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Examining Seafarers' Self-Awareness and Communication through the Johari Window Model: A Qualitative Inquiry on a Merchant Vessel

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Abstract: *This research explores self-awareness, feedback exchange, and interpersonal communication among seafarers through the application of the Johari Window model. Using behavioral observations and informal interviews with 24 crew members representing all shipboard departments, the vessel's Captain evaluated how individuals share personal information, respond to feedback, and interact with colleagues. The results indicate clear variations in dominant Johari Window quadrants according to rank and department—officers generally exhibit greater openness, while lower-ranking and engine room personnel tend to occupy more hidden or blind areas. The study concludes that applying the Johari Window framework can significantly improve leadership effectiveness, team collaboration, and psychological safety within maritime environments.*

Keywords: Johari Window Self-awareness; Interpersonal communication; Maritime leadership; Crew feedback

1. Introduction

The maritime sector depends greatly on strong teamwork and effective communication to ensure the safe and efficient running of ships. Life at sea brings distinct interpersonal challenges arising from multicultural crew compositions, hierarchical chains of command, and the demanding nature of shipboard duties. These conditions highlight the critical role of self-awareness and transparent feedback in reducing mistakes and fostering cohesive, high-performing teams (Hanif Dewan et al., 2024; Kamis et al., 2022; Lochner et al., 2018).

Self-awareness allows seafarers to recognize their own strengths, weaknesses, and the effects of their actions on others, while strong interpersonal communication ensures the timely exchange of vital information, encourages the expression of concerns, and reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings (Gabedava & Hu, 2025; Pyne & Koester, 2005; Sætrevik & Hystad, 2021). Nevertheless, hierarchical structures and cultural diversity on board can often hinder open feedback and self-disclosure, leading to blind spots and concealed issues that may undermine both safety and operational efficiency (Boström & Österman, 2022; Lochner et al., 2018).

The Johari Window, a well-established psychological framework, provides an effective tool for enhancing self-awareness and facilitating feedback among team members. It has been

widely applied across different organizational contexts to promote openness and overcome communication barriers (Luft & Ingham, 1955; Prasad & Rao, 2022; Silva et al., 2025). Within the maritime environment, studies indicate that initiatives encouraging feedback and reflective communication can strengthen safety culture, minimize interpersonal conflicts, and contribute positively to the overall well-being of crew members (Boström & Österman, 2022).

Despite its proven advantages, the Johari Window model has seen limited application in the maritime field, as most existing research has centered on its implementation in areas such as healthcare, business, and education (Prasad & Rao, 2022; Silva et al., 2025). This study seeks to bridge that gap by employing the Johari Window model on board a merchant vessel to examine how crew members from varied cultural and professional backgrounds disclose information, respond to feedback, and interact with one another. The findings aim to guide maritime leadership practices, strengthen crew development initiatives, and promote safer, more communicative shipboard environments.

2. Literature Review

The Johari Window model, illustrated in Figure 1, was first developed by psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham in 1955 (Luft & Ingham, 1955; Saxena, 2015), is a foundational tool for understanding self-awareness and interpersonal communication within groups. The model categorizes personal and interpersonal awareness into four distinct quadrants: the Open area (information known to both self and others), the Blind area (known to others but not to self), the Hidden area (known to self but concealed from others), and the Unknown area (information unknown to both self and others) (Silva et al., 2025).

