



# The dark side of organizational improvisation: Lessons from the sinking of Costa Concordia

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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** High-reliability organizations operate in highly regulated sectors in which the main concern is ensuring the safety of people and goods. Despite high levels of formalization, organizations have to be sensitive to contingent situations and ready to face the unexpected, so the role of the people in command remains crucial. When unanticipated events and contingencies arise, organizational improvisation comes into its own. Improvisation is the deliberate fusion of design and execution in a novel production entailing the cognitive, rational, and event intuitive interpretation of prescribed rules and standards of conduct at various levels of aggregation. Standardization and improvisation are often represented as two conflicting demands rather than as necessarily interdependent; hence, the possible presence of improvisation in high-reliability organizations has been left underexplored. While most of the extant studies on improvisation have stressed the wisdom of improvised choices, not all improvisations are so successful. In this article we illuminate the dark side of organizational improvisation by analyzing the notorious case of the sinking of the Costa Concordia. The case shows how conformity to the formal adoption of standards and compliance to them can provide a shelter under which impromptu adaptation can be pursued, expressing the negative side of improvisation.

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## 1. Not plain sailing

On January 13, 2012, at about 9:45 p.m., the cruise ship Costa Concordia—operated by Costa Crociere,

a subsidiary of Carnival Corporation—was sailing in the Tyrrhenian Sea. The cruise liner was heading north from Civitavecchia, the port city of Rome. The Concordia was more than 952 feet long and had a beam of more than 116 feet. The liner was outfitted with approximately 1,500 cabins and that night carried 1,023 crewmembers and 3,206 passengers.

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While the vessel was cruising in calm seas and overcast weather, the captain, Francesco Schettino, issued the order to ‘salute’ the Isola del Giglio, an island on the western coast of Italy. A salute involves sailing close by landfall as a form of spectacle both for passengers on board and on-lookers on land, who can gaze up at the behemoth of the deep close up. The sail-by—an out-of-route maneuver that brings a ship close to shore to salute those on land—resulted in the Costa Concordia hitting a rock in the proximity of the island. The impact tore a huge gash in the port side of the hull, which soon flooded parts of the engine room, causing the critical arrest of the propulsion and the electrical systems.

The order to abandon ship was not issued until over an hour after the initial impact. The ship was gradually listing and sinking in shallow water in calm seas, with no possibility of restarting either the engines or the electrical systems. In the meantime, the captain instructed his crew to tell the passengers that the vessel was simply experiencing a blackout and there was no need to worry. The same story was given to the maritime authorities. Later, as the ship was still sinking, Captain Schettino left while there were still many passengers on board. The evacuation eventually took over 6 hours and not all passengers were evacuated. That night 32 people died. In addition to the loss of human life, there was also damage to the economic and natural environments of the Isola del Giglio. Some other, more recent cases—such as the sinking of the Korean ferry on April 16, 2014, or the crash of the Germanwings airplane on March 24, 2015—show that even in high-reliability organizations in which procedures and operational standards are supposed to ensure reliability, individual conduct—both in normal and emergency conditions—can create disasters (Roberts, Bea, & Bartles, 2001). The analysis of the sinking of Costa Concordia offers a case for reflecting on how improvised and noncompliant actions can jeopardize organizations, even in systems that apparently cannot be ‘flawed by design’ (e.g., Ketchen, Snow, & Pope, 2015; van der Vegt, Essens, Wahlström, & George, 2015).

These occurrences suggest that despite the veil of compliance with standards and procedures, improvisation can create disastrous outcomes, even in high-reliability organizations. In particular, the Costa Concordia case is one of improvisation as deliberate extemporaneous action conducted in parallel to and under cover of formal planning and veiled by formal authority. The focus will be put on the discretionary autonomy of leading individuals who deliberately decide to improvise around the existing standards. To date, the literature has neglected

the possibility that planning and improvisation could coexist, seeing improvisation merely as a creative way to bypass constraining formal rules. Nonetheless, this case shows that improvising can mask divergent actions under the veil of formal compliance. Furthermore, while improvisation can help organizations face the unexpected, this case demonstrates that clear planning does not necessarily impede dysfunctional forms of improvisation, which can expose the dark side of formal authority.

## 2. Organizational improvisation in action

Improvisation involves “dealing with the unforeseen without the benefit of preparation,” and when done by the organization as a whole or by its members in its name, it can be constituted as organizational improvisation (Hadida, Tarvainen, & Rose, 2015, p. 440). At the individual level, improvisation happens when “employees adjust their work in real time to emerging information or are stretched beyond their routines to deliver a novel solution to the problem” (Hadida et al., 2015, p. 447). A superficial analysis of the collision of Costa Concordia could lead to the conclusion that the captain was simply violating the maritime safety rules by ordering what the Costa company later defined as an “unapproved, unauthorized maneuver” (Senauth, 2013, p. xii). However, we argue that Captain Schettino’s decision and actions related to the sail-by salute were not mere disobedience but a form of organizational improvisation, performed both with the acquiescence of the line of command and the compliance of the crew (Knoll & van Dick, 2013; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), thereby constituting a state of unreflective obedience (Milgram, 1974). To examine this view, we will present an analysis of the case as reported by the media and as it emerged during the initial judicial processes. While other crewmembers in positions of command have admitted their guilt without further investigation, the captain’s sentence is subject to appeal.

### 2.1. The founding dimensions of organizational improvisation

Despite the fact that research on the subject has highlighted different aspects, a minimal formal definition of improvisation involves three conceptual dimensions (Cunha, Cunha, & Kamoche, 1999; Cunha, Miner, & Antonacopoulou, in press; Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001; Moorman & Miner, 1998a):

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