

Opinion



Capt. Jeff Parfitt Director of CHIRP Maritime

Getting to the root cause

In January of this year, I took over from John Rose as the Director of CHIRP Maritime, the world's foremost confidential hazardous incident reporting programme for mariners.

In a career that has spanned four decades, I have spent the last 20 years in the offshore industry on dive and subsea construction vessels, an industry that enjoys an enhanced safety culture, a culture borne out of necessity from the inherent dangers of the business: anchor handling; saturation diving; dynamic positioning and heavy lift operations. Now with CHIRP, I have returned to the world of global commercial shipping.

What I have found most disturbing, is that the reported incidents are very similar to those that were occurring when I first went to sea in the 1970's. Incredibly, some cases are worse, such as with lifeboats. Mariners are still dying in enclosed spaces, still dying in circumstances related to working at heights, still dying in mooring incidents and electrical/mechanical isolation failures. What's more, lifeboat incidents have increased to alarming levels that were not even considered a hazard 40 years ago.

So, what is going on? Or more to the point, what is not going on?

Why are these incidents still occurring when all the lessons have been learned? Why are the lessons not being implemented or acted upon? In my opinion, the fault clearly lies with the shipowner/operator; with those who choose to pay only lip service to their own SMS and view it as a necessary compliance rather than a professional enhancement; those who hold IMO convention with contempt whilst presenting a veil of integrity in their pursuit of profit at a cost to the often vulnerable and dependent seafarer.

All too often, incident investigations focus only on the causal factors, the human element. All too often the seafarer takes the blame and in major cases the Master is frequently held as responsible. Yet the Master and crew must work within the parameters of the resources available to them. They can only operate within the endemic company safety culture. All too often the Master is restricted in his/her ability to make vital decisions based upon his/her perception of the reality and that

person may well be operating under duress.

CHIRP Maritime takes the view that root causes require to be identified and acted upon. Such questions need to be asked: What was the culture that the Master was forced to operate under? How suitable was the ship for its intended purpose? What budget did they have? How competent were the crew? How effective was the SMS? Most importantly, what support and guidance did the Master receive from the shore management?

Most of us are aware that incidents are the result of a series of failings that when aligned result in the unfortunate event. Those failings need to be traced backward to the root cause. We believe that all too often, that root cause leads down the gangway to the shore management and that shore management must take their portion of responsibility that led to the failing.

In cases of major incidents of criminal negligence against the Master, those responsible ashore should be equally scrutinised and subjected to the same judicial penalties. Perhaps then, there will be a sea of change that brings to a halt the routine isolation, scapegoating and increasing criminalisation of the Master.

The challenge as I see it, is for CHIRP Maritime to continue to represent those who wish to highlight and share their experience with a view to enlightening others so that they might benefit. CHIRP will continue to challenge those who seek to avoid their responsibility and we will do this with the support of professional industry bodies and superior Shipowners and Managers who recognise that critical introspection is a course to ethical and professional enhancement for the global mariner. In the meantime, CHIRP continues to expand and evolve as we are able to build on our growing access to world expertise and influence in matters of seafarers' health, safety and environmental impact.

And so the ancient struggle continues. The struggle between the Shipowner and the seafarer, from the Plimsoll Line to the Manila Convention, it seems never ending.

CHIRP Maritime putting the Mariner FIRST
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