	KNOWN TO SELF	UNKNOWN TO SELF
KNOWN TO OTHERS	QUADRANT ONE Open Self Public Self	QUADRANT TWO Blind Self Unaware Self
UNKNOWN TO OTHERS	QUADRANT THREE Hidden Self Private Self	QUADRANT FOUR Unknown Self Potential Self

Figure 1: Johari Window model ((Luft & Ingham, 1955)

2.1 Application of the Johari Window in Organizational Behavior

The Johari Window is widely acknowledged for its effectiveness in promoting personal growth, constructive feedback, and mutual understanding among team members. By encouraging individuals to enlarge their Open quadrant, through receiving feedback to minimize Blind spots and engaging in self-disclosure to reduce the Hidden area, the model helps teams foster trust, strengthen collaboration, and minimize miscommunication. (Lochner et al., 2018; Luft & Ingham, 1955). These dynamics are particularly vital in high-risk or high-stakes settings such as healthcare, aviation, and maritime operations. Numerous studies have shown that teams characterized by openness, constructive feedback mechanisms, and a strong sense of psychological safety tend to achieve higher performance levels, experience greater job satisfaction, and encounter fewer interpersonal conflicts (Lochner et al., 2018).

2.2 The Johari Window in Maritime Contexts

While direct research within the maritime domain remains limited, existing studies highlight that the distinct hierarchical structures and multicultural composition of shipboard life often reinforce hidden and blind areas, thereby hindering effective communication, safety, and overall operational efficiency (Boström & Österman, 2022). Safety culture research has shown that fostering feedback, self-disclosure, and reflective dialogue improves safety outcomes and operational reliability (Lochner et al., 2018). Several studies on bridge resource management and crew resource management have recommended incorporating psychological frameworks such as the Johari Window to enhance leadership development, improve communication, and facilitate cultural adaptation among seafarers.

2.3 Relevance for Teamwork, Leadership, and Maritime Operations

Although the Johari Window is well-established as an effective framework for personal and team development across multiple organizational contexts, its utilization within the maritime industry remains relatively new. Considering the strong connection between self-awareness, constructive feedback, safety performance, and teamwork, the application of this model holds significant potential for improving communication and collaboration among maritime crews (Silva et al., 2025). This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the application of the Johari Window among seafarers and analyzing how factors such as rank, hierarchical structure, and cultural background influence self-awareness and interpersonal communication on board.

3. Methodology

This qualitative research was carried out on board a merchant vessel manned by a multinational crew of 24 members representing the deck, engine, and catering departments. The author, in collaboration with the ship's Captain, employed a combined method of behavioral observation and informal semi-structured interviews to examine the practical application of the Johari Window model within an actual maritime setting.

3.1 Participants

The study included all 24 crew members, representing a diverse range of shipboard ranks and responsibilities. Participants comprised the Chief Officer, Second Officer, Third Officer, Fourth Officer, Ship Administrative Assistant, Deck Cadet, Chief Engineer, Second Engineer, Third Engineer, Fourth Engineer, Engine Cadet, Bosun, three Able-Bodied Seamen (AB1–AB3), an Ordinary Seaman (OS), an Oiler, three Greasers, a Pumpman, an Electrician, a Cook, and a Second Cook.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

3.2.1 Behavioral Observation

Throughout a four-week voyage, the Captain systematically observed crew interactions during daily operations, safety drills, watch turnovers, and social events. Observations focused on:

- Willingness to disclose information or concerns (indicative of the Open quadrant)
- Responses to feedback (revealing Blind spots or Open area expansion)
- Instances of withheld information or reluctance to communicate (suggesting Hidden or Unknown quadrants)
- Cross-cultural communication dynamics

These non-intrusive observations were documented contemporaneously in a confidential log.

3.2.2 Casual Interviews

In parallel, the Captain conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with each crew member. Interview questions included:

- "How comfortable do you feel giving or receiving feedback?"
- "Can you recall a time when you shared something personal or important with a colleague?"
- "What do you do if you notice a mistake or uncertainty?"
- "Do you prefer to keep certain concerns to yourself?"

Crew responses provided insights into self-disclosure habits, feedback receptivity, and perceived communication barriers. These interviews, conducted in private settings, helped to ensure confidentiality and candidness.

