



Advice for New and Young Commercial Fishermen

Fishing Industry Tips Shared by
Alaska's Next Generation
of Fishermen Study

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Advice from who?

Our research team has conducted 130 interviews in the Kodiak and Bristol Bay regions to study the graying of the fleet. We have reached out to industry experts and pulled from interviews with younger/older fishermen to provide tips on a broad range of commercial fishing themes to share advice with the next generation.

We hope these help you or someone you know with a fishing career at whatever stage!

Financing & Money Management



“The most important thing a young person interested in fishing can do is seek out a mentor—someone who has been in the industry for a substantial period of time. Availing yourself of that experience is priceless. The best thing a person can do before they talk to a lender is to have a good perspective on the particular fishery they want to engage in. The State of Alaska publishes permit values, quartile tables showing how much you can expect to make, and broker’s websites can give you the average price of a vessel. Once you know the potential income, cost, and guidance from your mentor on potential expenses, you are ready to begin a conversation with a lender.”

Financing & Money Management

“Are you credit ready [to buy into fishing] or should you talk to someone that can tell you? Since establishing or rebuilding credit takes time, an action plan needs to be identified early on so that the fisherman can be executing the financial plan at the same time they are working on the other time required tasks in the process.”

Financing & Money Management

“Managing fishing money is complex, but for someone just starting out I'd say: Keep your receipts for gear and travel expenses, pretend your checks are 30% less and save that amount to pay in taxes, understand the tax deductions you can claim, and don't spend all the rest in one place!”

Financing & Money Management

“In all partnerships it is essential that at least ‘one’ partner have good money management skills, and that the other partner be willing to listen to that partner. And yes marriages are partnerships. While it is natural to focus on how much money your operation will make, it is equally – if not more important, to focus on how much of those earnings you will retain. Keeping your overhead low allows you flexibility to be profitable in both the good and the bad years. It is best to avoid making purchases that are driven by the desire to avoid taxes rather than the need for the item.”

Financing & Money Management

"Prioritizing maintenance needs and determining what repairs can be deferred and for how long is crucial. Find a guru - someone with experience who is familiar with your equipment, engine, gear and it can be a huge help in setting priorities for replacing worn parts and heading off equipment failure. In seasons of good profits - which always lead to dumping money back into the boat the following season, position yourself to save in the long run with a capital construction fund."

Strategic Planning



“Be a critical thinker. Don't just follow a path but question where you fit within fisheries systems and ask questions as you go. Instead of getting frustrated, work to educate yourself on how policy and regulations work and how you can influence them. If you want to be a professional fisherman you have to use business sense. Make a business plan and a long-term strategic plan. It takes dedication to think about strategic pathways, but if you're willing to invest in the process and focus on ability to gain net worth it is doable.”

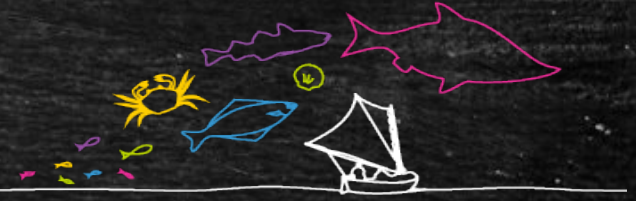
Strategic Planning

“If you are considering a large investment, have a 5-year plan with defined written goals. 5 years in this industry is a longtime and many changes will occur. Being able to review and adjust your original plan will help you keep on course through the changes.”

Strategic Planning

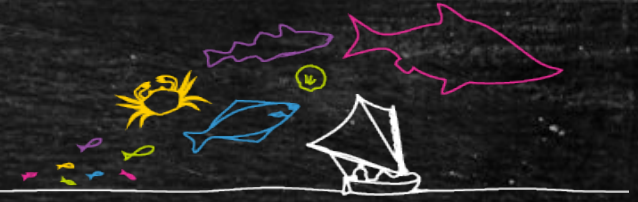
"It's okay to make mistakes but important to come back and make the right move. What you do after a mistake is what makes the difference. Today, business plans are a necessity for young and new fishermen, not like in the past when it was there for the taking. Take a look, figure out your business strategy through diversification and insulate from threats. Get involved with an organization to get educated and exposed to how businesses and organizations function and how professional processes work."

Mentorship



“My personal experience is that finding a good mentor or mentors is key and this goes along with networking. I also like to tell young fishermen that they are professionals and they should consider themselves as such and conduct themselves appropriately. Fishing is an industry that requires a broad range of skills so always be on the lookout for how you can expand or improve your skills. Diversify across fisheries and skill-sets.”

Crew to Captain Transition

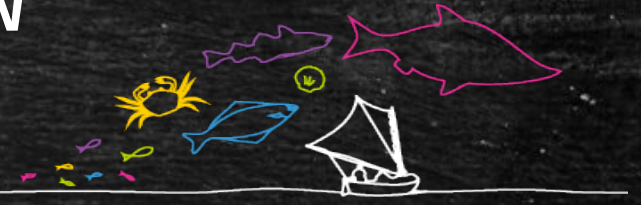


"I feel the best for fishermen and communities is for fishermen to be bona fide owner operators. That should be the goal. It's increasingly difficult to do that in many fisheries (IFQs). Whether a first time or experienced fisherman, these are the major overarching factors that affect your future in fishing: Safety, stewardship, experience/relationships, get involved, set realistic goals/do not overcapitalize, catch fish! New to fishing? Just because you feel you have a good relationship with your skipper, do not wait or expect that you'll be running the boat you're crewing on or transitioning into buying the permits/quota. Step out onto your own when the time is right but don't wait too long. Set realistic short and long-term goals."

