

Creating a culture for working safety aboard merchant ships

Dr. Solomon Y.H. Chen^{*}, Capt. Jackie H.K. Hu^{**}, Dr. Peggy S.L. Chen^{***}

1. Introduction

The iceberg theory of occupational accidents show that the causes of accidents result from the unsafe work, inappropriate human behaviour, the interaction between human behaviour and work producing hazardous situation, and inappropriate management system. As these causes induce death and serious injuries, which implies the importance for a business organisation to establish a culture for working safety.

A corporate culture is a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterises a company. It can affect the way employees feel, act, think and make decisions. Therefore, a safety culture of an organization can be defined as a set of all members' common attitudes toward, goals of, values and faiths in safety. It is also about all employees' abilities and behaviours that demonstrate on the safety practices.

2. Seafarers' working habits and culture

The safety of shipping mainly relies on seafarers. Crew that are not responsible, of weak crisis awareness, of insufficient knowledge, and of belief on empiricism often are used to have habits of violation of policies and make human errors. The formation of crew's bad working habits and culture probably results from three main areas, such as inappropriate working management, working atmosphere or culture, and crew's perception of working.

Inappropriate management: It includes job misarranged, weak command of managers and ineffective supervision, which consequently will dilute crew's awareness of working safety.

Working atmosphere or culture: Work atmosphere and culture on ship will influence crew's attitude toward working. If senior crew with the habit of careless and sloppiness, they would repeatedly affect new crew's working manners.

* Associate Professor, Department of Merchant Marine, Taiwan Ocean University; Secretary General, Taiwan Association of Maritime Safety and Security

** Senior Executive Vice President, Yang-Ming Group; Chairman, Taiwan Association of Maritime Safety and Security

*** Lecturer, Department of Maritime and Logistics Management, Australian Maritime College

Crew's perception of working: perception of working such as 'I just do following others do', 'I can not solve the problem which others can not solve', 'it is safe as long as there is no accident', 'today is safe as yesterday was safe' are usually circulated on board. These perceptions may cover potential symptoms of hazard and prevent crews from taken precautions against accidents, which will result in a bad quality of safety management owing to ineffective implementation of working rules and regulations.

3. The safety culture of shipping company

The varying levels of commitment, competence, and compliance with safety can be best explained in terms of the three types of culture in shipping companies. The first type is called avoidance culture. Companies belonging to this type avoid complying with the existing international rules and regulations, and they trade within those areas where they know such regulations are not adequately enforced or are simply ignored for the right price. The second type is compliance culture. The majority of ship owners may have this type of culture. The strategy is to adopt a minimalist approach to safety compliance. Ship operators in this category strive to maintain the minimum safety standard and seek to comply in the cheapest possible way regardless of the long term costs and benefits. The final type of culture is safety culture. A small but growing number of ship owners belong to this group; typically they are the large and leading operators trading both within the region and with the rest of the world. This group's approach is characterised by a growing focus on quality management, which typically serves as the framework within which safety requirements are met.

The compliance culture indeed can facilitate the achievement of better safety management and performance through the forces of cohesion, norms, leadership and motivations without increasing ship owners' expenditure. Concretely, the function of a good safety culture is to cohere crew's values, aims, and norms of safety, through which crew can be led to achieve self-control and self-administration to adjust their own values in and behaviours toward safety, and to comply with all the standards and code of conduct of safety, and, furthermore, to explore creativity enthusiastically.

4. Establishing a culture for working safety on board

Policies and practices of safety are used for regulating crew's operations through reward and punishment to pursue the working process implemented successfully. Nevertheless, such management system is not sufficient to achieve the goal of a good safety performance. Establishing a culture that place the safety issue as the highest priority is also necessary and crucial to facilitate the achievement of the goal. With this culture, crew can be nurtured to have higher awareness of safety and to feel an obligation to safety-without concern for repercussions.

The concrete strategies to establish a safety culture on board include (1) management and crew's commitments to safety; (2) the provision of safe works and safety policies and practices, and confirmation whether crew have high awareness of and good attitudes toward

safety prior to work; (3) the safety issue related to work is of the priority to be paid attention than other matters; (4) a safety culture is identified as part of corporate culture; (5) effective vertical and horizontal communication about safety issues between managers and crews; (6) clear policies in relation to reward and punishment for safety matters; (7) adequate provision of training; (8) establishing and maintaining a safe workplace and working environment; (9) implementing risk management of routine work; and (10) establishing a good evaluation and control system of safety management.

5. Conclusion

In addition to promoting a safe operation, the importance of a safety culture is that it makes good business sense for a shipping company as alternatively it would be costly to the company, including monetary cost and company reputation. Shipping companies need to evaluate their current culture of safety and move toward the third type safety culture mentioned previously. Leadership and management unconditional commitment as well as crew's participation play vital roles in establishing a safety culture. Changing culture takes time, however, it must to be done for improving working standard and quality so that the costs resulted from accidents can be avoided and further tangible benefits can be generated for companies.