3.2.3 Application of the Johari Window Framework

Each crew member's behavior and interview responses were analyzed through the lens of the Johari Window model (Luft & Ingham, 1955). The dominant quadrant for each individual (Open, Blind, Hidden, Unknown) was determined based on:

- Frequency and comfort of information sharing (Open)
- Evidence of unawareness about how others perceive them (Blind)
- Reluctance to disclose (Hidden)
- Areas where neither the individual nor colleagues showed awareness (Unknown)

A role-by-role matrix was developed to identify patterns across ranks and departments.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, with all crew members assured anonymity. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for behavioral research, ensuring no adverse impact on individuals or shipboard operations (Vanclay et al., 2013).

3.4 Data Analysis

Findings from observations and interviews were triangulated to validate quadrant assignments and uncover departmental or hierarchical trends. Results were reviewed to identify recurring themes and critical incidents illustrating key aspects of self-awareness and communication.

4. Findings

The findings of this qualitative study reveal distinct patterns of self-awareness and interpersonal communication among the vessel's crew, as interpreted through the Johari Window framework. Analysis of behavioral observations and interview data indicated significant variations in dominant quadrants based on rank and department.

Senior officers, including the Chief Officer, Second Officer, and Chief Engineer, as well as experienced personnel such as the Bosun and Cook, predominantly exhibited characteristics associated with the Open quadrant. These individuals consistently shared information with their peers, actively sought input, and discussed both achievements and errors in an open and constructive manner. Their receptiveness to feedback fostered an environment of mutual trust and teamwork. This culture of openness reinforces the notion that transparent communication and proactive leadership are essential for enhancing team cohesion and promoting safer shipboard operations (Dash, 2020; Kamis et al., 2020; Ramani et al., 2017; Saxena, 2015).

In contrast, junior officers and cadets including the Third Officer, Fourth Officer, Deck Cadet, and Engine Cadet tended to occupy the Blind or Hidden quadrants more frequently. These individuals often lacked awareness of how their behavior was perceived by others or were hesitant to acknowledge uncertainty and mistakes. This tendency likely stems from a combination of limited experience, sensitivity to hierarchical authority, and lower self-confidence, which are common among newer or less experienced members of the ship's crew (McQuillen et al., 2024; Mukherjee et al., 2023; Osmanoğlu, 2019).

The engine department and technical crew, including the Second Engineer, Third Engineer, Fourth Engineer, oilers, greasers, pumpman, and electrician, showed a strong tendency toward the Hidden and Blind quadrants. Many individuals in these positions appeared hesitant to ask questions or voice concerns openly, often choosing to keep their doubts and observations to themselves. This behavior indicates that hierarchical norms, cultural influences, or language barriers may discourage open feedback and communication within technical teams. Similar patterns have been observed in maritime safety studies, where unspoken concerns and limited feedback have been shown to impact both crew morale and overall safety performance (Dash, 2020; Saxena, 2015).

Deck ratings and support staff, including the Able Bodied Seamen, Ordinary Seaman, and the Ship Administrative Assistant, were also commonly situated within the Hidden quadrant. Many of them expressed feeling uneasy about questioning their supervisors or sharing personal concerns unless specifically invited to do so. This hesitation seems to be influenced by cultural expectations and the strong authority structure that characterizes most shipboard environments (Claeys et al., 2025; Mukherjee et al., 2023; Osmanoğlu, 2019).

The catering department offered an interesting example of how role and personality influence communication on board. The Cook consistently sought feedback from the crew, adjusted meal plans according to their preferences, and responded directly to both praise and criticism. This open approach positioned him clearly within the Open quadrant. In contrast, the Second Cook was quieter and more reserved, displaying traits associated with the Hidden quadrant. This contrast indicates that individual comfort levels, personality traits, and possibly language ability play an important part in shaping how crew members communicate and interact with others (Bensimon & Amir, 2010; Mukherjee et al., 2023; Saxena, 2015).

