



Nippin Anand

# CAN PEOPLE IN CONTROL LOSE CONTROL?

## SURFACING THE MYTHS WITHIN NARRATIVES

After the Costa Concordia accident, the captain was vilified for failing to live up to society's expectations of people in control. In this article, **Nippin Anand** challenges the prevailing narratives surrounding this and other accidents, revealing myths that shape our understanding of human behaviour during crises, especially in situations of traumatic stress.

### KEY POINTS

- **Societal myths in a crisis:** Human pilots possess adaptive, creative, and ethical decision-making. Prevailing narratives about the Costa Concordia disaster highlight a societal tendency to create myths around tragic events.
- **The compliance myth:** Societal myths influence perceptions of individuals in control in high-risk industries during crises. The compliance myth emphasises rule-following, while the defiance myth glorifies defying rules to establish order during crises.
- **Freeze mode and decision making:** Traumatic stress can lead individuals in crisis situations to enter a 'freeze mode', affecting their decision-making abilities.
- **Empathy and support:** Societal expectations of individuals in control during crises should be reconsidered to foster a more empathetic understanding of human behaviour and to provide adequate support structures for those experiencing traumatic stress.





On the 13th of January 2012, the Costa Concordia ran aground off the Giglio Islands in Italy, resulting in the death of 32 people. One issue that stood out to me in this accident was that the captain became the 'main cause' of the accident. If, like most people, you think this was because the captain came too close to the shoreline, he abandoned the ship 'too late', or he deserted the ship before all the passengers were evacuated, then you are not alone, and these beliefs reflect media reporting.

But the allegations made against the captain were far from the truth. Reflecting on the work of the French philosopher Rene Girard, these are myths that give meaning to misfortune. Girard asked a somewhat obvious but provocative question: can't you see it is a myth when an entire society uncritically embraces such narratives without asking a single question?

But we are neither the mob nor 'average people'. We are professionals working in high-risk industries. Given the theme of this issue of *HindSight* – People in Control – it may be appropriate to begin by asking how our society thinks about people in high-risk industries. For this article, 'people in control' would mean people in charge of making decisions about the day-to-day operations of high-risk systems. This would include pilots, surgeons, ship captains, nuclear power plant operators, drilling engineers, oil refinery managers, and many more. These professionals are typically closest to the hazards in time and space, and while they are somehow 'in control', control is distributed in many parts of the system. So, we should try to understand what gives meaning to such myths in our society about 'people in control'. One day, it could be us in lieu of Captain Francesco Schettino.





One way to approach this accident is to falsify the myth. I could take you through the details of the court proceedings, my interviews with the captain of the ship, academic articles, and books to help you understand that what we have heard so far about the captain's behaviour is far from the truth. I recently published a book that comprehensively discussed this incident, called *Are We Learning From Accidents?* But I will deliberately choose not to follow this path of falsifying the myth. Rather, let us turn the question around and ask ourselves: *"Why does the 'Captain Coward' myth appeal to us as much as it does?"*

There are at least two dominant myths in the Western society to understand human behaviour: **the compliance myth** and the **defiance myth**.

## THE COMPLIANCE AND DEFIANCE MYTHS

The compliance myth is that accidents happen because people fail to follow rules. 'Rule following' and 'duty of care' are common expressions. In an accident, we are quick to point out which rules were breached, and which procedures were not followed without becoming too concerned with the contextual relevance of those rules. That is also how we think about the behaviour of people in control in a crisis – compliant or non-compliant.

The defiance myth is that people create order in the midst of chaos, even if it means defying the rules. People in control are judged based on their ability to fight against the odds to lead us to salvation. In the defiance myth, there are both heroes and anti-heroes fighting against each other. The hero's job is to liberate the oppressed from the oppressor and ensure justice in the society. Life is a struggle centred on the premise of competition, success, growth, and intellect.

Stories of both myths are linear – 'once upon a time' with a happy or unhappy ending. The problem is that most people who have lived through a crisis do not fit neatly with the compliance myth or the defiance myth. Life is not as straightforward as following the rules or going against the odds to produce safe outcomes.

