



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

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KEYWORDS

Organizational improvisation;
High-reliability organizations;
Managerial illusion;
Authority;
Costa Concordia

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):

1. the convergence of design and performance (*extemporaneity*);
2. the creation of some degree of novel action (*novelty*); and
3. the deliberateness of the design that is created during its own enactment (*intentionality*).

Furthermore, the process of improvising often involves working with an *improvisational referent* (Miner et al., 2001), such as an internal or external benchmark or a prior version of an action pattern or previous plan. To this extent, improvisation represents a special type of unplanned action as it entails a deliberate new design, conceptually excluding random change. Thus, not all unplanned action is improvisational: “The condensed articulation of these three dimensions [extemporaneity, novelty, intentionality] results in a minimalist definition of pure improvisation as the deliberate fusion of the design and execution of a novel production [. . .] some degree of both is required for an activity to match this definition. Without this, improvisation collapses into the already-developed domains of innovation, organizational change or unintended outcomes” (Cunha et al., in press). The reconstruction reported by the maritime authorities during the trial of the incident of the Costa Concordia can easily be linked to organizational improvisation, as we have defined it above.

2.1.1. Extemporaneity

“The sail-by was planned out by Schettino before departing from Civitavecchia, noted on the chart and recorded on the integrated navigation system. . . . [The Captain] told the Navigation Officer: ‘Come here, we plot a course to pass close to the Giglio and make the sail-by’” [Third Officer’s deposition, 01/28/2012].¹ Captain Schettino and the navigation officer had already planned a route compatible with sailing by the Island of Giglio before departure (IMIT, 2013). The initial plan for the route was designed so that the vessel could cruise safely, keeping a proper distance from the shore of the island at a conventional navigation speed. Only later, around 9:03 to 9:11 p.m., did the captain order the ship to go very close to the shore: “Let’s get very close to Giglio, I love doing these ‘salutes’” (IMIT, 2013). In this case, extemporaneity unfolded as the captain confirmed his intention to perform the sail-by (performance) while the ship was actually approaching the island. In fact, from 9:29 p.m.

to 9:45 p.m. (when the collision occurred) the ship was involved in a risky sail-by salute, maintaining a speed of over 15 knots before the collision with a submerged rock that tore a huge hole in its side.

2.1.2. Novelty

As it emerged in the trials, the captain admitted to having done such sail-by salutes in the past. On this occasion he planned to approach the island from a different entry angle—from the southern cliff of Le Schole—allegedly so that the ship could be even closer to the island (Mandryk & Osler, 2012). While approaching the island, the captain made a phone call. To do so, he used someone else’s phone, since according to the rules he should not engage in conversations while maneuvering. The phone call was with a retired former captain of the Costa. The retired captain, a native of Giglio, was actually somewhere on land that day. During the trials, it was debated whether the salute was addressed to the ex-captain—despite his not being there—or whether it was performed to please one of the restaurant managers, who was also from the island. Regardless, before the collision, the captain engaged in a phone conversation with the retired commander of the Costa asking him about the safe distance for passing by the island; the former commander strongly discouraged Schettino from performing such a salute. Later, the retired captain recalled the incident: “[The headwaiter] phoned me. I was surprised. He told me ‘I’m athwart the island of Giglio’ and passed me over to Schettino, who said: ‘We have pleasure in doing a sail-past 0.4 miles off Giglio’. . . . I could sense he was in awe of me. In years past, he had sailed with me but I was slightly irritated because a captain was asking a captain something he ought to know. The seabed is marked [on the charts]. . . . So I told him to sail clear, to give the island a wide berth. I advised him not to do it” [Retired Captain’s deposition, 01/30/2013].

2.1.3. Intentionality

The actual behavior of Captain Schettino can be seen as an enactment in breach of maritime safety rules (Weick, 1988). After having intentionally planned the sail-by salute, the captain came on to the bridge and ordered the helmsman to move the rudder into manual mode so navigation would have to be performed visually. “I was navigating by sight, because I knew those seabeds well. I had done the move three, four times” [Captain’s deposition, 01/19/2012]. Both the ship’s and the Coastguard’s instruments would have indicated that the vessel’s actual route—monitored by GPS—posed danger, because any deviation from the planned route entered

¹ This and all other depositional quotes accessed from <http://tribunaledigrosseto.it/>

into the navigation system activates an alarm. Inactivation of the alarm system neutralized any possibility to signal that the ship was navigating too close to the shore.