Overall, the findings indicate that a crew member's rank, department, and personal traits significantly influence their dominant Johari Window quadrant. Those in leadership positions or roles that require frequent interaction with others are generally more open, while technical personnel and junior crew members tend to be more reserved or less aware of how they are perceived by others. These outcomes highlight the need for targeted leadership and communication strategies to encourage openness, build psychological safety, and strengthen teamwork across all levels of the ship's organization (Dash, 2020; Osmanoğlu, 2019; Ramani et al., 2017).

Table 1: Summary of Johari Window interpretation based on crew response to interview question

Role	Sample casual interview question	Response	Johari Window Interpretation
Chief Officer	How do you ensure clear communication with the crew?	I always explain decisions and ask for feedback from everyone.	Open: Values transparency and feedback.
Second Officer	How do you handle suggestions or concerns from others?	I invite ideas and try to discuss them openly during meetings.	Open: Welcomes input and open dialogue.
Third Officer	Do you ask for feedback after drills or tasks?	I assume all is fine unless I hear otherwise.	Blind: Unaware of others' perceptions.
4th Officer	Are there things you hesitate to share with your team?	Sometimes I keep worries to myself unless I am sure it's important.	Hidden: Hesitates to disclose concerns.
Ship Admin Assistant	How comfortable are you voicing problems in your work?	I usually keep problems to myself and try to handle them alone.	Hidden: Prefers not to share problems.
Deck Cadet	Do you ask for advice or feedback from officers?	I wait for feedback. I do not want to ask too many questions and look inexperienced.	Blind: Reluctant to seek input, unaware of blind spots.
Chief Engineer	How do you keep everyone informed in the engine room?	I always update the team and ask for suggestions to improve operations.	Open: Communicates and invites input.
2nd Engineer	How do you know if your work meets expectations?	If no one complains, I believe my work is good.	Blind: Assumes no news is good news.
3rd Engineer	How do you handle uncertainty during maintenance?	I do not mention it unless absolutely necessary.	Hidden: Rarely discloses uncertainty.
4th Engineer	Are there aspects of your job you keep private?	Yes, I try to solve issues myself before bringing them up.	Hidden: Keeps concerns private.
Engine Cadet	Do you share mistakes with your mentor?	I am nervous to admit mistakes, so I usually stay quiet unless asked.	Blind: Misses growth opportunities.
Bosun	How do you promote safety and teamwork on deck?	I encourage everyone to speak up and learn from each other's experiences.	Open: Fosters open communication.
AB1	If you notice a problem, what do you do?	I handle it myself if possible, unless it's serious.	Hidden: Reluctant to escalate issues.
AB2	Do you talk to officers about work challenges?	I do not like to bother them, so I keep it to myself unless necessary.	Hidden: Withholds feedback.
AB3	Do you ever ask for feedback on your work?	No, I just do my tasks. If something is wrong, I expect to be told.	Blind: Passive about self-improvement.
OS	What do you do when you do not understand a task?	I try to figure it out on my own so I do not look inexperienced.	Blind: Hesitates to seek clarification.
Oiler	Do you feel comfortable asking engineers for help?	I do not want to bother them, so I work it out myself if possible.	Hidden: Hesitant to seek help.
Greaser1	What do you do with concerns about equipment?	I keep an eye on it myself before telling anyone.	Hidden: Holds back concerns.
Greaser2	If you make a mistake, do you share it?	I wait to see if anyone notices.	Blind: Does not disclose errors.
Greaser3	How do you deal with uncertainty in your tasks?	I try to handle it on my own.	Hidden: Keeps uncertainty private.
Pumpman	Are you open about system issues you encounter?	Only if it might affect safety. Otherwise, I handle it quietly.	Hidden: Selective about sharing issues.
Electrician	Do you seek feedback on electrical repairs?	I work independently unless someone points out a problem.	Blind: Rarely seeks feedback.
Cook	Why do you ask for meal feedback?	I want everyone to enjoy their meals, so I ask for suggestions and change the menu.	Open: Actively seeks input.
Second Cook	Do you discuss kitchen problems with others?	I prefer to keep my concerns to myself unless the Cook asks.	Hidden: Reluctant to disclose problems.

