Seafarers need instruction in “teamship” as well as seamanship, says Helen Sampson, of the Seafarers International Research Centre.

On August 25, a 15,829 dwt chemical tanker, Bow Eagle, collided with a French fishing vessel Le Cistude off the coast of Brittany. As a result, the fishing vessel sank with the loss of four lives. The Bow Eagle did not stop and is now at the centre of a major inquiry by the Norwegian Maritime Authority. A winchman involved in the rescue of the crew lost his life, and a survivor from the fishing vessel narrowly escaped death after nine hours clinging to the wreckage in the water.

The vessel Green Lily sailed from Lerwick harbour in very bad weather on the command of the captain whose judgment was subsequently found to have been silently questioned by at least one officer aboard. The vessel subsequently foundered and is now at the centre of a major inquiry by the Norwegian Maritime Authority. A winchman involved in the rescue of the crew lost his life.

This incident is but one example of a more pervasive problem. It is a problem that has been acknowledged in the airline industry and is often referred to as “destructive obedience”. This term recognises the capacity for individuals to sit back and say nothing to challenge the problematic behaviour of a superior officer even when their own, or others’, lives are in jeopardy. The National Transport Safety Board (NTSB) in analysing 37 serious airline accidents (23 of which involved fatalities) concluded that in 25 per cent of cases the accident could have been prevented by the non-flying officer challenging the behaviour of the flying officer (who was senior in 81 per cent of cases).

While we may initially find it difficult to believe that people find it so hard to challenge authority that they will even endanger life rather than speak up, examination of our own individual behaviour might prove illuminating. Many of us have sat in the passenger seat of a car, or on the back of a motorbike, driven by a stranger, or someone whom we feel unable to challenge (perhaps a boss?), silently fearful of an accident as a result of poor or reckless driving. Most of us, if we are honest, are likely to recall some incident in our lives where we have not acted as we thought proper or prudent because of the presence and/or behaviour of another individual. The truth is that, for most of us, challenging the behaviour of others is difficult at the best of times and we find challenging people whose authority we recognise and respect even more problematic. Aboard ships seafarers are no different, and we should not be surprised when, in the absence of intensive training, they act just as we would ourselves in similar situations.

The airline industry has taken active steps to address this problem, and has introduced practice in challenging the behaviour of those in authority into its simulator training programmes. In some of the more imaginative courses in maritime training establishments across the world similar training scenarios are being practised. However, even these non-mandatory courses may have little impact on such events in the shipping industry. Ordinary seamen do not receive such training in today’s maritime environment.

Critical members of the bridge team, and the ones who are arguably most in need of training in raising concerns with senior officers (as they have the highest power differentials to cope with), are surely the ordinary and able bodied seamen who are at the top of the power structure and have to deal with the authority of their officers. Yet, critical members of the bridge team, and the ones who are arguably most in need of training in raising concerns with senior officers (as they have the highest power differentials to cope with), are surely the ordinary and able bodied seamen who are at the top of the power structure and have to deal with the authority of their officers.