2.1.4. The improvisational referent

Although the practice of sail-by salutes dates back to ancient times (e.g., to salute crewmembers' family on land), it is sometimes currently used to provide onboard tourists with a better view of the places the ship passes by. Cruise companies aim to provide passengers with a spectacular experience economy, which the salute heightens (e.g., Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Within the specific context of cruise ship routines, despite implying a breach of major rules, the practice acquired a degree of legitimacy (e.g., Weber, 1915/1947). Yet, despite prior practice, when Captain Schettino had performed a similar sail-by with the same vessel (see Mandryk & Osler, 2012), both maritime regulations and the company's internal code of conduct would rule that the Costa Concordia was following an unsafe practice by conducting a salute of this nature.

The concomitant presence of extemporaneity, novelty, intentionality, and improvisational referents make Schettino's sail-by salute an organizational improvisation rather than just an impromptu deviance from standards and procedures (Table 1). Improvisation took place under the cover of two legitimate standards: one was the full autonomy of the commander's authority to determine both the route of the cruise and the decision to switch

to 'at sight' manual/touristic navigation; the second was the long-lasting maritime tradition of tolerating—if not praising the bravery—of such salutes. Indeed, the captain enjoyed some sympathy from his peers: “The biggest problem is not his seamanship, it's his personality. He has come over as a bit of a playboy and a joker. He's not. He's a very capable seafarer” (Captain Fredrik Van Wijnen, General Secretary of the Confederation of European Shipmasters' Associations, as quoted in Marszal & Squires, 2015).

The case shows how improvisation may unfold as a sum of deliberate extemporaneous actions conducted in parallel to formal planning under the veil of compliance with formal authority. The possibility of different operational standards (e.g., regular open-sea cruising vs. touristic navigation, normal vs. emergency conditions, manual vs. automatic control, personal vs. corporate communication devices and media) creates individual opportunity to juggle with compliance, choosing the standards with which to comply. To this extent, the discretionary autonomy of leading individuals permits them to improvise around existing standards and use formal authority to do so. The Costa Concordia case shows that clear plans and rules do not necessarily impede forms of improvisation. Although improvisation may have a 'bright side' of nurturing the organizational capacity of resilience (van der Vegt et al., 2015; Vogus, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 2010) when it is mobilized to face actual, unexpected risky situations, it may display a dark side when improvisation serves other aims and agendas, as will be discussed in the next sections.

Table 1. Organizational improvisation in the case of Costa Concordia

Dimensions of organizational improvisation	Evidence from the case	Enactors
Extemporaneity	<i>Design</i> : planning of a route compatible with the sail-by <i>Performance</i> : the sail-by while approaching the island	<i>Compatibility</i> between the planned design and the intended performance
Novelty	The desire to get even closer than before	Desire to <i>show</i> to be able to achieve superior performances
Intentionality	Deactivation of technology for assisted and monitored cruising	Actual possibility to operate <i>under the radar</i>
Improvisational referent	Maritime tradition “Spectacular experience” (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) Previous routes (organizational memory; Moorman & Miner, 1998a)	The existence of <i>traditional authority</i> representing (Weber, 1915/1947) a legitimacy claim equivalent to rational-legal norms, if not stronger than them Ability to handle risky situations (even when self-generated) as a component of professionalism (see Marszal & Squires, 2015)

3. The dark side of organizational improvisation

As framed by [Hadida et al. \(2015\)](#), organizational improvisation can unfold at three different levels—individual, interpersonal, and organizational—and with three degrees of intensity. The magnitude of its effects spans from minor (e.g., spontaneous practice), to bounded (e.g., expert leadership), to structural (e.g., hybrid-flexible organization). The behavior of Captain Schettino can be investigated at several levels: at the individual level as micro-improvisation in absence of shared common (organizational) purposes (e.g., [Cunha et al., in press](#)); at the leadership level by building on the organizational sharing—by the crewmembers—of the salute as a maritime tradition initiated by an expert authority; and as organizational memory because past performances anchor the salute in the structure of past routines ([Moorman & Miner, 1998b](#)). The attitude of organizational subordination validated the organizational legitimacy of Captain Schettino: the crew neither formally opposed nor did they mutiny.

