LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM A SINKING SHIP

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DoI: 10.23862/kiit-parikalpana/2021/v17/i1/209017

ABSTRACT

Titanic. Just a single word is enough to ignite myriad emotions. Many ships have sunk and have been forgotten in the annals of history. But Titanic is different. It is just not a story about a sinking ship. It is a story about sinking humans. That a ship as big as Titanic could sink was beyond anyone’s imagination. But it did. Facts and folklore abound as to why it sank and what could have prevented it. Films have been made. Stories have been written, each capturing a part of the whole. So many wrong things happened in the darkness of one night. Precious lives were lost. The story is no different when a corporation sinks. It is just not about investors losing money. It is also about people losing jobs and their families pushed to penury. Like the captain of a ship, the CEO steers a corporation towards its goals. Profit is surely an important goal. But the welfare of employees is paramount. In this review article, the author draws leadership lessons from the Titanic story.

Keywords: Leadership, Crisis Management, Risk Management, Communication, Titanic.

Introduction

Titanic disaster has inspired many movies1-3, books4-12, memoirs and articles. Among all movies that were made on the disaster, “Titanic” is considered to be iconic. Produced in 1997, it starred Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio. This film captures many human emotions and validates the fact that human beings are not above fate. Bad omens can strike anyone anytime. We must all be prepared for all kinds of twists and turns of life. No one has ever imagined
that the beautiful maiden journey of Titanic will end in such a helpless way.

On 10th April, 1912, 2,224 passengers from Southampton (UK) boarded RMS Titanic. Her destination was New York City, USA. It was the largest ship on voyage at that point. After five days of voyage, it sank in the North Atlantic Ocean on 15th April at about 2:30AM. The reason of the disaster was the collision with an iceberg 400 miles off the coast of Newfoundland. The last port where it halted was Cobh (Queenstown) and that was on 11th April.

Twentieth century was known for technological progress - Elevators, airplanes, automobiles and wireless radio. Titanic disaster put a break on that path of human progress and made people introspect if technology is always for human good.

To find out the reasons of the disaster and to take preventive steps in future, there were public inquiries in Britain and the US. These inquiries led to major improvements in maritime safety by adoption of new laws, processes and guidelines. The most remarkable step was the establishment of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), which still governs maritime safety today.

Titanic had been designed to be the best in style, comfort and luxury. Many of the passengers in RMS Titanic in that voyage were rich and famous. Many of the wealthy passengers were industrialists, high-ranking government officials, businessmen, dignitaries and well known celebrities in different fields. Among all, the most prominent was the managing director of White Star Line shipping company J. Bruce Ismay. RMS Titanic belonged to this company. Mr. Ismay was being accompanied by Thomas Andrews, the ship’s builder from Harland and Wolff. The other important person was John Jacob Astor IV, heir to the Astor family fortune. He was the richest person on board. A year before, he had made quite a ripple in the media and gossip columns for marrying Madeleine Talmadge Force, a young 18-year-old woman. She was twenty nine years junior to him which was rare age gap for a matrimonial match. This
marriage had taken place after John Jacob divorced his first wife.

It is relevant to mention here that, there were nearly thousand emigrants from Britain, Ireland and Scandinavia on board. They were all travelling to North America for the prospect of a new life. Titanic had three classes of passengers - First Class, Second Class and Third Class. In the third class for over 700 passengers, there were just two toilets.

One of the contributing factors of the disaster was the missing binoculars. Some sources mention that those instruments were locked inside a cabinet by one ship officer who forgot to hand over the key to the person on duty next. The ship’s lookouts therefore had to rely on their eyesight alone.

A ship is as good as its boats. The ship was equipped to hold 64 boats, but carried just 20. Though this number was enough to comply legality, those were grossly inadequate for such emergency. Twenty lifeboats could carry some 1200 passengers, which was just half of the actual passenger load that day.

Titanic remained afloat for nearly three hours surpassing Captain Edward Smith’s hope. This long hours was enough for rescue had some nearby ship reached on time. Those hours witnessed acts of naked cowardice and extraordinary bravery. The captain stayed at the bridge to give instructions for rescue. The Marconi wireless radio operators continued sending their distress signals until the very end. Women refused to leave the boat leaving behind their husband and children. Some even did go to lifeboat leaving their pet dog.

It is interesting to note that the musicians played music till the vessel finally sank. Initially they were playing music at the first class lounge but later they shifted to the deck. While the passengers were waiting for their turn to get into the lifeboats, the musicians displayed enormous poise and kept entertaining the passengers. It is not known if this episode mentioned in many sources is a fact or not. But if it indeed true, it is humbling. Notwithstanding the crisis, the musicians did their job till the last. That is something very very exceptional devotion to the call of duty.

