

Leadership in a Crisis: The Costa Concordia

As the Costa Concordia ship began to tilt over and came to rest in a precarious position upon the rocks off Italy's west coast, the passenger ship industry, and indeed other industries, are unlikely to have appreciated the far reaching ripples this incident would cause.

A gruesome search continues for the bodies of those who were unable to react to the "abandon ship" command, whilst prosecutors focus upon the prompt questioning of the Captain and preservation of evidence for any future manslaughter prosecution. There will, of course, be significant appetite for a high profile criminal trial and some litigation has already started.

The aftermath of such a tragedy requires strong leadership on the part of many, including the authorities, those leading the rescue/recovery operations and the ship owners and operators.

Managing the safety of the recovery teams, drawn in this case from the coastguard, navy and fire brigade, is an extremely challenging task with the vessel tilted 90 degrees, with visibility beneath the water limited in places to little more than a couple of inches and a series of confined spaces onboard to check. The dive crews are having to swim through all manner of debris, marking their inward route with thread so as to ensure the way out is clear in the event of an emergency such as the ship slipping off the rocky shelf on which it is presently balanced. Pre-dive briefings are being delivered with the benefit of large plans to illustrate which parts of the vessel can be searched, with laminated copies issued to divers to take with them. Clarity of communication and confirmation of instructions in this manner is vital. Fitness tests are being undertaken to ensure the divers are fit for the arduous conditions ahead of them, and dive times are being strictly limited.



Picture courtesy of 233627's photostream

Costa itself was prompt to issue a press statement, to express their great sorrow. The words "we're very sorry" flowed without hesitation – such important words for a company to use towards those bereaved and suffering, and which here were extended towards their customers and staff generally who will be distressed and anxious by the incident. Their priorities, they said, included the prompt repatriation of customers and crew, efforts to prevent an environmental disaster, and assisting the authorities. Whilst "human error" was promptly said by them to be the cause, one hopes there will be a thorough investigation so as to ensure all appropriate lessons are learned.

And so too is there a requirement for leadership on the part of the industry as a whole following an incident of this scale. In response, the Cruise Lines International Association, Inc. announced the launch of a Cruise Industry Operational Safety Review. Their members will, they said, be conducting internal reviews of their own operational safety practices and procedures concerning issues of navigation, evacuation, emergency training, and related practices and procedures. Human factors will receive a particular focus. There will be consultation with independent external experts, best practice and policies will be shared and any recommendations for substantive regulatory changes to improve the industry's operational safety will be shared with the IMO¹, the United Nations specialised agency with responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships.

The IMO itself has said it is the right international body to deal with safety of passenger ships and, in particular, a safety review after the Costa Concordia incident. As well as maintaining a close relationship with the authorities investigating the incident to ensure specific lessons are learned, the IMO's Secretary General has also tabled a review of Passenger Ship Safety on the IMO's Safety Committee Agenda for discussion in May 2012. Contributions for improving safety are encouraged from Member Governments and the industry. In the interim, he has called on all IMO Member States to ensure that their current national safety regulations and procedures are being implemented fully and effectively.

Those in the marine industry would be well advised to take this opportunity to review their own approach towards compliance with the ISM Code², shipboard and shoreside, the robustness of their efforts to prevent human error and their crisis management plans. Speaking up about potential improvements is to be strongly encouraged, as is staying abreast of the reviews now underway and the recommendations identified.

For those in other industries, especially those where passenger safety is an important priority, the background to the tragic demise of the Costa Concordia, and the response by regulators and industry, are bound to provide general lessons in good safety leadership in due course.

Whilst the waves surrounding the Costa Concordia might be beginning to calm as the recovery exercise is scaled down, the concern for passenger safety and preventing human error in general will undoubtedly force significant change in an industry which was, until now, regarded as having a good safety record.

¹ International Maritime Organisation

² International Safety Management Code