The dramatic exchange of views between a crewmember (CM) and one of the lawyers (L) depicts the situation. CM: “[While approaching the cliffs] on the bridge, they were all silent, focused on doing the job.” L: “Were they all silent to go together towards a collective suicide? Was there a guru leading a sect to commit suicide that night? All silent without telling him [the captain] the ship was about to hit the rocks?” (ref. 04/15/2014). The crew was focused on the ongoing action, and thus silently concentrating on the task at hand, while the vessel was dangerously approaching the rocky shore. The crew appeared to be trapped in a liminal state between acquiescent and ‘quiescent’ silence, as conceived by [Pinder and Harlos \(2001\)](#). They refrained from speaking out *against* those in positions of command above them, which is more than understandable in a work environment such as a vessel, where hierarchy is strictly enforced and dissent might lead to insubordination. The captain limited information exchange to mere technical codes and coordinates, probably in order to not be recorded by the onboard instruments. In doing so he was configuring an “opportunistic silence” driven by “self-interest seeking with guile. . .with the purpose to mislead, disguise or confuse” ([Knoll & van Dick, 2013](#), p. 351). Information was being withheld by the captain; additionally, the crew were holding back opinions and signals of worry and fear in order to protect themselves from negative consequences that might flow from allusion of cowardice or, worse, allegations of insubordination. Individual improvisation contaminates the overall organization when performed by

its formal leader. The magnitude of improvisation increases when legitimated by technical competences or centrality in the trust network (e.g., [Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993](#)). “If he said he’ll make it, we’ll make it” was the common mood aboard ([Senauth, 2013](#)). The case of Costa Concordia instead unveils the dark side of improvisation along two complementary directions: the absence of wisdom and the possibility of improvising around the standards.

3.1. The lack of wisdom

Phenomena related to human stupidity have been under-investigated and under-theorized (e.g., [Alvesson & Spicer, 2012](#)). While most of the managerial literature concentrates on the positive side of organizational dynamics, recent studies address the lack of organizational wisdom (e.g., [McKenna, Rooney, & ten Bos, 2007](#)) characterizing behaviors and decisions. In the first proceedings of the trial, the Prosecutor’s reprimand (ref. 01/26/2015) addressed Captain Schettino both as a ‘smart idiot’—meaning somebody feeling so confident as to generate dangerous situations—and as a ‘reckless optimist’—someone combining optimism with overvaluation of their actual capabilities. Building on these two cases, the prosecutors synthesized the emergent category of the ‘reckless idiot’ in which both the smart idiot and the reckless optimist cohabited, as if the captain was two-headed in the prosecutor’s reprimand (ref. 01/26/2015). The autonomy and the discretion of the formal unvirtuous leader (i.e., the captain of the vessel) led to dysfunctional forms of improvisation that jeopardized the whole organization: both the ship and the company operating the business.

3.2. Improvising around the standards

High-reliability sectors and organizations ([Roberts et al., 2001](#)) tend to be very formalized, with safety being a major concern in running the business. Rules enable the imperative command of a hierarchical organization, such as the crew of a cruise ship. Although the actors in command should leverage rational competencies in formal organization ([Weber, 1915/1947](#)), standards and procedures are nonetheless incomplete by definition because they relate to specific conditions and parameters of action (e.g., high-visibility vs. low-visibility cruising, normal route vs. detouring) that need not be enacted ([Weick, 1988](#)).

The existence of degrees of freedom in the enactment of rules gives people in command the discretion to choose which standard to comply with

(e.g., the assessment of the condition of danger or emergency). Captain Schettino planned the route for the salute in advance and, together with the navigation officer, noted the route on the chart and recorded it on the integrated navigation system. In doing so, he complied with cruising maritime standards. When the ship reached the planned point, he switched to manual navigation, which is also allowed in specific conditions—such as visibility—and in compliance with specific standards. In doing so, he improvised in order to hide his actions beneath the surface of the formal organization (Miller & Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2013). His behavior can therefore be identified as a way of playing around the standards by using different legitimate procedures—even the deactivation of technology. Nevertheless, in a clear state of managerial illusion (Ciborra & Lanzara, 1994), the captain performed showboating in order to demonstrate his superior seamanship; this deviated from the organization's major priority of not endangering the ship, the crew, and the passengers.

