

The right blend

by Irene Rosberg, Programme Director – Blue MBA, Copenhagen Business School

In recent years, the maritime landscape has become increasingly complex, both worldwide and on a regional scale. While many of the challenges facing maritime leadership in the Baltic reflect global trends, the region's unique environmental sensitivities, strategic geography, and geopolitical pressures have given rise to distinct expectations and responsibilities for those at the helm of its maritime industries.

The impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine has been among the most profound shifts. This war has introduced a level of disruption that surpasses previous geopolitical challenges, placing considerable strain on maritime leaders operating in and around the Baltic Sea. The conflict has exposed the fragility of trade routes (likewise of underwater infrastructure), affected energy and food security, and amplified the urgency of reducing reliance on Russia's resources. Maritime leaders must navigate a world of escalating tension and unpredictability, necessitating a more adaptable, well-informed, and strategic leadership approach.

It is no longer sufficient to focus on operational efficiency only. Leaders in this region are expected to develop comprehensive strategies that respond to the wider context in which their organisations operate. This includes a deep understanding of geopolitical risk, a preparedness for crisis scenarios, and the ability to implement adaptive strategies that can guide their teams through instability while maintaining commercial resilience.

Where heritage meets future

The regulatory framework in the Baltic Sea region adds another layer of complexity.

As a designated particularly sensitive sea area under international conventions such as MARPOL and HELCOM, the Baltic is subject to some of the world's strictest environmental regulations. These include stringent rules on the discharge of pollutants and specific mandates around marine protection, designed to safeguard the region's fragile ecosystem while enabling continued maritime activity.

For leaders in the Baltic maritime sector, environmental responsibility is not simply an ethical or reputational issue – it is central to how they must operate. This means placing environmental considerations at the forefront of strategic decision-making and investing in technologies and practices that reduce harm and promote sustainability. It also requires collaboration with a wide array of stakeholders, including policymakers, industry partners, and environmental organisations. Effective leadership in this context is inherently collaborative, built on an ability to connect disparate interests and drive progress through partnership.

Meanwhile, the region is grappling with a dual imperative: preserving its rich maritime heritage while modernising in response to digital and technological transformation. Traditional operational knowledge remains highly valued, but it must now also embrace innovation, automation, and data-driven

systems. For many organisations, this means rethinking recruitment, training, and leadership development to ensure that future leaders are equipped with the right blend of experience and forward-thinking skills.

A key challenge is the widening skills gap. The maritime industry in the Baltic is fully aware that continued progress depends on a workforce that is technologically capable, adaptable, and empowered to think creatively. In some parts of the region, this transition is already well underway. Leaders are integrating new technologies with traditional expertise, promoting a culture where innovation is not only explored but embedded into operational frameworks. In others, progress is slower, but there is a growing consensus that all parts of the region must keep pace if the Baltic is to remain a strong and sustainable maritime hub.

The space to step back (to move forward – collectively & inclusively)

Part of this shift also involves embracing opportunities for leadership education that allow maritime professionals to broaden their outlook, share ideas, and learn from others across the region and beyond. Programmes such as Copenhagen Business School's Blue Board Leadership Programme and the Blue MBA are proving invaluable, offering experienced professionals the space

