CONFLICTS WITHIN AND WITHOUT: LEARNING FROM COSTA CONCORDIA

When Costa Concordia sank, the Captain's actions came under the spotlight. But what was the context of his decision to sail past Giglio island? Former Master Mariner **Nippin Anand** interviewed Captain Francesco Schettino and uncovered goal conflicts that are woven into the industry, and were not unique to that tragic day.

KEY POINTS

- **'Revenue-earning' units of businesses, such as hotel departments of cruise vessels, have particular power and autonomy, which influences decision-making.**
- **Financial risks dominate large scale corporations and their strategic choices, and how organisational priorities are communicated and perceived throughout the organisation.**
- **Decision-making is not characterised by individual rational choices between safety and efficiency goals. People do things that make sense to them at the time, given the context of work, including the conflicting goals and pressures.**
- **Messages about 'safety first' are often contradicted by pressures in the operational environment.**
- **The messy reality of front-line work (and workers) needs to be better understood, with a view to creating a safer future.**

Financial risks dominate large scale corporations and often dictate strategic choices.

"*Have a look to see what speed we need to get out of here and approach Giglio. We've got to sail past this f####ing Giglio right, let's chart the route then.*"

"*Is half a mile OK Captain?" There's [enough] depth of water [there].*"

Court of Grosseto (2012). Captain's Interrogation Report – 17/01/2012

This was an exchange of words between Captain Francesco Schettino and the second mate onboard the Costa Concordia at 18:27 on 13 January 2012. Following this conversation, the passage plan was amended to perform a sail past at a distance of 0.5 nautical miles from the shore. The same night at about 21:45 on her passage from Civitavecchia to Savona, the vessel ran aground and capsized off the Giglio Island resulting in a loss of 32 lives.

A week before this accident, the maître d'hôtel (hotel manager) made a special request to the Captain: "*Now that I am due to sign off I would be grateful if you could pass by Giglio for a sail past.*" Due to unfavourable weather conditions, Francesco rejected the request on the first occasion but when the maître reminded him in the next voyage, the Captain felt that he should perform the manoeuvre.

With a mammoth cruise liner lying submerged resulting in human suffering in the European waters, it is morally difficult for an investigation agency to ignore public outrage. Someone must have wronged or else the ship would have never been in this situation. Going by the outcome alone, the decision of the Captain to please a hotel manager whilst ignoring the safety of over four thousand passengers and crew members seems utterly stupid and unforgivable. But if hindsight is kept aside, a sensible question to ask would be what motivated Schettino to perform the sail past manoeuvre.

Duty of care

During our three days of interviews with him, Francesco used the term 'deontology' (meaning duty of care) on several occasions. Unpacking this term would be an appropriate starting point for the analysis.

The captain has a duty of care. Safety of the vessel, crew and passengers take priority. The decisions made by the Captain should not put anyone in imminent danger. In that sense, when the maître d'hôtel first approached Schettino and requested a sail past,

Francesco made it clear that the manoeuvre will not be performed due to bad weather.

In the following week, once the weather conditions had improved, Francesco felt under pressure to perform the manoeuvre when he was approached by the maître again. In the wake of an accident, organisations often point fingers at practitioners for not carrying out their duties in a professional manner. However straightforward it may appear on the surface, professionals are always faced with conflicting and competing goals. Whilst the duty of care means keeping the ship safe, it also means taking good care of crew and passengers. Let's explore the conflict between 'good care' and safety for the Captain of a cruise vessel.

The economics rule the roost

Me: *What was the motivation to go past the Giglio Island?*

Francesco: *The maître was asking me to perform the manoeuvre so I said OK I will come to the bridge. It was kind of reward as this man was good and also there was a former captain at Giglio so I thought I will make happy both of them.*

While it may be simple to pin down the survival of an organisation to one single metric of profitability, to achieve this is not always straightforward given the multiple and conflicting goals within any organisation. The problem is even more pronounced in large organisations that consist of business units, sub-units and so on. It is here that the divide between 'revenue-earning' and 'resource exhausting' units within the organisation becomes worthy of investigation. While technical and safety units are generally considered a burden on resources, operations and chartering divisions are considered a source of revenue-earning. No company would admit this out and loud, but in general the resource exhausting units often struggle with power and autonomy compared to revenue-earning departments. In deep-sea drilling, the production teams enjoy more privilege than the marine department as is the case with crane technicians on heavy lift vessels and subsea engineers on specialised offshore vessels. It is a hard truth of life that the economics rule the roost; that is what guarantees survival in the face of intense market competition.

The hotel department on luxurious cruise vessels shares a similar privilege in terms of departmental supremacies.

