

Effective safety management system

The right attitude, motivation and commitment start from the top.



Safety management systems require support from top management

Top management's commitment to safety must go beyond the signatures appearing on policies and procedures.

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Procedural non-compliance is often singled out as the leading cause of accidents. Why is that the case? Were the procedures too cumbersome? Were the procedures too impractical or, perhaps the crew did not believe in the Safety Management System (SMS) and were not motivated to make it work.

Support of the SMS onboard

Effective SMS depends on the willing participation by those who carry out the work activity, i.e. the crew. Although the company's policies and procedures may be properly worded, there may be no buy-in by the crew onboard and other staff ashore because the commitment from the top management is not sufficiently visible and apparent. For example, the QHSE policy of the company may state that 'crew safety and protection of the environment are top priorities'. However, in reality the management may encourage deviation from such policies when faced with commercial pressures. Every expectation of deviation from policies plants doubt in the seafarers' mind and compromises the legitimacy of the organization's leadership. Such expectations, although may be complied with, could lead to loss of trust in the SMS.

Secondly, developing shipboard work procedures ashore without consulting those who will carry out the work on board generally leads to the seafarers showing indifference towards the procedures. Adherence to procedures depends a lot on seafarer's perception of the practicality of the procedures. If the procedures are perceived as impractical, the likelihood of non-compliance is high and audits and inspections may not be able to detect every time the procedures are circumvented.

“Practice what you preach”

To improve SMS compliance and thereby reduce the probability of accidents happening, top management needs to have the right attitude and motivation to be able to show their commitment to the company's SMS. *Attitude* is the ability to respond positively or negatively to issues related to compliance with the SMS, whilst *motivation* is what influences the seafarer to ensure compliance. *Commitment* is simply to do what you say and to “walk the talk”. When this comes from the top management, it makes safety more meaningful and has a cascade effect which reduces the probability of accidents happening.

In its preamble, the ISM Code states that '*cornerstone of good safety management is commitment from the top*'. 'Practice what you preach' is the mantra the Fleet Managers, Directors and CEOs of the Company must live by.

Further reading

Loss prevention poster type: [asset-hyperlink id: ebcfb5f67124d4ea2b26c7607269734](#)