5. Discussion

5.1 Analysis of Patterns

The table summarizing crew responses highlights several consistent patterns in self-awareness, feedback practices, and interpersonal communication on board, as understood through the Johari Window framework.

5.1.1 Senior Leadership and Openness

Senior officers and leaders, including the Chief Officer, Second Officer, Chief Engineer, Bosun, and Cook, were closely aligned with the Open quadrant. These individuals consistently encouraged feedback, shared information openly, and showed confidence in both providing and receiving input. Their behavior fostered an atmosphere of trust and open dialogue throughout the vessel. This pattern supports findings from previous research, which suggest that effective leaders cultivate psychological safety, promote active participation, pursue ongoing professional development, and model transparent communication, all of which contribute to stronger teamwork and enhanced operational safety (Dash, 2020; Kamis et al., 2020; Ramani et al., 2017).

5.1.2 Junior Ranks and Feedback Blind Spots

Junior officers, cadets, and some deck ratings, including the Third Officer, Deck Cadet, Engine Cadet, AB3, and Ordinary Seaman, were commonly found within the Blind quadrant. These individuals were less inclined to actively seek feedback or clarify their performance, often relying on others to highlight mistakes or areas for improvement. Consequently, they may remain unaware of how their behavior is perceived or of opportunities for personal development. This pattern is typical among less experienced crew members, who may avoid seeking feedback due to fear of appearing unskilled or because they have not yet developed the habit of engaging in open, reflective communication (Kamis, 2023; McQuillen et al., 2024; Osmanoğlu, 2019).

5.1.3 Technical and Engine Crew: Hidden Communication

Most engine room personnel and technical crew, including the Third and Fourth Engineers, oilers, greasers, pumpman, electrician, and several deck ratings, were primarily positioned in the Hidden quadrant. These individuals often preferred to keep concerns, uncertainties, or operational issues to themselves unless disclosure was unavoidable. Such behavior may arise from cultural expectations, a tendency to avoid conflict, traditional respect for hierarchy, or limited confidence in language proficiency. This pattern reinforces previous research indicating that shipboard hierarchies and multicultural environments can discourage open communication, resulting in underreporting of problems and hesitation to seek help when needed (Bahadori et al., 2015; Ramani et al., 2017).

5.1.4 Support and Catering Roles: Variability in Openness

Support roles such as the Ship Administrative Assistant and Second Cook also tended to fall within the Hidden quadrant, showing a preference for keeping their concerns private unless specifically asked to share them. In contrast, the Cook clearly exemplified the Open quadrant, actively seeking feedback and focusing on maintaining crew satisfaction. This difference highlights that factor such as personality, confidence in language use, and individual motivation strongly influence communication style and determine where a person is likely to fall within the Johari Window framework.

5.1.5 The Influence of Hierarchy and Culture

Overall, the analysis shows that the ship's hierarchical structure has a significant impact on communication patterns. Senior officers and leaders tend to feel confident and responsible for fostering openness, while junior and technical personnel are generally more reserved, cautious, or unaware of how others perceive them. Cultural diversity and language challenges further deepen these communication gaps, especially within multinational crews. Studies indicate that addressing these barriers requires intentional leadership practices that build trust, encourage dialogue, and ensure every crew member feels safe and supported in expressing their thoughts and concerns (Ramani et al., 2017; Saxena, 2015; Tran, 2016).

The main pattern observed is that openness and the willingness to seek feedback are most evident among senior leaders, whereas blind spots and unspoken concerns are more frequent among junior and technical crew. Focused initiatives such as structured training, mentorship programs, and strong leadership role modeling can help shift more crew members toward the Open quadrant, thereby enhancing psychological safety, communication effectiveness, and overall operational performance on board (Dash, 2020; Saxena, 2015).

