Knowing the Ropes
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“The Captain, who had been on the coast before and ‘knew the ropes,’ took the steering oar, and we went off in the same ways as the other boat.”

“One of them, an old salt, who had seen something more of the world ashore, set all to rights, as he thought, — ‘Oh, vast there! — You don’t know anything about them craft. I’ve seen them colleges and know the ropes. They keep all such things for cur’osities, and study ’em, and have men a ’purpose to go and get ’em.”

Lessons from the High Seas

“Knowing the ropes,” a maritime cliché suggesting experiential learning that provides insider knowledge learned over time and recognized by seasoned experts as the right way to do the job, also applies to our contemporary workplaces. A leader who has learned by the ropes can be trusted by others in the team to know all the ins and outs of a skill or a profession and lead well. It further denotes someone with no knowledge learning a new skill or profession through experience.

Although Richard Henry Dana Jr.’s quote above juxtaposes knowledge “by the ropes” with learning acquired in college, the term also suggests knowledge shared by all in the workplace for the greater good of the enterprise.

In a recent biography by former Chief Justice of the Vermont Supreme Court Jeffrey L. Amestoy, Slavish Shore, The Odyssey of Richard Henry Dana, Jr., one sees through Dana’s eyes how learning by the ropes provides lessons for our work in the academy, and indeed, even addresses issues dividing our Republic. I had read Dana’s Two Years Before the Mast when in high school. Enveloped in my boyhood dreams of sailing the high seas, I had little inkling that lessons of Catholic Social Thought or managing through the mission lurked within its pages. Amestoy’s biography, however, sent me back to re-read Dana, where I found critical lessons for our times.

Dana, born into a Revolutionary War family, entered Harvard University as one of the Boston Brahmin elite. In his sophomore year, struck by a bout of measles that weakened his eyesight, he dropped out. In 1824, at age 19, he signed on as a sailor, writing, “There is not so helpless and pitiable object in the world as a landsman beginning a sailor’s life.” He proudly learns the ropes and soon earns the confidence of the entire crew as he throws himself into the daily routine. His tale reveals the life of the diverse crew from many parts of the world. They must trust one another as they undertake dangerous work and learn to survive despite poor food and sleeping quarters beset with leaks that let in the crashing waves.

When Dana returned to shore and his health had improved, he reentered Harvard and eventually graduated from law school, opening his law practice in 1840. Within months, his office was flooded with sailors seeking relief from wage theft and other indignities from a life at sea. Shipping out for two or more years at sea, sailors would often suffer wage-theft at the hands of captains and ship owners.

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If brought to court, the captain’s word prevailed against that of an uneducated sailor. Other attorneys, seeking higher and steadier compensation from merchants and owners, refused to take their cases, but the sailors found an advocate in Dana.

He knew the sailor’s life by the ropes. He also knew the unregulated power of a ship captain at sea could lead to abuses. Good captains tempered their power to gain the loyalty of a crew. Dana did not doubt the need for order, given the dangerous work, and believed deeply in the supreme power of the captain. But he also knew that many captains did not possess the self-discipline to control unlimited power. Bad captains lost the faith of the crew and soon found work poorly done, tasks unfinished, and crew productivity lost.

Dana had also witnessed the flogging of two sailors, merely for challenging the captain’s authority. Dana saw how class, education, and culture undermined legal procedures and denied the dignity of some by disregarding their testimony while giving credibility to the one in power.

**Bridging Divisions, Honoring Dignity**

Dana’s example raises the question of whether we fully know the ropes of our own institutions. Universities are often critiqued as having silos when departments specialize in one area of learning and know little of the substance of another nor the culture that surrounds that learning style. Do we not also have hierarchical silos within our departments? Does a tenured department chair working long hours as an exempt employee know that the administrative assistant — a single parent and employee-at-will — must leave by five to pick up a child before daycare closes? Does an exempt manager who often puts in long hours understand that the receptionist cannot arrive any earlier because the daycare does not open any sooner?

Certainly, these are not identical problems to reefing a sail as a storm rises around Cape Horn, but tensions arise in the contemporary workplace when we do not know — by the ropes — the demands of different jobs in the workplace. Bullying allegedly impacts one in six workers in this nation. Despite our best attempts, some of those workers are undoubtedly employed at universities and colleges. Bullies frequently beat the system because, while they are bullying downward, they are often self-servingly reporting upward. Will the procedures set in place by human resources fairly determine if a person is being bullied when credibility issues are determined by power imbalances?

In the last column that he wrote for *Update*, Gary Miller stressed the benefits of community in the workplace, noting that Catholic Social Thought emphasizes how humans flourish in the workplace when dignity is respected and community emphasized. We also know that divisions within the community can decrease productivity and well-being for everyone. Dana knew community. He lived and worked with sailors through storms and through clear blue water. He knew the challenges when bad leaders and outside forces threatened the safety of the ship and the crew. And he saw how a community in which dignity was honored despite differences in education or class fostered harmony, safety, and productivity in which everyone could share.

Dana went on to a remarkable career (one which I recommend you learn about by reading the book) and his lessons in dignity expand beyond sailing. He lived and worked in the tumultuous antebellum United States when society was fractured by law and by differing mores. His knowledge of life on board ship, including the terror of
flogging, inspired him to defend fugitive slaves running from the tragedy of slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act required that runaway slaves be returned to their purported owners. Dana, consumed with the horror of seeing a man be flogged, knew the horror of slavery in ways that many in the North could not. He knew the slave, like the sailor, was a human being, created in the image of God. He defended fugitive slaves and those who assisted them. Daniel Webster, then secretary of state, argued that fugitive slave laws preserved the Union and called Dana’s actions in defending slaves treason. Although not a Roman Catholic, by knowing the ropes, Dana demonstrated what Catholic Social Thought teaches about a preferential option for the poor and what St. Vincent DePaul invoked about solidarity with the vulnerable. Dana was not a perfect man — he possessed some of the erroneous prejudices of his time — but he knew the ropes. That, combined with his moral fiber, led him to advocate for those in need.

We live in tumultuous times. Our universities and colleges are institutions that sustain society while we also challenge society to its better purposes so that all within it may flourish. We must ask ourselves, do we live in silos, or do we engage those not privileged with our resources? Are we protected by institutions regulated by law or procedures that leave others on the outside and unprotected? Do we have internal procedures that seem fair on the surface, but give credibility to those with privilege, at the expense of those that do not know the ropes?

Challenge yourself to learn the ropes of another culture, of those whose views may disagree with your own, or of another group of employees at your institution. Perhaps, like Richard Henry Dana, Jr., it will change your life.

The opinions expressed in this column are the author’s alone and do not represent those of DePaul University or the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

We invite you to respond to this column through the Human Resources and Mission blog. This will permit a fuller discussion of how mission and CST influence the employment process.