Sifting through some of the cruise line company websites, it is not difficult to understand this. Some of the world's most famous chefs are appointed on cruise ships to showcase their culinary skills. A job advert seeking to fill in the role of a maître d'hôtel on a cruise ship job reads:

"*I am a Department Head and so responsible for reporting to on-board management and the main office, scheduling of all my personnel, disciplinary action within my Department, public relations with guests and taking care of any special needs, such as specific dietary requirements.*"

"*Public relations with guests*" explains the vital importance of this role. After all, it is the core business of cruise services. It is understandable that the request from the maître was not simply overruled by the Captain. During a follow-up correspondence two weeks after our meeting in Italy, I probed Francesco why he felt the need to deviate the ship on request from maître d'hôtel, to which he replied:

"*Fleet wide was induce a sort of mentality to reward the hotel managers on board by paying attention to them. His request was not exceptional one since the island*

was on the route, and passing close to any island is a normal practice for a cruise ship."

Safety is a top priority

We will leave the topic of 'normal practice' for another discussion. For now, let's ask why, despite a clear commitment to safety as a top priority in every board meeting, it becomes so difficult to achieve it in practice?

Measure what you must to manage your business. This is the philosophy of running a profitable business, but in doing so what exactly is being measured? Often, organisational priorities drift away from focus into ancillary or secondary areas that do not quite make sense to those at the front end. Of course, what is 'ancillary' to a ship master may not be the same for the management, but it shows the detachment between onboard and onshore staff. This was neatly summarised to me some time ago by a senior manager in the cruise sector who had also served as a master on cruise vessels in his past career at sea. "*When I joined the boardroom, I looked at the corporate risk register and there were at least thirty risks, mostly financial. Within that long list there was one operational risk and every emergency you can think of was thrown into that risk – fire, grounding, collision, spill – you name it*", he said. It is apparent that financial risks dominate large scale corporations and often dictate strategic choices. All this plays an important role in how organisational priorities are communicated and perceived down the line.

While technical and safety units are generally considered a burden on resources, operations and chartering divisions are considered a source of revenue-earning.

"I thought I will make happy both of them"

That human actions are influenced by the competing goals of safety and efficiency is a somewhat oversimplified statement. Why did he choose to go 'so close' to the island? Why did he not consider maintaining 'safe distance'? The framing of the questions is characterised by certain assumptions and biases. It is as if decision-making is about individual rational choices between safety and efficiency goals – in this case maximising pleasure for the passengers whilst keeping the ship at a safe distance from the coast. But when I asked Francesco about his motivation to manoeuvre the vessel close to the Giglio Islands, his response reflected a strong sense of giving back to his community. In his own words, he said, "*I thought I will make happy both of them*" (i.e., the hotel de maître and a former captain who was his friend and lived on the island).

If taken honestly and accurately, this simple phrase provides a deeper insight into individual values and beliefs that make a profound impact on decision-making. The idea of making a crew member or a close friend happy by putting the ship in danger may go against the professional conduct of a ship captain who, at least in the modern Western world, is expected to conform to a set of rules and standards, and exercise judgement in his vocation. But this may not be true of other societies where skills, finesse, charisma, artistry, heroism, and courtesy are valued more than meticulous conformity to a code of practice (Elias, 1939).

In 2008, a senior pilot from the Cathay Pacific was sacked for flying a passenger jet just 28 ft off the ground as a stunt

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to entertain a group of VIPs on the plane's maiden voyage at the Boeing's headquarters in Seattle. Later it was found that such stunts were a common practice on maiden flights intended as a 'bit of a jolly' for executives. More recently, Pakistan International Airlines came under attack on at least two occasions where 'unauthorised' guests were allowed into the cockpit by the pilot while the aircraft was airborne and during landing (Siddiqui, 2017). Such examples show a direct conflict between modern ethics of professionalism and the alternative forms of professional conduct that beg for a deeper understanding of human motivation.

Conclusion

The economic struggle to maintain competitiveness whilst constantly pushing the boundaries of safety and efficiency in pursuit of profit often puts organisations and their staff in a vulnerable situation. One response to this problem is to deny reality and proclaim infallibility (i.e., zero accident vision, accident-free future, foolproof designs, 'unsinkable' ships, and so on). Often it means preaching safety as a top priority, warning employees against taking 'undue risks', reminding them of their families and winning hearts and minds through behavioural based programmes and safety culture assessments. But there is little value in preaching one thing when market competition and the operational environment demands quite the opposite.

One possible alternative could be to understand the conflict between safety, efficiency, and professional values, and acknowledge human fallibility as an essential and ongoing challenge for any business. This could help us to work towards designing technologies, governance tools (audits, inspections, surveys, etc.), recruitment campaigns, and training programmes that would reflect the messy reality of front line work (and workers), with a view to creating a safer future.

Nippin Anand PhD is the Founder of Novellus Solutions Limited, a specialist in human factors and safety and a former Master Mariner with a PhD in Social Sciences. His research interests include applied sciences, storytelling, cultural anthropology and safety management.

info@nippinanand.com

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