This case shows how compliance to standards can guarantee organizational mandates and objectives only up to the point at which autonomy in decisions allows the adoption of other standards. Choosing to route offshore of Giglio instead of sailing in open sea could be held to be a legitimate decision up to the point when the captain ordered the sail-by salute; in doing that, he switched to the other legitimate standards of manual navigation. So, close to being in breach of the first standard—namely a minimal distance from the shore—he switched to the other standard. On top of that, since the captain was not allowed to use his mobile phone while maneuvering the vessel—and was aware of the fact that the on-board systems would have recorded any conversation taking place on the bridge—he used someone else's phone to call the retired commander. The possibility of complying with different (micro-)standards within a framework of bravado and hubris inconsistent with the overarching mandate of the business—one of caution and wisdom—allowed a free form of improvisation. In synthesis, the captain's behavior did not display a case of noncompliant conduct through disobedience to formal rules, but instead revealed the possibility of juggling between the adoption of different standards and enacting adaptation of these standards.

3.3. From adoption to adaptation

The salute planned and executed by Captain Schettino synthesizes the adaptation of standards through two forms of adoption: (1) ostensive compliance and (2) underlife improvisation (Clegg, Cunha, &

Cunha, 2002). Ostensive compliance captures the deliberate attempt to comply with one standard at a time (e.g., regular cruising vs. by-sight navigation), both separately allowed and regulated by the maritime rules. At the same time, the captain and his crew performed a form of underlife improvisation that took place in the informal and invisible organizational underlife (Manning, 2008), a space in which experiments could be conducted outside the dominant logic and formal organizational controls (Miller & Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2013). Such an underlife favors the unfolding of improvisation (improvising) over formalized procedures, the creation of hidden transcripts, and the stabilization of discourses “beyond direct observation of those in power” (Dailey & Browning, 2014, p. 24). Captain Schettino opportunistically took advantage of the different forms of real-time traceability and control from the maritime authorities by juggling with standards and adapting them to his plan. In fact, such a close sail-by at that sustained speed was traceless in the formal bureaucratic façade, and therefore formally nonexistent, as on the previous occasions on which such a maneuver was performed (see Mandryk & Osler, 2012).

3.4. Unveiling the dark side of improvisation

This case shows that even in highly formalized environments and in high-reliability organizations, some forms of improvisation are possible. Most of the time, the smart enactment of improvised action is vital in situations in which instruments are failing or protocols do not completely adhere with the experience of reality. In such cases, people in command attain the status of heroes if they are able to face risks and take on challenges. That is when improvisation shows its bright and salvific side. On the other hand, when the overall plan of action contradicts major mandates of the organization, such as in this case of ‘flirting with danger’ with respect to safety, improvisation displayed its dark and disastrous side. Disasters can happen under the shelter of formally defensible and standard operating procedures when actions enact and switch different standards and protocols, and officers are usually able to get away with doing so because control takes place either online (in real time) or off-line (e.g., ex post, via voyage recording systems).

4. Lessons learned

This article builds on a case that has gained worldwide notoriety because of the preventable loss of human lives provoked by a hazardous human

decision and the subsequent behavior of the captain and some of his crew in abandoning the sinking ship—an action we have not analyzed in this article. Nonetheless, adopting an improvisation framework provides additional arguments to those suggesting that the manslaughter was caused only by human stupidity, hubris, or blind self-confidence. Even in very regulated sectors, high-reliability organizations may be exposed to disasters when the autonomy of the main decision makers allows a sort of arbitrage or juggling around of standards with which to comply. Additionally, it is technically possible that the presence of human errors can disappear when voyage data recording is deactivated from radar control: for instance, could any standard or technological control prevent the crash in the sky of two fighter jets departing from the same airbase and assigned to two different routes and missions (e.g., Reuters, 2014) that suspiciously disappeared from radar and collided in a clear sky with perfect conditions of visibility?

Although built on a very peculiar case, this article contributes to wider debate about safety compliance and adherence to industry, sector, or company-issued standards (Table 2). The collision of Costa Concordia shows that even in very regulated

environments the lack of commitment to overarching values may neutralize the effectiveness of any possible standards.

