



Fit for the Job

Officers on passenger vessels have always had an extra weight of responsibility and that is even more true today when one person – the captain – is ultimately accountable for up to 8,000 lives and a billion dollars' worth of hardware.

There are tools, however, to ensure that the captain and his deck and engine officers are fit for the job.

Said Bengt Schader, senior maritime psychologist at Marine Profile in Sweden: "We help our clients with psychological assessments of maritime officers. Our aim is to identify officers who, for personality reasons, are fit for a certain job, as well as identify those who are not.

"One of our overall objectives is to counteract the impact of human error and achieve higher safety."

Counteracting Human Error

Schader explained that the goal is to understand whether an officer is a stable, judicious and composed person with good capacity for situational awareness and for coping with stress. These are the main safety-critical aspects, important for counteracting human error. However, Marine Profile is also interested in the personality as a whole, including such issues as motivation, drive, personal aims, loyalty, reliability and also sociability, communication and leadership skills.

"In case we find an officer falling short, we give a very clear recommendation to reject," Schader added.

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Broad Evaluation

He said that contrary to popular perception, airlines' assessments are narrower and normally cognitive and performance-based. They are interested in measuring capacities needed for flying an aircraft so they focus on such things as IQ, capacity for multi-tasking, ability to concentrate, reaction time, visual discrimination, stress coping, cooperation, motor coordination and the like.

"The assessment we do for the maritime industry involves some of these capacities," Schader said, "but also assessment of personality traits such as self-image, biases, drives, leadership skills, emotional stability, maturity, self-confidence, mind-set, attitudes, habitual moods, habits, sensitivity, inhibitions, fears, fantasies, strivings, personal ethics, relationships, sociability, openness and potential for development."

He noted that the longest flights are around 18 hours and the majority of flights last less than four hours. Aviation pilots are continuously monitored and led from the ground and others actually make more decisions than the pilots do. A maritime

officer, on the other hand, often lives and works for several months in a more complex organization involving more people and in more diverse situations than aviation pilots.

Personalities

The accident with the Germanwings crash into the French Alps has been an eye-opener. Some shipowners have tried to copy the aviation industry because they were considered to be in the forefront of psychological assessment.

"Today, we have indications that the co-pilot was depressed, and had suicidal or self-destructive thoughts and even obsessions," Schader commented. "Such tendencies can be identified using proper assessment tools such as the personality tests we use."

He continued: "The case of the Costa Concordia may be different and we know less about the captain's personality. From a psychological perspective, it seems likely that after the grounding, he became handicapped by a state of denial. He did not take proper actions, he delayed evacuation, he minimized and misinformed people about the severity of the situation, he didn't react to suggestions from other officers and, finally, he tried to escape."

Schader said that a disposition for denial, part of a psychological makeup, is one definitive sign that can be detected and would lead to a clear, unambiguous recommendation to reject.

Other important character traits, according to Schader, could be an authoritarian disposition on the part of the captain, overestimation of his own abilities, underestimation of present demands, willingness to take risks, poor judgment, a grandiose self-image, and an urge to be admired or to impress others.

Crisis Response

Most people do not know how they will react in a crisis situation, according to Schader. "Our experience is that some anticipate they will not function very well, yet they manage, while others are certain they will cope with whatever crisis might come, yet they don't.

"Experiences of actual behavior in a crisis can lead to increased self-confidence or a totally demolished self-image.

"The best evaluation methods today are observations in simulators and psychological assessments, offering an understanding of the psychological defenses and how emotions might overwhelm someone, leading to lost presence of mind and breakdown of intellectual contact with knowledge, training and rational behavior."

Since 1994

Since 1994, Marine Profile has made around 2,800 assessments of seagoing officers, deck and engine, seniors and juniors, of some 40 different nationalities and from about 60 clients. The majority of assessments have been for the cruise industry.

Today the company works with major cruise lines in the U.S., Europe and Asia. ■