Crew to Captain Transition

"Be realistic about your goals. Fishing business are not made overnight and require a huge commitment in money and time. If you want to own a business that will support you and your family realize you will invest \$500,000 over time. While that appears daunting, I think anything less will be a part-time occupation that will need to be supplemented by another revenue stream: Teacher, construction, North Slope work. Nothing wrong with that if that is the goals. Actually a good second job is a great asset to build your commercial fishing business. My wife worked as a registered nurse for 20 years providing the stability we needed to allow me to take advantage of commercial fishing opportunities, which often do not pay like expected."

Managing and Teaching Crew as New Captain



"Finding someone [for crew] who is competent is key. Assess the skills needed in the operation and don't settle for subpar if you can help it. Be sure there is compatibility and your crew has a good work ethic and knows how to work. Inexperienced hands can be useful in that they will usually listen to and follow the instruction they receive. Crew with lots of experience tend to think they know more or could do better and that can create real tension on deck. Look for crew who are sharp, fast and fit. Crew who don't have health and substance abuse issues last longer and are more pleasant to be around. Be patient, and provide time to process mistakes later after a cooling off period."

Managing and Teaching Crew as New Captain

“When you’re young and the boss it’s hard to be both a peer and a supervisor. Find the balance between being reasonable and authoritative. Take the time to explain your expectations from the start and you’ll get a better result from employees. When teaching people, understand that people learn differently and will respond differently to you. Successful communication, interaction and teaching will get easier as you go.”

Practical (attitude, skills)



"Tips for conducting challenging conversations and navigating conflict resolution have come in handy, which I've gained from a variety of jobs. Maintain respect always, don't take things personally, use 'I' statements, trust that your intentions and story are worthwhile, find a safe space for a conversation that could escalate to conflict, remove yourself from a scene when you feel unsafe or stuck, understand and respect the priorities of yourself and others."

Practical (attitude, skills)

“Work to become expert at your craft. Set realistic goals defined over time. Mental commitment to be there to fish with right gear, right boat, right partners, the best available. Network whenever possible, adding to contact list of business associates. That list will become a very valuable asset to help make informed business decisions. Do not let yourself become distracted by alcohol, drugs, bad habits. I have seen a number of fishermen create their own barriers that could not be overcome. Understand that in just 10 years of hard work your fishing business could provide the lifestyle, security, and future for yourself family you desire.”

Practical (attitude, skills)

"I was a philosophy and economics major in college. I wish I had more mechanical skills, but after my first year of being a deckhand I went to a community college that had hydraulic, diesel, and navigation classes. Every one has a different skill set. Take what you are good at and use those skills to your advantage, but also work on the skills where you are lacking. If you are not a good mechanic be really good at preventative maintenance, so you don't have to fix as much on the grounds while you are fishing. Even after 30 years of fishing I know I have gaps in my skill set. That's why I try to have good relationships with the marine trade professionals, and I don't hesitate to ask them for advice."

Practical (attitude, skills)

"One of the most important things is to pay attention in general and care about your job. I guess it's already a bumper sticker, but attitude really does make the difference. One of my favorite things I've heard from a crew member is 'If you're not 15 minutes early, you're late.' The man who said that now runs my boat. Some of the simplest things can be very important or valuable to a captain; show up on time (or early), sober and ready to work; don't misrepresent your skills; if you see something that needs to be done, do it; something needs fixed, fix it or at least mention it; act like a professional; learn cpr and first aid; read and understand your crew contract. In this line of work a crew depends on each other for their lives as well as livelihoods, take it seriously."

Practical (attitude, skills)

“When making a business plan understand what you want to do and educate yourself about the regulations. You can call or go in person to ADF&G offices to understand available fisheries to you as you work on your plan. Don’t be intimidated to ask questions. Don’t expect to understand regulation right away, it is complex but ADF&G encourages contact and questions to clarify for fishermen. Overall, know to ask and go visit your local ADF&G office.”

Practical (attitude, skills)

"If you're not very patient you're going to be miserable and everyone around you is going to be miserable. I find that people that like to hold a salmon or like fish, those are the people that really like fishing. People that are sport fishermen generally make good crew members. Guys that are, 'I'm a really hard worker and I know how to fix stuff,' that's all good but it's more important that people like what we're doing you know. It's different than what anybody else in the world does. I think actually liking fish is a very important thing. That's not a skill I don't think."

Practical (attitude, skills)

"Anybody that's thinking about getting into it, or is already into it and wants to move up, you just have to know you're gonna have to sacrifice a lot of things. You won't always be able to take a vacation that year. You're gonna be married to the boat if you buy one. Or some boats you just work on. Other boats just fish year-round. Sometimes you only get a month off to be home and have that time off. You pretty much have to be dedicated to what you do and enjoy what you do. Cause if you're not it won't work out for you."