In a business world in which compliance is pervasively spreading in many fields, from quality of products and services to financial reporting or corporate social responsibility to corporate governance, the promotion of values and a virtuous leadership seems therefore to be as important as the design and the enforcement of operational standards. Captains at sea, as well as captains of industry more generally, might activate different forms of arbitrage around the possible standards—or even cutting and pasting parts of them. In contexts in which the control that standards and procedures guarantee can be evaded by human ingenuity, improvisation can unveil its dark, dangerous side.

Several implications can be extracted from the present analysis. First, good practice in the form of compliance affords formal protection. Second, compliance with formal rules might sometimes be ceremonial, without impeding local improvisations that tailor practice to specific cases. In many sectors, even in high-reliability organizations, formal supervision and control can take place either online or

Table 2. The bright and dark sides of organizational improvisation

Organizational characteristics	Organizational improvisation	
	The bright side (potential advantages)	The dark side (potential risks)
Formalization (standards)	Adaptation of the standard for attaining the organizational goals and/or defending the organizational values (<i>ad hoc</i> execution, substantial compliance)	Organizational drift from organizational values and objective (formal compliance)
Multiplicity of standards	Adoption of the standard which is the most adept to the actual conditions	Choice of the standard/s which is/are the most aligned with extra-organizational aims “Cut and paste” of pieces of standards
Centralization of decision power Independence (of the leader) in assessing the external or internal operational conditions (i.e., emergency vs. normal situation)	Exercise of discretion in unexpected situations Resilience (Vogus, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 2010)	Autonomy in performing arbitrage or juggling among different standards
Existence of online and off-line operational procedures	Continuity in the organizational action	Possibility to display formal compliance as a façade for (substantially) uncompliant actions
Professionalism	Adherence to deontology Conformity of action among different individuals	Freedom of judgement Room for fulfilling personal needs (i.e., vanity, hubris, bravery)

off-line. Such a duality allows the possibility of improvising by adopting off-line modes of action where expected diligence or prudence would suggest otherwise (e.g., regular tracked cruising or operating under normal conditional activity). Third, organization is not nor should be an excuse for arbitrary interference in the lives of others. Pettit (1997) defines this capacity as domination. Domination entails “*the capacity* [which may or may not be exercised] to interfere, on an arbitrary basis, in certain choices that the other is in a position to make” (Pettit, 1997, p. 52). It is the limits to arbitrariness that differentiate authority, which is strictly circumscribed and legitimated, from domination, which is neither limited nor legitimated. Arbitrariness refers neither to the interests of others as represented by authoritative rules freely consented to nor their opinions with regard to the breaching of these. Authoritative rule can provide a political framework that provides security against domination; it provides the conditions for non-domination, limiting the asymmetry of organizational relations.

The implications of this position of ‘civic republicanism’ are profound in organizational terms.² First, organizations should be governed by just laws and rules; that is, the basis for their systems of authority are legitimate in the lack of constraint they impose on those subject to them to oppose actions deemed arbitrary. In ordinary language terms, limits to managerial prerogative are inscribed. The lack of limits in this case, where the crew’s freedom to resist arbitrary judgment was abridged by the simple fact of the captain’s power to act as he chose, led to disaster and death. Griffin, Learmonth, and Elliott (2015, p. 319) advise that in the absence of such limits, “the opportunity to discuss and deliberate decisions should be institutionalized.” They go on to cite the eminent political scientist Robert Dahl (1986, p. 111): “If democracy is justified in governing the state, then it must also be justified in governing economic enterprises; and to say that it is not justified in governing economic enterprises is to imply that it is not justified in governing the state.” To insist otherwise is to make the notion of being a citizen of democracy unintelligible: Domination cannot be acceptable in one sphere of life while formally proscribed in another.

Pettit (1997) proposed two different types of strategies against domination: the strategy of constitutional provision through the governance rules of an organization designed to afford protection to all those that enter into it and, second, the strategy of

reciprocal power to make resources equally available so that all individuals can defend themselves against arbitrary interference. In fact, the former should entail the latter. Simply put, the entitlement of being a captain, whether of a vessel or industry, in practice as well as in theory, should not entitle one to arbitrary interference in the lives of others, and others should have legitimate grounds and means for questioning captain’s choices. Out of such reciprocal obligations the values needed to steer good improvisation can be formed. Subordinates should have the right, the duty, and the obligation to speak up when non-domination is breached through arbitrary decision. Otherwise, any reckless idiot that makes it to the C-role will be untrammelled by organization members too cowed to give voice to whatever reservations they might harbor. In short, organization bureaucracy requires organization democracy. Under such a regime, the constitutive rules together with other checks and balances in the system would oblige leaders to participate in the democratic process because they know that should they fail to do so, they can be democratically outed and removed from their posts. Leaders’ improvisations should be framed by these leaders’ awareness of the interdependence of strategies of constitutional power, where external checks by institutionalized external authority may be alerted through strategies of reciprocal power in terms of internal rights to check and give voice (Hirschman, 1970).