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## A TRAUMATISED CAPTAIN

Various official and media reports illustrate that on the night of the accident, the captain was experiencing traumatic stress:

*"After hitting rocks which tore a 70-metre-long hole in the side of the Costa Concordia, Schettino rang Roberto Ferrarini, an official manning the company's emergency room. In a recording of the conversation, the court heard him say, 'Captain Palombo told me, "Pass by, pass by!" I passed by and hit the bottom with the stern. I am destroyed, I am dead, don't say anything to me.'" (Kington, 2013)*

*"First mate Giovanni Laccarino said that the Captain put his head in his hands and told the officers on the bridge: 'I messed up.' During the trial, Mr Laccarino told the court that he was using his Playstation in a crewmate's cabin when the ship hit the rocks. He rushed to the bridge, where instruments showed that the ship had lost propulsion, but was surprised at the captain's calm demeanour.' He was completely lost,' he said. 'He was out of his routine mental state. He was under shock. He wasn't the person I knew.'" (Winfield & Sportelli, 2013)*

*"Ms Canessa, the navigator, also said Captain Schettino showed chronic indecision as he contemplated the loss of his ship. 'I was saying to him very insistently that he needed to do something, to give the general emergency signal, but he was telling us to wait,' she told the court, 'even as officers screamed at him to do so,' said Canessa. 'He told us to wait, he didn't give us answer,' she said.'" (Kington, 2013)*

In an interview with the Naples daily newspaper *Il Mattino*, Gianluca Marino Cosentino, the medical officer on board the Costa Concordia, also mentioned the long delay before abandoning ship and accused Schettino.

*"Everyone was looking for the captain. As a doctor, I thought he appeared upset and no longer rational. He did nothing to coordinate the rescue. Personally, I was very surprised to see Schettino out of uniform on the quayside after midnight." (Lloyd, 2019)*

## DECISION MAKING IN A CRISIS

In a crisis, decision making is a dynamic, continuous process of sensemaking. Moment by moment, as we build a coherent picture of the past by giving meaning to our experiences, we are also faced with a future full of novelties and surprises. During the crisis, as the captain was working out the extent and location of the damage to the ship, new information was being brought to his attention by his team. This information was sometimes unclear or misrepresentative, and on other occasions conflicted with

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Francesco's own beliefs and identity as a captain. Under extreme stress, our experience of time can be distorted. What we hear and see starts to conflict with our goals, threatening our identity and even our existence.

Interestingly, when a ship is on fire or sinking, we often use the metaphor 'ship in distress'. But only living beings experiencing distress. Under traumatic stress, our life support systems – nervous, respiratory, endocrine, digestive, skin, and cardiovascular – all begin to tell each other that something is not right. Then, when our homeostasis is out of balance, our emotions become disconnected from our reasoning abilities.

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A question that comes to mind is that despite all the evidence suggesting that the captain was suffering from trauma, and knowing that decision making is severely impeded in a trauma, neither the public media nor the official report refers to the captain's state of mind

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during the crisis. In fact, as I sift through many other examples of maritime accidents, trauma and distress are rarely acknowledged in accident investigations. Why is this?

Perhaps it is because a society – seduced by the myths of compliance and defiance – finds solace in scapegoating a professional rather than attempting to understand a

person's psyche. A narrative that depicts a captain in distress does not sound like a superhero myth - a captain in uniform, working out the optimum move in the midst of a crisis, with everyone around the captain doing exactly what the superhero expects. Captain Francesco Schettino absorbed all the sins of our society in terms of design, regulation, operating standards, and the insatiable demand for cheaper, better, safer cruises. Instead of being a superhero who could absorb all the flaws of shipbuilding and operations, he 'allowed' distress and trauma to take over his decision making.

I am left with more questions than I have answers. Where was the support for the captain? Where were the structures to help him in the traumatic situation and with traumatic stress? What culture had been cultivated on the bridge? Why are people in control expected to be superhuman in a crisis? What kind of culture has been created such that captains can't listen to others below them in the hierarchy? These are questions far beyond the scope of simplified stories of compliance and defiance.

## REFLECTIONS

Understanding human behaviour does not come from some objective reality out there woven into timelines, evidence and factual reports. These are narratives that we create, share and believe to give meaning to human suffering, and they contain hidden myths. Perhaps we can learn to be more understanding, empathetic and forgiving, and less judgmental about people in control when they lose control.

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