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New regulations not the answer

Safety: Eddie Janson

Captain Eddie Janson of MariTrain AB, instructor and consultant in maritime safety, points the Shipgaz spotlight at safety related matters.

In the last five months there have been two groundings that have reached the headlines. In October 2011 M/V Rena grounded on the Astrolabe Reef off New Zealand and in January this year the Costa Concordia run aground just off the shore of the island of Giglio in Italy.

These groundings have a lot in common. First of all, they should not have happened. Secondly, the Captains on both vessels have been blamed and jailed before any investigation has been completed. Thirdly, in both cases we can suspect lack of Bridge Team Management as one of the causes for the grounding.

I will try not to speculate too much, but just refer to information that has been made public.

On the M/V Rena, both the Captain and the Second Officer were arrested, charged with dangerous activity involving ships or maritime products.

» To change unsafe behavior regular training and commitment from the top is needed«

Captain Eddie Janson, is the head of MariTrain AB.

The Captain risks USD 10,000 in fine and imprisonment up to twelve months. The Captain of the Costa Concordia was detained for questioning after the grounding, but in the public opinion he is already found guilty.

He is referred to as the most hated man in Italy. In most countries jurisdictions, one prerequisite for being fined or sentenced to jail, is that there was an intent to do harm. I am quite sure that none of the Captains intended to put their vessels aground.

The big question should be "Why do vessels run aground and how can we prevent it from happen again?"

There is not an easy answer to that question. We have never before had such advanced navigation equipment as today. We have ECDIS, DGPS's and Radars, but still vessels are running aground.

We do not know if the equipment was in good working order on the two vessels, but if we look at groundings in general they are very seldom caused by equipment failure.

A common answer is to blame it on the human factor or just to call it human error. That is an easy answer and most often the Captain is blamed for the incident.

First of all this is totally contradictory to the ISM code, the company shall "assess all identified risks to its ships, personnel and the environment and establish appropriate safeguards" and "ensure that accidents and incidents are investigated and analyzed with the objective of improving safety."

For me it is very clear that a grounding must be an identified risk for a shipping company. The appropriate safeguards should be such that they will prevent the vessel from running aground.

I have seen several Root Cause Analyses ending with different kinds of "human error" and the solution to the problem is punishment. But the purpose of a Root Cause Analysis is not to find someone to blame, it is to prevent an undesired event from happening again. We have to ask, why was it possible to make this error? What safeguards should have been in place to prevent it?

Did the vessels have a proper passage plan programmed into the ECDIS, including correct safety margins that had been tested, discussed by the bridge team and approved by the Master before departure? If the plans have been made correctly it should have prevented the vessels from grounding providing that the plans were followed. Most likely the passage plan in each case was not followed and the question is why?

There can be many reasons for that,

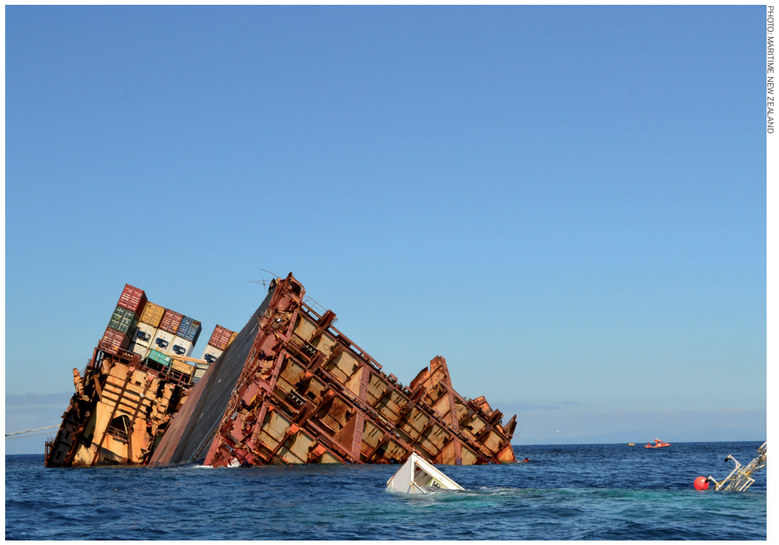

PHOTO: MARITIME NEW ZEALAND

The wreck of Rena on the Astrolabe Reef, New Zealand.

»The way to prevent groundings from happening again is not to make new rules and regulations«

speculations have circulated that the Costa Concordia passed close to shore for entertainment of the passengers. It has also been said that this was something that was done every now and then. If that is true it is a typical example of an unsafe act that has become "the normal way of doing it". If this is the case, no one in the Bridge Team will challenge a "normal" deviation from the plan.

THE GROUNDINGS

→ The Rena ran aground on October 5, 2011, on the Astrolabe Reef, New Zealand.
The Costa Concordia ran aground on 13 January, 2012, just off the shore of Isola del Giglio, near the western coast of Italy.

For the M/V Rena that run aground at 17 knots, we can also speculate that the passage plan was not followed. The Captain and the Second Officer were on the bridge at the grounding.

It is possible but not likely that none of them were aware of the deviation from the plan, but still they ended up on the ground. I see this as lack of proper Bridge Team Management, if the bridge team had been alert, someone on the bridge would have challenged the deviation.

It is easy to believe that there is a lack of safety culture in Costa based on the statement done by Costa Crociere CEO Pier Luigi Foschi. He blamed the grounding solely on the Captain. Already two days after the accident he said "I can't deny there was human error". One of the cornerstones in a good safety culture in any company is commitment from the top.

M/V Rena's owner, Diamantis Manos of Costamare Shipping Company S.A. has been much more sensible in his statements, a few days after the grounding he said "It will be inappropriate for us to speculate on the cause of the grounding at this stage".

So the way to prevent groundings from happening again is not to make new rules and regulations. New regulations will not change human behaviour, but training can. If a company shall live up to the standards of the ISM code, mandatory training is not enough. To change unsafe behaviour regular training and commitment from the top is needed. *

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