

# A blueprint for safety

Learning from accidents and incidents



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**W**hy is it so hard to learn from other people's mistakes? For that matter, why are procedures so often short-circuited or not completed? Procedures, after all, are the distillation of best practices that themselves are a product of past operations that have gone well – but also those that have gone awry. There is something about our human nature that seems to preclude an easy absorption of experiences that we ourselves have not lived through. But before we investigate these questions, a little history.

On 6 March 1987, the ro-ro ferry *Herald of Free Enterprise* left Zeebrugge harbour bound for Dover with 80 crew, 81 cars, 47 trucks and approximately 459 passengers. The weather was fine with very little swell. Yet, four minutes after passing the harbour outer mole the vessel flooded through the open bow door and subsequently capsized. At least 188 persons lost their lives. As events later showed, the bow door should never have been open when the Master increased speed, which created a bow wave that literally sank the ship.

Any number of terrible shipping accidents in the past, and certainly many before the *Herald of Free Enterprise* disaster, some with even worse consequences, could have given rise to similar conclusions as that of the Department of Transport report produced in 1987. The difference was that this report was one of the first to follow the chain of causal factors all the way to the top company management. Indeed, as modern investigation techniques have since shown, unsafe conditions and unsafe acts on board vessels have an intimate and direct link to the management of those vessels.

The *Herald of Free Enterprise* casualty and subsequent report has been credited as the catalyst and inspiration for the International Safety Management (ISM) Code, which has since been an important contributor to the maritime industry in conceptualising a framework for safety and safety culture. Among other attributes, the Code makes management accountable for safety policy and procedures. Additionally, the Code allows crew access to top management through the Designated Person Ashore.

The six functional requirements of the ISM Code:

- Develop a safety and environmental-protection policy.
- Develop instructions and procedures to ensure safe operation of ships and protection of the environment.
- Define levels of authority and lines of communication between, and amongst, shore and shipboard personnel.
- Develop procedures for reporting accidents and non-conformities.
- Develop procedures to prepare for and respond to emergency situations.
- Develop procedures for internal audits and management reviews.

## A work in progress

In 1998, 11 years after the capsizing of the *Herald of Free Enterprise*, the ISM Code became a mandatory requirement for certain SOLAS ships and companies operating those ships. In 2008, ten years after the ISM Code was implemented, Michael Molloy penned an article for the American Club publication 'Currents' (no.27) in which he asked;

“So, has the ISM Code worked or not, and was it worth it? In a very important sense, these are the wrong questions. The implementation of the Code was not a single event to be evaluated like the introduction of a technical fix that either worked or did not. It is a process. The question we should be asking is not, ‘Has it worked?’ but ‘Is it working?’ The answer is that it has begun to work. Is it worth continuing the effort? Most certainly it is.”

“ Procedures are the distillation of best practice

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Today, 18 years since the inception of the Code, I think most persons who know shipping would agree with Mr Molloy. I for one can certainly agree – the Code has been around for approximately half of my sea going career and I have seen a definite improvement in safety since beginning as a cadet in 1979. Although the Code is not a silver bullet, a fix for all, it has nonetheless given the maritime industry a blueprint for safety that is adaptable to any size of company, relatively flexible and goal-based.

As we can see from the functional requirements listed in the column (left), the ISM Code is heavy on procedures and instructions. This has been used to criticise the Code as giving rise to a check-list mentality. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Company officials who understand the essence of the Code will be able to formulate a good balance between checklists, procedures and instructions without inundating the ship's staff with useless paperwork.

## Procedures and practices

But why such an emphasis on procedures? Quite simply, as I mentioned in the opening, procedures are the distillation of best practices that themselves are

often honed from past operations that have gone well, but also those that have gone awry. Speaking of operations, the medical establishment uses the term 'procedure' as a label to describe how various operations are performed. And many other areas of endeavour are now procedure based with a mechanism for continuous improvement. There is obvious benefit to documenting and adhering to a best practice. This was one of the underlying lessons of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* disaster and the resulting ISM Code.

### Why is it so hard to learn?

Now, let us go back to those initial questions at the beginning of this piece. Why is it so hard to learn from other people's mistakes? For that matter, why are procedures so often short-circuited or not completed?

People are certainly hard-wired to learn from their own mistakes. Once you put your hand on a hot stove top, you will not do it again! But what if you tell someone who has never experienced such a mishap 'Be careful, that stove top is very hot and can burn you'? They will listen, analyse and probably think it true and good. But their appreciation for the hotness of the stove top – for the searing burn – will not be firsthand. It will not be anchored in their brain as profoundly as it is in the brain of the person who experienced the event. This is the paradigm that must be overturned.

### Getting buy-in

One way to help change the attitude to procedures is to insist that they be periodically reviewed by a working group of the crew who use the particular procedure. Not only will this ensure currency of practice and serve as a timely reminder, it will help with 'buy-in' from the

very people who need to adhere to the procedure in the first place. In a sense, by participating in the procedural review (or creation of new procedures) the crew will be metaphorically putting their hand on the hot stove top. They will come to understand the 'why' behind procedural rigour.

As MARS editor, I recently received correspondence from a mariner stating that he didn't see the point in MARS, and that reporting incidents and accidents was not changing anything because they keep happening over and over again. This comment made me think. Although it is true that many accidents are similar and are still happening, we cannot reasonably expect MARS or even the ISM Code to fix everything, once and for all. And let's not forget that with today's almost seamless and continuous communication, we hear of every serious accident almost in real time. It may appear that there are more and more accidents happening, but that is not necessarily true.

### Reasons for optimism

In my opinion the paradigm has shifted since the inception of the ISM Code 18 years ago. In general, there is a better understanding by all crew of safety and safety culture than there was at the time of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* capsized. The more knowledge mariners have of other accidents, not just their own, the better and more honed their risk appreciation will be. The better prepared they will be to follow procedures and to report slips, trips and incidents of a more serious nature. But there is always room for improvement – so keep those reports coming to [mars@nautinst.org](mailto:mars@nautinst.org). And learn from other people's mistakes by reading MARS. 



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