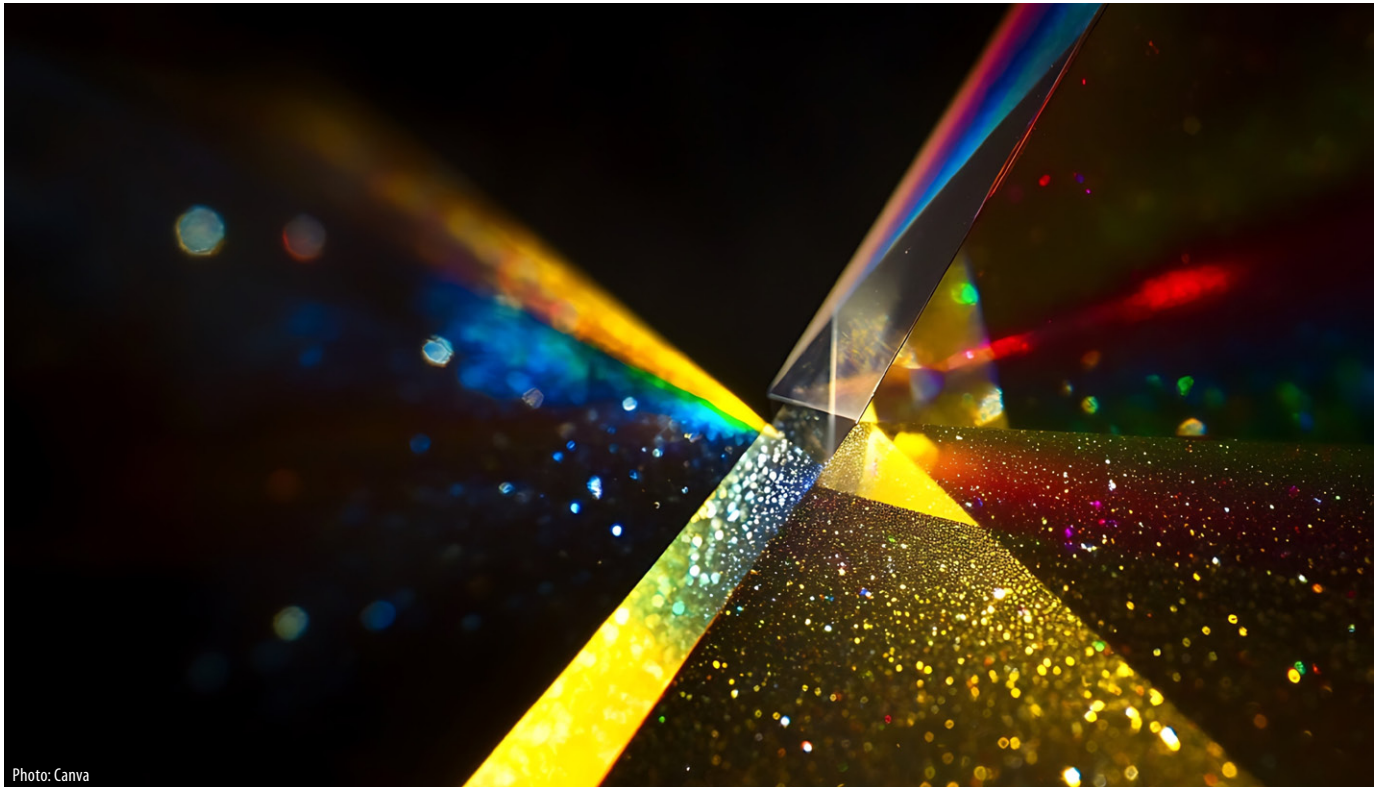


Photo: Canva

to step back from day-to-day operations and engage with wider strategic thinking. As shipping companies navigate regulatory uncertainty, technological disruption, and changing workforce dynamics, the value of leadership platforms that promote collaboration, critical thinking, and cross-border dialogue has never been more evident.

The generational shift in leadership further reflects a deeper change in mindset. A new wave of professionals is entering the sector, bringing with them a digital-first approach, an awareness of environmental urgency, and a clear expectation for more inclusive leadership models. Motivated by purpose and progress, these emerging leaders are reshaping maritime culture from within. Many of them benefit from programmes and learning environments that emphasise peer-to-peer engagement and a holistic understanding of the maritime value chain.

Education and leadership development are now viewed as strategic imperatives. Companies across the Baltic are recognising that in order to build resilient organisations, they must invest in equipping their teams with the insight and skills to handle what lies ahead. Initiatives that promote regional leadership collaboration, including the abovementioned ones, also play a key role in encouraging alignment across the Baltic. They help unify thinking around common challenges while sparking

innovation through the exchange of diverse ideas and experience.

Collaboration remains at the heart of this leadership evolution. The challenges facing the Baltic maritime sector, from decarbonisation and workforce shortages to cyber security and data- & tech-led modernisation, are shared across borders. As such, regional partnerships have never been more essential. Stakeholders are aligning across the public and private sectors to develop coordinated strategies, share knowledge, and drive collective progress. These partnerships create space for innovation, reduce duplication of effort, and promote a unified response to challenges that are too large or too interconnected to face alone.

There is also a growing focus on diversity and inclusion. Maritime organisations increasingly understand that attracting and retaining the next generation of talent requires inclusive leadership that reflects the communities it serves. Collaborative, cross-border initiatives that bring together varied backgrounds and perspectives are helping

to shift the leadership profile across the region and create more innovative, resilient teams. European Union-supported projects are contributing to this shift, but so too are smaller, targeted efforts that promote professional growth and cross-cultural understanding through leadership education.

Vision through complexity

The maritime leaders who will shape the future of the Baltic Sea region are those who embrace complexity and lead with vision. They will be defined by their ability to think and act strategically under pressure, to champion environmental sustainability, to build diverse and resilient teams, and to remain open to learning from others.

Programmes that promote cross-sector and cross-national engagement will continue to provide vital support to those navigating this changing landscape. In doing so, they will help ensure that the Baltic maritime sector remains not only competitive but collaborative, connected, and ready for the future. ■

An alumna of Rice Business, the Jönköping International Business School, California State University-Sacramento, and the Copenhagen Business School, **Irene Rosberg** has been with the last for over 24 years, currently as the Director of the Executive MBA in Shipping and Logistics, aka the Blue MBA, which won the prestigious Danish Maritime Prize for 2011. "Always in good humour, kind, and co-operative," Irene takes MBA students "through the challenging two-year programme with her strong passion and dedication," read Irene's pupils recommendations.