Some accounts mention that the White Star managing director Mr. Ismay initially helped load some of the life boats with the women and children. But later he stepped onto a collapsible as it was being lowered for taking the next batch of passengers. As per various sources, no women or children were in the vicinity when he abandoned ship. But history didn’t consider his act kindly. The world expected him to remain in the rescue mission till the last passenger was offloaded. He was criticized widely because he opted to escape the disaster leaving many others to perish. On the other hand Astor was more responsible and dignified. He displayed maturity in the face of such a crisis. He helped his wife Madeleine into a lifeboat. Later,
he pleaded to accompany her with the reason that she is pregnant and need his support. But his plea was not accepted. He could not join his wife in the boat. He kissed his wife goodbye and stayed back on the ship.

In his writings, John Maxtone-Graham, a very famous ship historian has compared the sinking of the Titanic to the Challenger space shuttle disaster in 1986. In the case of the space shuttle, the world realized the limits of technology. Challenger, the greatest and most sophisticated invention ever created then, had crashed and was lost in space along with the crew members. That was unbelievable and never crossed the mind of neither the common men nor the scientists. Both the tragedies were similar in many ways and triggered a sudden rupture in confidence. These accidents proved to the humanity that we remain subject to human failures and errors, in spite of our strong belief in technological infallibility.

Methodology

Content analysis method of qualitative data analysis has been made in this paper. The authors have mined historical information related to the Titanic available in old newspapers, books, biographies, interviews with survivors, court proceedings etc to find out the extent to which leadership qualities of the Captain contributed to the crisis. List of sources have been listed at the reference. It also looks into the leadership quality of the Captains of two other ships (Carpathia and Californian) which were nearby and responded differently to the SOS signals from Titanic. The paper concludes as to how some of the leadership qualities are universal and should be inculcated by good leaders.

Three Captains

In the story there is description of three ships besides Titanic - Carpathia, Olympic and Californian. The communication between the Titanic and others are worth knowing to understand the importance of information. Carpathia arrived at the site one hour after the mishap and Californian which was nearby reached there after three hours. The way the Captains of each of these vessels responded to distress call gives an idea about their leadership quality. Some sources said that Olympic was an unauthorized vessel busy in fishing in the sea and did not come for rescue as that would have exposed its legal shortcomings.

Captain Edward Smith of The Titanic

Edward John Smith was an English naval officer who served as commanding officer of numerous White Star Line vessels. While we cannot know for sure how he spent his final moments, it is known that Captain Edward Smith perished in the North Atlantic along with 1517 others on April 15, 1912. His body was never recovered. There is no concrete evidence whether Captain Edward Smith died in the disaster or survived. But during trial, witnesses described his valour even in the face
of imminent danger. He ordered his people to immediately lower the life boats. He ordered his men in charge of wireless communication to send CQD and SOS messages to other ships nearby. He asked his staff to gun shoot and flash lamps to bring attention of other ships. He displayed manly bearing to remain in charge till the end. He showed his sensitivity and concern for the safety of women and little children by ordering them to be the first to be helped into the life boats. But he was hugely criticized for his indifference to the danger of iceberg which culminated in that unnecessary tragedy. He should have been careful about such a danger in the sea to which he is not stranger. Even when he got the information about the iceberg from a nearby ship, he didn’t stop or slow down and maintained the high speed. When Titanic hit the berg, the impact woke him up and he rushed to the bridge only to find out that his ship had been badly damaged and that she would sink. He was also aware that 20 lifeboats, with a total capacity of 1,178, was not adequate for all the 2,200 passengers and crew members aboard in the ship that time. But he can’t be faulted on this account as that number of boats fulfilled the legal requirement. The number of lifeboats available in the Titanic exceeded the stipulation of British Board of Trade. However that number was grossly inadequate for any kind of crisis situation. The ship hit the iceberg and was massively damaged. The evacuation began after an hour or so of the accident. Due to lack of drill that day and also an unusual panic situation, evacuation effort was largely tentative and disordered. The lowering of the first lifeboat was made when there was chaos all around. Lifeboats were designed to hold 65 people but the first boat left with only 28 aboard. It was not known if they played it safe or otherwise as to why they carried such a low load. If it is Sunday morning, lifeboat drill is a must, but that didn’t happen on that fateful day. The captain cancelled the drill without any reason. This led to haphazard lowering of life boats. There is one allegation that the Captain was influenced by Joseph Bruce Ismay’s pressure to reach at the destination early to showcase the marvel at the maiden trip. But there is no evidence to prove that the Captain did attempt to bring the Titanic ahead of schedule at the destination. This is a historical controversy. But there are many reports that supported that he did not slow down the speed even when he got reports of the ice burg from nearby ship.

