

Coxswains at the Helm

There is regular confusion from the field about what role coxswains play in vessel operation, especially while they are being evaluated by a Qualification Examiner (QE).

The following is adapted from a message that all QEs received in 2005 (updated for the 2007 changes in currency requirements). If you are getting conflicting or different information from a QE, please let me (D1NR QE Coordinator) know directly. The concept here is that QEs must be able to see and evaluate the seamanship skills of coxswains. The concept is simple, and doesn't need bureaucratic specification.

The SO-MTs should see that the flotillas and mentors and candidates understand this message. SO-OPs should see that coxswains and non-coxswain operational facility owners understand this message. DCP/VCPs can assist by providing leadership on the need for quality in our coxswain training and qualification.

"Direct or operate?"

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A coxswain is expected to be able to demonstrate significant seamanship skills. Understanding vessel characteristics, effects of wind and current, and towing dynamics are all part of the necessary skill set.

Normally, these skills are observed while a candidate operates their own operational facility while simultaneously directing their crew.

However, not all coxswains own an operational facility.

The issue: how does a coxswain candidate demonstrate seamanship skills when operating a facility they do not own? Does the coxswain direct a helmsman or operate the helm of the vessel themselves?

A common situation arises when a coxswain operates somebody else's facility: the facility owner takes the helm. The coxswain "directs" activities.

The problem is that often the facility owner/helmsman takes over nearly the entire seamanship role from the coxswain (more common on larger facilities).

The QE is signing, as a result of the check ride, that the coxswain candidate possesses the necessary seamanship skills. The QE must insist that the candidate demonstrate these skills to the QE's satisfaction. If the coxswain is not handling the boat and is "directing", the QE must insure that the helmsman is operating solely by that direction, and not performing tasks or maneuvering outside direction. Rudder, throttle, transmission changes should all be done by direction and not by independent helmsman action. Consider the helmsman as being virtually hooded, where only the compass can be seen.

The QE is evaluating the coxswain or coxswain candidate by their understanding of vessel, wind, current, and physics. For the purpose of the evaluation, this cannot be delegated to a facility owner at the helm.

This is why having the coxswain operate the vessel makes evaluation easier – the QE does not need to very carefully separate the helmsman role from the coxswain role. It is

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possible for a coxswain to demonstrate their skills by direction, but it is much harder for the QE to make sure the helmsman stays solely in the helmsman role during an evolution.

Coxswain Initial Qualification Check Ride vs Currency Check Ride

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The initial qualification check ride is the most important evaluation that can be done of a coxswain's training, skills, attitude, and leadership. While there is a specific set of broad scenarios to follow, the evaluation is dock-to-dock underway. To improve the quality of the evaluation (particular for the benefit of the candidate), this district requires the use of 2 QEs as a review board for an initial coxswain qualification. It is ONLY the initial coxswain qualification (not crew qualification, not currency check rides) that have this requirement. Further, it is suggested that some effort be made (where possible) to have an active duty QE from the local station be the 2nd member of the review board. This helps the local station gain more confidence and understanding of that particular coxswain as well as of the program in general.

If the candidate owns an operational facility, it is expected that the qualification check ride is performed on the facility in the operating area that the coxswain will be performing most of their activities. NOTE THE EMPHASIS ON OPERATING AREA.

If the coxswain's facility is unavailable, a similar style vessel in the operating area is desirable.

If the coxswain candidate does not own a facility, it is important that the candidate be very comfortable in operating the vessel (by direction as spelled out previously, or by operating at the helm). This means practice is needed before expecting qualification using that vessel.

Local knowledge may be needed to arrive at or depart a particular berthing for the host operational facility. As a safety concern, of course the facility owner might participate much more directly. Don't confuse seamanship in docking with local knowledge of hazards.

Mentors need to include overall seamanship and crew leadership in their training program. These skills transcend the specific task lists and specific task standards, but nevertheless are critical in a coxswains training.

Three year currency check rides also call for "dock-to-dock" evaluation of a coxswain while performing the list of tasks specified in the Auxiliary Boat Crew Training Manual.

The coxswain must show appropriate seamanship, crew communication, and leadership skills during the task evolutions; these are qualities that the QE is looking for during the check ride. It is the on-scene judgment of the QE that determines if the total evolution is successful for the coxswain, or if some additional training, practice, or personal leadership change is necessary.

Early or late season currency check rides do not relax the quality standards QEs are expected to maintain in evaluation. Candidates are often rusty (they shouldn't be!!). The QE is likely to ask if the coxswain has performed patrols, tows, and search patterns on this particular vessel this year. "No" answers may mean that the coxswain is not prepared; if

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the required evolutions are very awkward or have to be cut short for safety reasons, the QE may politely say that this patrol should continue as training only and not for evaluation.

What happens on regular patrols after qualification/certification?

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The coxswain has the ultimate responsibility for the safety of the crew and vessel. The coxswain (not the facility owner) might choose to delegate some tasks at some times, but this does not remove the requirement that the coxswain be capable of performing those tasks and have responsibility for how the vessel is operated.

If a facility owner is not comfortable with a particular coxswain operating or leading on their vessel, I very much want to hear of it on a confidential or other basis. Something is wrong in this case; either the facility owner can't let go (and they must be prepared to let go or they should not offer their vessel for use with a coxswain release), or there is a training gap in that coxswain's performance (which may mean that there was an evaluation gap somewhere on the part of the QE corps).

If there is still confusion or questions, please direct questions through the staff chain (MT or OP), as others might have the same questions – and answering through the chain will distribute the answers in a much broader manner.