Practical (attitude, skills)

"Don't give up. It's not easy. You're gonna hate parts of it. But whatever you do, I say this to crew members - for every five hours of hell there's five minutes of heaven and that five minutes makes all of it worth it. Do what your boss says, do what he says the first time even you think he's wrong. Keep your head down, work hard, that's all that it takes to be successful in anything."

Personal Care



"I think it's really important to talk about personal health. When working long, grueling hours, what food should we put in our bodies for energy? How do we manage pain? How much do we ignore? What happens with prolonged use of various pain medications? How much drug or alcohol use is "safe" on the water, in the harbor, on anchor? My dad's go-to phrase is "alcohol and water don't mix." I want our fishermen thinking about their health! There's no doubt self-care is usually last on the to-do list and numbing agents are typically turned to first."

Buying a Boat



"Always ask for surveys, how readily engine parts are available and how it's been maintained, inquire about previous owners, ask when it last fished, and how long it's been in/out of the water. Little, if anything, is going to be perfect. Decide where you can afford additional costs - money, time, inadequate gear. Consider a vessel's resale market and/or opportunities for diversification."

Buying a Boat

"First is it documented? Look closely at the equipment and develop a realistic outlook for future needs, whether it's maintenance, improvements, repair or future viability in expanding to other fisheries. Sellers are eager to sell when they are ready. A broker has ZERO interest in your success and is going to make a quick profit regardless of sale price. Calculate the annual cost just to own the boat, storage, maintenance, regulatory fees, etc. With many participants exiting fisheries its a good time to look around for vessels that have been well cared for and will provide for years of production."

Buying a Boat

“When contemplating the purchase of a vessel, beyond the questions of value and condition, one should be looking at how their investment will work for their business long-term. When first getting into commercial fishing you will likely get a “starter” vessel, a vessel that is meant to meet your immediate needs and get you started. As your business grows your thoughts should be towards your long-term goals. Like any capital investment the more fisheries or uses the vessel has or participates in the better return you will see on your investment

How to Be a Good Deckhand



"I want them to want it and learn and pay attention and be observant. The best piece of advice I've ever given to a deckhand is be observant. Pay attention to what everybody else is doing so that if that persons not there doing that job when it needs to be done you can grab it, jump it and get it done, help do it you know. It's not just stand around waiting for that person to go do it because he's the only person that's ever done it."

How to Be a Good Deckhand

"Just do the work. Cotton sweatshirts are a bad idea. Spend the extra money and get something synthetic or quick dry. You'll be dry and happy. Forget the cotton, you gotta be comfortable. Get a crew contract and get a copy of it. You have to want to work. You have to want to get up early."

Finding Good Crew



“Check with maritime related teachers at local high schools because they can give recommendations on work ethic and keep the jobs local. Teachers get to know the kids and can be a good contact between students and fishermen.”

How to Get a Good Crew Job



"Hit the docks. Walk every single dock in town every day but don't stop there. Hit the boat yard and the canneries. Talk to people and introduce yourself. Nothing beats being proactive and being visible. Go to every boat and ask if they're crewed up. If they are, ask if they know of anyone looking. Make sure to follow up with that question and keep a notebook of potential leads. Being seen as actively looking for a job will beat somebody that put a sign up in a coffee shop."

How to Get a Good Crew Job

“Does the captain seem competent? Any operation worth its salt should be able to provide a crew person with a contract that clearly spells out expectations and compensation. Find a skipper with similar values, interests and ethics. Good crew can really make or break a season. Finding compatibility, building trust and good working relationship can lead to unfathomable opportunities in the future.”

Networking & Communication



“Good Communication, in life and in your operation is vital. As an owner operator it is essential that you are able to communicate effectively with your crew, your processor, your accountant, your insurance company, your partner, your lender. Keep good records and keep the lines of communication open.”

Networking & Communication

“Look at your vendors as partners in the success of your business. Build these relationships and expand your contact list. It is of great value to be able to call your insurance agent, banker, accountant, or gear supplier to seek advise and counsel. These should be trusted relationships, take care of these people (pay your bills on time) as the right ones will be partners in the success of your business for a long time. When starting out as owner operator, do not underestimate the importance of working with the fish buyer/processor. This should be an honest forthright relationship.”

Policy Engagement



"If you are not participating in the regulatory process on some level, you are at risk of being subject to the decisions being made in favor of your competitors, who are."

Policy Engagement

"Just go to Board of Fish and Council meetings and learn more by observing. Get over the mindset that these meetings are only for established captains and know that you can go there and give public testimony, it's for everybody. If I had known when I was 20 I could have gotten involved with privatization before we reached such a crisis. I wish someone had told me just to go check out the political process. If you want to be fishing for awhile, just go and listen to start out! Don't be intimidated by the process."



Thanks to the commercial fishermen, community members and industry experts that shared their valuable advice for the next generation of fishermen!

Learn more at fishermen.alaska.edu



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