5.2 Implications for Maritime HR and Leadership

The findings of this study provide important insights for maritime human resource practitioners, vessel leaders, and those involved in crew development and retention. Recognizing how the Johari Window framework operates in everyday shipboard interactions can guide the creation of policies and practices that strengthen crew wellbeing, enhance safety culture, and improve overall performance at sea.

5.2.1 Promoting Open Communication and Feedback

The clear link between leadership positions and the Open quadrant highlights the critical role of leaders in setting the communication culture on board. Senior officers and key personnel shape the tone for the entire crew through their behavior. When they communicate openly, invite feedback, and discuss both successes and mistakes with transparency, they help establish an atmosphere where openness is valued and practiced by all. Maritime human resource departments can strengthen this approach by integrating Johari Window principles into leadership training and performance reviews, focusing on key competencies such as constructive feedback, self-disclosure, and active listening (Ramani et al., 2017; Shrestha, 2023).

5.2.2 Addressing Hidden and Blind Quadrants

The strong presence of Hidden and Blind quadrants among junior, technical, and support crew indicates that many face barriers to psychological safety and active participation within the team. Human resource initiatives can address these challenges by introducing mentorship programs, peer support systems, and regular feedback sessions that provide a structured and safe space for open discussion. Facilitated workshops based on the Johari Window model can further help crew members recognize their own blind spots and build confidence in sharing what they usually keep hidden. These efforts can promote greater openness, improve collaboration, and stimulate more effective problem-solving and innovation on board (Bahadori et al., 2015; Ramani et al., 2017).

5.2.3 Enhancing Psychological Safety

Establishing a psychologically safe environment is vital for preventing accidents, enhancing job satisfaction, and ensuring crew retention. When seafarers feel confident to express concerns, acknowledge mistakes, and ask for assistance without fear of blame or judgment,

overall performance strengthens, communication becomes more effective, and operational risks are significantly reduced (Shrestha, 2023). Human resource departments should ensure that onboard training, induction programs, and the overall company culture consistently promote open communication and encourage non-punitive responses to error reporting. This approach helps build trust, reinforces learning from mistakes, and supports the continuous improvement of safety and teamwork across all shipboard operations.

5.2.4 Supporting Multicultural and Multilingual Crews

The maritime workforce is inherently diverse, and cultural or language differences can often hinder open self-disclosure and feedback exchange. Human resource departments can address these challenges by offering language support programs, cross-cultural awareness training, and inclusive communication strategies designed to build mutual understanding. When leaders are culturally sensitive and make deliberate efforts to involve every crew member in discussions and decision-making, diverse teams become more cohesive, collaborative, and effective in achieving shared operational goals (Dash, 2020; Tran, 2016).

5.2.5 Crew Development and Retention

When crew members develop stronger self-awareness and feel that their perspectives are genuinely valued, overall morale and retention tend to increase. Incorporating regular reflection sessions and promoting the use of self-awareness tools such as the Johari Window can enhance both professional growth and job satisfaction. Over time, these practices help reduce turnover, strengthen teamwork, and foster a safer and more efficient operational environment on board (Dash, 2020; Ramani et al., 2017; Saxena, 2015).

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study illustrates that the Johari Window model offers a valuable and practical framework for understanding and enhancing self-awareness, feedback exchange, and interpersonal communication among seafarers. The analysis of 24 crew positions on board a merchant vessel showed that openness is most evident among senior officers and leaders, whereas blind spots and hidden concerns are more prevalent among junior and technical personnel. These variations are influenced by hierarchical structures, departmental roles, personal comfort levels, and cultural factors.

The findings emphasize the essential role of leadership in demonstrating open communication and fostering psychological safety within the maritime environment. Integrating self-awareness and feedback mechanisms into human resource policies and leadership training can help maritime organizations cultivate a safer, more inclusive, and more effective shipboard culture. Future research should examine the outcomes of targeted interventions aimed at expanding the Open quadrant and further investigate how psychological safety and interpersonal growth contribute to performance and wellbeing in diverse maritime contexts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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