

Resilience and Shipping

After Delta had crested and before Omicron had come to town last fall, I spoke at an “in-person” company function in Montréal that was somehow possible. I remember saying: “I believe that when thinking long term, off into the future, it is very important to always go back to first principles. We must think back to our starting point to understand how to get to our destination.” In the context of the pandemic and the shipping industry, how might this make sense?

At the beginning of the pandemic, on one key shipment we were dealing with, a vessel was stuck in the ice. This was successfully resolved, thanks to the Canadian Coast Guard. Our Italian agents, on another Covid front, were exceptionally busy, but all self-isolated, working from home, neighbours singing from their balconies. I was astonished by their effectiveness working in this new, high-spirited way for so many weeks and seemingly available 24/7. Thinking of the masterly fashion they were managing shipments with us, it became clear to me that anything we do in this industry is reliant on the power of our imaginations, of thinking up and developing good solutions. Of course, there is the reliance on trusted and competent partners, who do what they say they will do.

Soon in the spring of 2020 we were ourselves having to work differently. Our team in Canada and the USA was working more from home, appreciative of already having a sustainable IT infrastructure. We had never envisaged a shift to all working remote, but fortuitously we were ready. Next was the test of how we would internally communicate with each other, as well as liaise with our clients and suppliers in the industry. Somehow this worked well over-all, and got better over time, although some clients and suppliers might be non-responsive at times, for reasons initially unknown. We would later learn that

they or a family member had been unwell with the disease. Now this type of information is less hidden.

Each of us has anecdotes and we have been sharing them from the outset of the pandemic. It became ok to call anyone we worked with, or would like to work with, anywhere worldwide and start the conversation by saying, “How are you?” which I have always liked to do anyway. This is empathy. Now it was unobjectionable, because so many people were having a tough time and were often fine talking about their experience.

Occasionally Government inspectors might be over-zealous with shipments, unrelated to Covid. It seemed that the anxiety over the virus had knock-on effects. In a different case we wanted a marine surveyor to visit a site up north the check on cargoes – and were told that, no, due to Covid rules at the site, not allowing outsiders access, this was not in the cards. The problem resolved itself anyway thankfully.

Our firm works extensively with trucking companies, in the cross-border market. The shifting rules for drivers, in the USA and Canada, driven by both health advice and politics, were perplexing for many of them. Working in both Canada and the USA I was very aware of the changing rules, while personally crossing or not crossing the border in both directions. For months I did not cross, because of the Government rules, and our company protocols.

In the media sometimes one hears experts say that, yes, there have been major supply-chain issues in all shipping modes globally, but it is a very creative industry and solutions are always found. I believe this is a charitable view of what has been happening. For the clients, the consumers, the companies procuring shipping services, we have all lived through the experience of delays, miscues, shipments being rolled, missed ports and closed

ports, and of increased freight levels. This experience has required a great deal of forbearance. The industry's IT systems were not designed to deal with the level of disruption that has occurred.

The particular problems at the Port of Vancouver late last year were a pre-occupation for months, after reaching crisis-point. There were the multiplier effects of huge import volumes, plus vessels at anchor awaiting free berths, Covid, massive rains, floods, major arteries being washed out in sections, marine terminals and warehouses full to bursting, truck and driver shortages, and rail stoppages. Together these all created an expensive and mesmerizing set of circumstances for all, especially consignees. An infrastructure that had been designed for "just-in-time" delivery was jammed. But a lot of resilient people who work at and with the Port of Vancouver will take the lessons learnt from the experience, and investments will have to be made to build increased capacity into the system.

So, what are the first principles? Where is the starting point in this narrative? It is obvious that each of us has used this difficult time to take stock in some measure, both in our personal lives and in our work lives. Successful shipments are the result of hard work, of well-honed routines. With additional elements, and sometimes new obstacles, thrown into the mix, these work routines have often had to be thought about and re-defined and agreed upon internally. The pandemic has opened up new opportunities, which partly offset the sadness we have lived through. New friendships have been made, and new insights into people's lives far away, and closer to home, have occurred to us. I would like to think that we have moved to better humanize our relations, taking back some control of

the often-robotic way we receive if not send messages. But the jury is out on this human vs machine debate.

What again are the first principles at work? Can they be pulled together into one principle?

Not to put too fine a point on it: Be the best you can be at what you do, with no excuses: certainly not using the pandemic as an excuse. That is key to one's resilience, and really is our starting point. Be the best you can be.

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