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The reporting culture

If you were looking for a perfect example of “blame culture”, the process which homed in on the individual responsible, rather than considering the cause of an incident, the shipping industry would have provided perfect illustrations. Just as long as you could determine whose fault it was that some untoward event took place – from a total loss to some over-carried cargo, that was the job done and appropriate vengeance could be then wreaked on the hapless individual.

We have moved on somewhat from this lamentable situation, although we remain far from the alternative “just culture”, which endeavours to discover why something went wrong and to learn the lessons, in order to prevent a reoccurrence. A just culture requires honesty and a willingness for people to admit and to report near misses and they won't do that if they think that the book is going to be thrown at them.

But things are improving, suggests Captain John Rose, the maritime director of the Confidential Hazardous Incident Reporting Programme, which provides a vital vehicle for this important process. You don't change attitudes overnight, but increasing numbers of people are now reporting incidents, secure in the knowledge that their report won't come back and bite them, and that a useful service is being done to international marine safety.

CHIRP was born out of a UK aviation initiative and its maritime offspring is now robust and attracting international reporting, which is as it should be in a global industry. Captain Rose reckons it might take ten years to change our old blaming ways into a just culture, but he is greatly encouraged by the way that some sectors, notably tankers, are rapidly catching up. Even more important, while more individuals feel sufficiently confident to report incidents, some of the major operators and ship managers are themselves transmitting reports from their own systems that they believe can have wider promulgation through CHIRP.

The maritime director believes that the CHIRP Maritime Feedback, which provides lessons derived from the reports, four times per year, now reaches more than 200,000 readers each issue, 67,000 copies sent internationally as inserts in a variety of maritime publications. It will soon be translated into Chinese, using an arrangement with Dalian Maritime University and 2000 recipients now read the Feedback on email. The system is also being made easier for people to make reports, using different forms of media.

Funding, which a few years ago was very problematical, is now much more secure, with the continued sponsorship of Trinity House, the Lloyd's Register Foundation, Britannia P&I Club, the International Foundation for Aids to Navigation and Cammell Laird, along with other valued supporters.

CHIRP is also moving into new media, with some very professional DVDs showing how incidents develop and using the Warsash simulators to get the message across. It employs Facebook, with a couple of thousand followers, and Twitter. An App is being developed. The time between a report being made and lessons being published is also being speeded up. The

promotion of the programme is accelerating with the appointment of ten “ambassadors” throughout the world and the appointment of a staff member in Hong Kong, acknowledging the reality of how global shipping is distributed these days.

The programme itself is operated by what might be considered a “skeleton” staff at its base near Farnborough, but backed up with an advisory board 26 strong, who can review reports with their accumulated expertise of some 750 years. The system is wholly secure – Captain Rose emphasises that there never has been an incident where a reporter or the incident itself has been identified. This itself builds confidence and is reflected in a large number of reports coming through.

The importance of the near miss, he notes, cannot be under-estimated and its reporting part of an embedded safety culture both aboard ship and in the operating company. Most are familiar with the principles of the Heinrich Safety Triangle which shows that for one fatal or very serious accident, there will be many hundreds of near misses and the reality that by tackling the latter you reduce the risk of the former. So there is a real requirement to report near misses and a ship or operating company not reporting these is not a perfect operator, but living in cloud cuckoo land. Indeed, some might suggest that a failure to report indicates both the preservation of a blame culture and a very inadequate safety management system.

Captain Rose acknowledges that the reporting from different shipping sectors varies greatly. The tanker sector clearly identifies with the principles, but at the other end of the spectrum are to be found the containership sector and dry bulk carriers. Considering the number of reports about bad containership behaviour, this might be thought somewhat lamentable. However, the growing superyacht sector, often it seems, exhibits appalling safety practices and perhaps needs to learn from its mistakes, invariably reported by others.

As the report archive builds up, CHIRP is able to identify trends and this clearly increases its value to the industry at large. It identifies accidents or near misses that are caused by bad design or lax safety management aboard ship. It prefers to refer to “causal factors”, rather than the “root cause” used by the professional accident investigator. And in its Maritime Feedback pages, simply and succinctly illustrated, will be the “lessons to be learned” about every report.

Where will CHIRP go from here? Certainly there will be a great emphasis on spreading the word, notably in eastern waters. The shipping sectors which fail to report near misses perhaps ought to look at their behaviour. Captain Rose would like to see more reports from engine rooms, as engineers report rather less enthusiastically than their deck department colleagues. He is very anxious to get the fishing sector involved and other maritime areas, like ports and terminals could report their near misses with advantage. Reporting is integral to safety and as the CHIRP maritime director points out- “everyone gains and good safety management doesn’t cost you anything”.

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