

# Safety column

## What failure has taught me

Let's go back some 18 years in time. The local time was 03.10. I was standing my watch as a Second Officer on a large container vessel, bound for Irago Pilot Station in Japan in the next 90 minutes. On a container ship bound for a Japanese port, the concept of 'estimated time of arrival' actually means *accurate* time of arrival. Arriving earlier and holding ground near the pilot station is not an option either. Precision is the name of the game.

Traffic is usually quite dense in this area. On this occasion the weather was bad, and visibility was down to about 3 miles. We were approximately 20 miles from the pilot boarding grounds with two vessels headed on a parallel course – a car carrier on the port bow and a Taiwanese container vessel on the starboard quarter. Both vessels were on the same course at approximately the same speed of 20 knots, positioned at a distance of about one mile from us. The trouble started at this point.

Without warning, the vessel on the port bow turned on an almost perpendicular course to starboard in an attempt to cross our bows. Turning to port was not a choice, given the shallow waters on the side. Slowing down or stopping the engines never occurred to me, despite bright luminous 'safety first' signage, full engine controls on the bridge and the Chief Engineer standing by right behind the bridge panel. My immediate reaction was to call the Captain. The Captain arrived in less than a minute. Dressed in his pyjamas and trying hard to adjust to night vision, he quickly assessed the situation and ordered a hard over helm to starboard.

With the helmsman on the wheel, I immediately switched to hand steering and the helmsman executed the order without further delay. As we were swinging to starboard, the Taiwanese vessel on the starboard quarter adamantly maintained her speed and course. It took us about 45 seconds to swing past the entire length of this ship. Those were the longest 45 seconds of my life. I have no idea how close we came to collision, but to put things in perspective, a heaving line thrown from the bow would have effortlessly landed on this vessel. I would have no difficulty calling it a near miss.



Arrival times are exact

### The aftermath

The next morning nothing seemed usual. I went up to the bridge to lay out the passage plan for the next port. The captain was reserved in his greetings. Where before he had been friendly, he was formal and brief. By this time the able seaman had spread the word. Everyone I met on the way up to the bridge was smirking as if they knew how I had screwed up on the night before. The Chief Engineer caught me on the alleyway, curious to know why I did not pull back on the engine telegraph or crash-stop the vessel. 'After all, this is exactly why these devices are designed, Nippin,' he said in an uplifting tone. I felt humiliated, apologetic and ashamed and said: 'I'm sorry Chief, but I have no idea why I did not.'

“ If you ever experience failure – and by this I mean faced with an undesirable, unexpected situation – stay positive, pay close attention to the situation and share your experiences without guilt, shame, fear or resentment. ”

Perhaps it would be appropriate to say a few words about my past performance here. Arriving on time in port or negotiating heavy traffic had never been a concern for me. I was in my third year as an independent watch officer. I had never missed arrival time in port nor shown hesitation in a difficult situation. But things changed from here. The 'Call Master' position shifted earlier and earlier for every port arrival. Navigating high traffic areas suddenly became a big deal with doubled watches, increased presence on the bridge from the Captain and detailed night orders. I started to lose confidence. In every manoeuvre I performed, my watchman could sense my anxiety no matter how hard I tried to maintain calm.

At the end of my tenure of duty, I knew it wouldn't be good feedback from the Captain. But I never expected just a dry goodbye. The message was clear – 'I hope I never get to sail with you again.'

Almost a decade passed by and memories of this unpleasant experience kept recurring. For a long time, I felt responsible for the entire situation. I should have never allowed my own vessel to become sandwiched between the two vessels. I should have slowed down the vessel or crash-stopped her in the moment. What was the big deal in delaying the vessel? At the most we would have arrived a few minutes late. Why so much hesitation? And why did I not call the Master sooner? Questions such as this kept haunting me for a long time and I went into a negative spiral for a considerable time.

### Changing the approach

This is not a unique story of a near failure. Failure is always an option in this fast-paced, competition-driven world. However, as the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl stated, 'between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies

our growth and our freedom.' I have changed my approach to failings and chosen to respond to failures in a more positive way. You may have noticed that my earlier response to failure was centred on my own self. But over the years I have started to pay closer attention to the context of the situation. Here is what I have learnt from this experience:

1. As professionals, we always have more than one goal. Arriving on time and arriving safely are not compatible goals.
2. I genuinely did not know why I did not crash-stop the vessel despite all the instructions and standing orders. We do not know what we do not know. We should therefore not judge ourselves harshly over split second decisions that may seem stupid to others in hindsight.
3. When we experience failure, our natural recourse is to search for problems within. It may well be that the system itself is designed to fail us.
4. I was a competent officer, and yet I ran into a near collision. Society often views failure as linked with incompetence, but there is no clear linkage.
5. Our natural tendency is to treat failures as isolated from everyday work. In fact, the behaviour that we exhibit in a failed situation is not far from the behaviour that we exhibit in everyday work.

More generally, if you ever experience failure – and by this, I mean faced with an undesirable, unexpected situation – stay positive, pay close attention to the situation and share your experiences without guilt, shame, fear or resentment.

Acknowledging failures and sharing our experiences is not a sign of weakness. It is a commitment to learning and development and moreover, an immense source of inner resilience. If we are genuinely striving for a safer future, let's talk about failures openly and honestly.



Sharing experiences gives everyone an opportunity to learn

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