In a more general sense, the discretion of the individuals in command is central to the interplay between the adoption and the adaptation of procedure and standards, so organizations should not assume that very educated and highly trained professionals—such as captains, pilots, or doctors—necessarily enact the required conditions of prudence and adherence to obligations. Such matters cannot be resolved simply through the control systems designed into the architecture of organizations. The possibility of governing a ship or plane from remote control centers might well enhance the vulnerability of organizations to a hacking attack or terrorist intrusion. In other words, in solving one specific problem, organizations may generate others. Similar cases have shown that practices designed to prevent existing risks can generate new dangers.³

Human discretion is central to negative forms of organizational improvisation in breach of clear rules. Recent examples of human-generated disasters suggest that wicked problems associated with the management of high-risk systems can be dealt

² Civic republicanism is Pettit’s (1997) term; for its applications in practice see Martí and Pettit (2010).

³ See, for instance, the Korean ferry disaster of April 16, 2014, and the crash of the Germanwings airplane of March 24, 2015.

with by paying most attention to the dynamics of command and participation rather than just the structuration of bureaucratic routines and standards alone. The centrality of enactment leads to the conclusion that more attention should be dedicated to antecedents of human behavior rather than placing too much reliance on ex-post emergency procedures. Amongst such antecedents, the absorption of major overarching principles—such as safety, corporate values, or organizational culture—could represent a valid complement to rules and standards in enacting compliant, safe behaviors. Organizations should consider creating communication channels to report deviations from core values, promoting cultures of speaking up (i.e., no-blame culture), stimulating collective heed, and making subordinates accountable for dangerous silence. In the absence of these considerations, professionalism is vulnerable to human expressions of vanity, hubris, and self-confidence and can be enacted at intermittent paces and with diverse aims, as this case confirms. Practices such as distributed leadership, while potential solutions, can generate confusion in the hierarchy of authority in the absence of requisite checks and balances.

5. Conclusion

While improvisation has often been mostly associated with noble fine arts and novel creative outcomes, this article addresses its negative implications. The analysis of the collision of Costa Concordia displays how improvised actions can take place even in highly regulated environments and create organizational drift toward disastrous outcomes. The case shows how a sequence of actions that could be superficially labeled as just hubris, disobedience to rules, bad luck, or showboating is instead a consequence of bad choices resulting from illusions of authoritative control in the absence of effects that can moderate this illusion. Even in a sector characterized by high reliability (cruising) and high levels of formalization of standards and procedures, managerial dynamics can allow the organization to deny its own major mandate (safety). Organizations, even those designed to be highly reliable, can end up being vulnerable to human decisions that are not predicted by the system and that produce vicious circles that lead to disaster. That happens when the formal adoption of standards may allow forms of adaptation under the radar, yet under the shelter of formal compliance.

Some events are accidents waiting to happen. In this case, high discretion combined with an unlucky event to produce large-scale death and disaster that

no one intended. Both professionalism and rules are vulnerable conditions where the authority of the former is unchecked and able to override, situationally, the sense of the latter. The best antidote to the excess authority embedded in rights of command and control is espousal and tolerance of organizational democracy. Quasi-military organization, such as we find in highly professionalized bureaucracies, requires tempering with empowered opportunities for creative disobedience to counter authority's disposition for blind and silent obedience, or we must continue to expect the worst. Captain Queegs are an ever-present possibility when, in the words of that character played by Humphrey Bogart in the adaptation of Herman Wouk's (1951) novel *The Caine Mutiny* (Dmytryk, 1954), the crew can be told "there are four ways of doing things aboard my ship: The right way, the wrong way, the Navy way, and my way. They do things my way, and we'll get along."

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