

THE SIRC COLUMN



The development of a shipboard safety culture is a requirement of the ISM Code, but how far is it actually happening across the industry? Nick Bailey of the Seafarers' International Research Centre is trying to find out.

Safety is everybody's concern. Nobody wants to get hurt or injured. Indeed, it is widely held to be a fact of human nature that, in general, people do their best to avoid pain and injury. Nevertheless seafarers continue to get injured or killed at sea. The question then is: why does this continue to happen?

To address this, it is important to recognise that much of how we behave is shaped by where we live and work. Crew members aboard a ship are not isolated individuals but occupy numerous relationships to one another. It is not just personal relations and interactions that are important, but also organisational ones. For example, there are hierarchies of rank, of age, and differing relations between work

Understanding shipboard risk

groups, i.e. catering, engineering and deck. Moreover, workplaces are highly regulated spaces in which there are ways of doing things. Some of these will be explicit in terms of written rules and procedures, but much will be implicit and understood as the way things are done in this company or on this ship.

The point is that seafarers are social actors operating in a particular social setting. Hence, when thinking about why incidents occur, it is necessary to look beyond the immediate cause, e.g. that no safety harness was worn, and inquire as to the factors that led to this action. The reasons will be different from case to case but may include such things as: the ship was about to sail and the safety harness was in a store at the other end of the ship. In turn, reference to these factors raises another level of questioning as to why equipment wasn't more readily available, which may raise questions about the company and their attitude to

supplying equipment. Likewise, it could be asked why there was such a rush, and answers may refer to the captain's attitude or company pressure to sail on this tide.

The search for an explanation often stops at the level of the individual, when it would be more appropriate to cite the way things are organised on board and more generally within the company. These types of answer relate to the safety culture within the company. This can be understood as the beliefs and attitudes that people in a company or organisation have towards safety. When the organisation has a good safety culture, everyone in the organisation makes safety their top priority.

Research in shore-based industries has shown that managers need to take the lead in developing a culture of safety, but equally important is the active participation of everyone in the company. This is what the International Safety Management (ISM) code is meant to



AN exercise on board the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) vessel RRS Ernest Shackleton.

achieve: the creation of a culture of safety. The system is based on the effective management of shipboard risk. Risks must be identified, assessed and appropriate steps taken to remove or manage them. This responsibility goes beyond fitting guards to machinery or producing procedures to do tasks. It includes ensuring that there are enough people who are right for the job, properly trained and sufficiently rested. Additionally, they must be properly resourced, have access to the right equipment, have enough time to do the job, and the conditions should allow for work to be carried out effectively and safely. Furthermore, there needs to be a climate in which individuals take responsibility for safety as much as the company management. While some companies may be well advanced in developing a culture of safety, it is not clear to what extent this is happening across the industry, despite the fact that all companies are required to implement ISM.

Whatever the situation, the fact that seafarers are still being injured clearly shows that there is room for improvement. As a response to this situation, Lloyd's Register has created the Lloyd's Register Research Unit within the Seafarers' International Research Centre (SIRC) to undertake research into human element issues in ship operation. The unit will carry out a series of studies looking at different aspects of safety at sea. The first project aims to find out what seafarers, ship managers, and others in the maritime industry perceive as the most important issues. We want to know what you think is important, what the dangers are at sea and what can be done to make work safer. With this information, those in maritime administrations and company management will be in a better position to determine which issues to focus on to create a culture of safety across the industry as a whole. The Lloyd's Register Research Unit has been conducting interviews with seafarers and ship managers and questionnaires are currently being distributed. If you receive a questionnaire, you have the opportunity to contribute your opinion to help improve safety for everyone.