "red on right returning" are well understood by your first mate. Think of how dangerous it could be should you suffer a stroke and your spouse takes over to get you back to shore only to misread the ATONS and wind up on a sandbar or worse hit the rocks.

Once the first mate is comfortable with operating the boat and you have set up a routine where the first mate is put in command on a regular basis, it is time to move on to more skills. The first mate should know where the life preservers are stored, where to find the throwables or where the emergency

flares are kept and how to use them. The first mate needs to be made familiar with the GPS. They need to learn how to hit the MOB button, how to determine where they are and how to follow the course on the GPS. They need to be taught how to use the GPS to find their way back to the dock. They must be able to determine latitude and longitude.



The first mate needs to know how to drop the anchor.

AVOID PANIC

For an inexperienced first mate, Panic is the real threat. Understandably a person who is suddenly responsible for operating a power or sail boat at sea while at the same time worried about the condition of the captain is a prime candidate for panic. The way to avoid the anxiety of operating the boat is to do it regularly. Making operating the boat routine reduces the anxiety on the first mate so they can better handle the anxiety of the emergency situation. There is nothing ever routine about your husband or wife suddenly being incapacitated. That will cause anxiety but, routinely operating the boat will relieve the first mate of the anxiety that would come from having to try to handle the boat for the first time.

It would be a good idea for every boat

owner to take a CPR and First Aid course in addition to an approved boating safety course. No matter how you talk about it or try preparing for an emergency, actually being able to stop the bleeding or perform CPR while you wait for the Coast Guard EMTs is a great asset that could save a life. While you are preparing for an emergency it also

would be a good time to prepare a "Go Bag" with all the things you won't have time to find should you suddenly have to abandon ship. Your first mate and everyone aboard should know where to find the go bag.

The US Coast Guard Auxiliary offers a class called Suddenly In Command designed to instruct the person most likely to be face with running the boat what to do should the Captain become

disabled. Certainly taking the SIC class is a good start but it is only the beginning. Your first mate needs to become comfortable handling the boat, calling the Coast Guard, using the GPS, using the compass and reading a chart. They need to do it on a regular basis. One of the smartest things to do is to have your own MOB drills. Put your first mate at the helm and unexpectedly throw a dummy overboard. Actually have your first mate control the boat to bring it around to safely retrieve the dummy. Who knows, heaven forbid that dummy could one day be you.

You can find the location of Suddenly In Command classes in your area by simply googling "suddenly in command" or by contacting your local Coast Guard Auxiliary or Power Squadron flotillas.



Instruct your spouse in the use of the GPS.

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