Capt. Arthur Henry Rostron of the Carpathia

When the news of Titanic reached Rostron it was late night and he was asleep in his cabin. He sprang up from his slumber and acted fast. He ordered the ship to change course at once and sped towards the Titanic’s reported position. Carpathia was 60 nautical miles away from Titanic when the news came. It took the ship three and a half hours to reach Titanic’s position.
In spite of late arrival, Carpathia could rescue 710 passengers and crew and took them back to New York.

Rostron’s quick thinking and prompt action paid that night. His proactive preparation en-route before it actually arrived at the spot helped rescue so many. He ran his ship at a high speed to reach Titanic as soon as possible.

As water rushed into the ill fated Titanic and was filling it fast, its crew shoot distress flares and blasted out SOS messages on the ship’s wireless. The message was received by Carpathia which was cruising at more than fifty miles to the south-east direction. Anticipating the worst crisis, it raced to the rescue spot with a rescue mission. It was not an easy cruise at all. The ship was at a distance, yet the captain took the challenge to cut through the ice and reach the Titanic. Rostron had ordered all non-essential power on the ship to be shut down to conserve power for the distressed survivors. He drove the ship at its peak so as to reach the spot early. The captain also instructed his crew to prepare and provision hot food, blankets, medical care and other essentials for the survivors. One of the authors of Titanic disaster Lindsay Sutton said: “Rostron and his crew were magnificent. They couldn’t have done more”. Rostron demonstrated extreme sense of humanity and leadership quality in the situation. He was quick to think and act which resulted in some rescue of the ill fated Titanic. Had the ship been nearby, the captain would have surely saved many more lives than it did that night. It was for this valor and responsible behaviour that earned Rostron all respect in the eyes of the survivors and others. He is worthy of all praise that showered on him from across the globe. Leadership qualities are seen in a crisis and Captain Rostron showed that enough in the rescue mission.

Capt. Stanley LordCalifornian

Stanley Lord, the captain of Californian, was conservative and careful. He took a more cautious decision about movement of the ship. He anticipated problem with the cluster of icebergs and had ordered the halting of his Boston-bound ship. That night he sighted ice field in the proximity and was wise enough not to risk a voyage. He was also proactive in communicating the hurdle to other ships in the sea. He had duly instructed his wireless operators to alert other ships in the area to the impending dangers of icebergs and they had complied with his instructions. Unfortunately wireless operators of Titanic didn’t give enough importance to the message from Californian and continued the voyage as usual. That was a big blunder and surely contributed to the disaster in the sea. But there was a big lapse from Capt. Stanley as well. Late in that night the staffs on duty of Californian spotted the flares from the Titanic and reported that to Captain Lord twice for his direction. But he was half
asleep and opined that the flares were probably “company rockets”, meaning signals between ships from the same group company. He dismissed the distress signals and gave no advice for action. The wireless office of the ship was shut down for the night as usual. It couldn’t receive the SOS messages blasted through out the night by Titanic. When the office re-opened in the morning those signals were picked up by the radio and captain got to know about the disaster. The Captain of Californian acted immediately but by the time it reached the scene, the situation was beyond redemption. The Titanic had already sunk. Dead bodies were floating every where. It was a precarious scene and almost no one was left for rescue.

Various judgement indicted Captain Lord who failed to respond to them in accordance with the diktats of humanity, international usage, and the requirements of law. Californian vessel was nearest to the Titanic and ignored the distress call. No one can absolve Lord from blame by any logic but perhaps circumstances conspired against him. He was unwise and whimsical that night. His retiring for the night without taking little more interest in finding out the reasons of gunshot took away all opportunity to act when the disaster was unfolding nearby. Due to the closeness of his ship to the Titanic, Captain Lord could have done respectable rescue operation in no time and could have saved many precious lives. But he could do precious nothing. In November 1920, Stanley Lord, ex-Captain of the notorious Californian, declared his intention to renounce his British citizenship and declare his allegiance to the United States.

Leadership Lessons:

1. A leader must be open to all kinds of information, whether good or bad. Had Captain Smith been sensitive to the initial warnings from the wireless team about the iceberg, the disaster could have been averted. He could have advised the crew to stop the voyage like the Californian.

2. Safety First should be the guiding principle of all leaders. Awareness about the SOPs and mock practice helps. In Titanic, Life Boat drill in the morning could have saved few more lives. There was delay in lowering of the boats and many boats ferried people much less than their capacity.

3. Poise under pressure is an essential quality of a good leader. