

Captain Rajesh Unni

The Founder & CEO of the Synergy Group, one of the world's leading ship managers, believes shipping must decarbonise and that digital technologies can play an important part. However, his current priority is the crew change crisis



Please tell us more about the founding of Synergy Group and your current bulk carrier fleet?

After a decade in ship management, myself and colleagues founded Synergy Group in 2006. We could see that productivity costs were too high and service standards sub-par. There was clearly a need in our industry for end-to-end maritime solutions and services tailored to the specific requirements of clients based on trust, openness and reliability. So we took the leap and decided to challenge the status quo. We essentially unbundled all we had learnt and went back to basics to create a value proposition for customers. Starting with

the contracts to manage four ships, we steadily grew to 70 Ships in just under seven years. Synergy has since then built a reputation for reliable service and a commitment to safety and client satisfaction. I'm glad to say that owners have responded very positively and we have enjoyed continuous year-on-year growth, most of which has been organic. We now have offices in all leading maritime hubs, we employ more than 12,000 seafarers and we have over 300 vessels under management including everything from LPG and LNG tankers to 20,000+ TEU container ships. Bulkers are a core component of the fleet. Our dry bulk fleet currently totals 130 vessels including 51 Capesize and 21 Panamax ships.

You have been an outspoken advocate for seafarers during the current pandemic, how difficult is the situation for crew at present?

Covid-19 has been difficult for everyone, of course, but what has happened to seafarers has been a disgrace. Over 300,000 seafarers have been stuck on vessels since lockdowns, which prevented crew changeovers at ports and airports, began in the first quarter. Seafarers are a tough bunch and they can cope with most things that are thrown at them but they are key workers and they deserve better: much better.

What are your concerns over the mental health of seafarers and what are you doing to support them?

The crew change crisis has developed into a humanitarian crisis, a safety issue and it's now an obvious threat to the welfare of the seafarers on which we all depend - the very individuals that enable global trade. I think it was apparent pre-coronavirus that seafarer mental health and wellness needed more attention, but I think the current crisis has illustrated that we must take far better care of those at sea. We have a mental wellness counselling service available 24x7 which we launched in 2018 called iCALL for Seafarers which has been in heavy use throughout the pandemic. From the outset our idea was to provide a free service, open to all and offering the best available counselling. It is available 24/7 in ten languages via phone, email and the chat-based nULTA App. We urge all seafarers to make use of this service at this time of need.

How do you think the crew change crisis should be tackled?

The failure of governments to enable crew changes has to be addressed. We've been working hard to raise awareness of this crisis, but it has been an uphill slog.

We've started moving some crew but it's a painful process and overcoming the bureaucracy and red tape is a daily battle. We need governments to fast-track airline permitting and crew visas, open up ports and create pathways so crew can return home or join ships. In the long-term governments and UN bodies, including the International Maritime Organization, must put in place systems that prevent a repeat of the current fiasco because this is a problem that transcends shipping.

How, as a ship manager, have you been coping with port calls during the current crisis?

We ensure we're fully involved with the Master, the agents and the charterers to get our points across in the most constructive ways so that the vessel can basically get out of port as soon as possible. Our Superintendents are all hands-on ex-seafarers who have a fair idea and empathy for what they are going through on board and a lot of handholding and talking is going on. Owners have been understanding, communication lines have been thrown open or relaxed to allow seafarers more bandwidth and more contact with their friends and families ashore when the vessel is at port. That has been a great stress buster. It is the least we can do.

Are there any problems that seafarers are coping with specific to bulk carriers.

Bulk carrier crew are a mixed and hardy lot and they've coped admirably. Those working on the larger vessels with longer sea passages invariably have shorter port stays at mechanised berths and their mingling with shore personnel is to a large extent minimised. The problem is with smaller ships calling at ports where there is a lot of manual labour. It has been frustrating dealing with large groups of people in, say, anchorage ports with minimal or no PPE [Personal Protective Equipment], who depend on the ship to provide fresh water and practically live on board for the duration of the vessel's stay, bathing and cooking on board. They can easily get agitated if they feel they're being slighted.

How are bulk carrier operators handling cargoes in the current situation and will this affect future investment decisions?

I don't see much of a difference to the way operators are handling cargoes, it's more about the humanitarian issues for seafarers and managing port calls. But then again it depends on the type of vessel and the cargo booked and the country, of course. Developed countries have mechanised to a large extent over the years and while the reasons were to reduce expensive labour, it may be paying out now in terms of the attractiveness of many terminals. A mechanised or robotised terminal would frankly be the preferred one now for any operator in terms of less exposure, delays and red tape so that would be one way to go. I'm sure they are all thinking of new ways to do things. I don't know how it will work out economically but Covid-19 has really changed the way we see ROI now. Bulk carriers carry a lot of other cargoes as well. One thought, for example, would be to palletise bagged cargo so that fewer people would be required to handle it, meaning fewer moves and they could be stacked next to each other with forklifts and be disinfected more easily, etc.

Do you think the Covid-19 crisis will change how vessels are managed and operated?

I think it will accelerate change in a number of ways. I think in future, we'll have to make pandemic provisions for crew changes because this crisis has illustrated we have a blind spot in world trade and seafarers and their families should not be left in limbo in this way. We need a better 'new normal' for changeovers than the one seafarers have suffered. I think we'll also see more accelerated digitalisation, an acceptance that we need to rethink how we conduct business and a strong focus on decarbonisation.

How specifically will this impact digitalisation in shipping?

There are so many new technologies and regulations in the pipeline and, of course, coronavirus does not have a deadline, but when we get to a more normalised situation I think for ship managers and shipping we'll see crew will need new skillsets and ships will need to be more digital and smart. I think coronavirus has shown people across industries that there are benefits in adopting more digital practices. On a basic level, Covid-19 has shown that germs can be exchanged on paper. In shipping, we don't need so much paper and now it comes with extra risk so let's find better ways of conducting our business. Nobody wants to handle paper at ports, and nobody needs to do. This can all happen digitally and then be shared with regulators and other stakeholders. It is more efficient to exchange data digitally and now it is clear that it's also safer. So, I think coronavirus will speed the adoption of technology and the digitalisation of shipping.

How does shipping become more sustainable in future?

We need to decarbonise supply chains and shipping should take the lead on this, not wait until punitive actions and regulations force our hand. We can use digital technology to make vessel and fleet operation efficiency gains, and carbon capture technology to cut emissions. Long-term we need to commit to using more sustainable fuels and improved ship designs so we can reduce emissions over the life cycle of the ship. Synergy essentially works with its clients on this issue as a technical thought partner. We see decarbonisation as a huge opportunity. It's something we're investing a lot of resources into, and we seek to share our findings and best practices with our customers in a way that facilitates inevitable transformation ■

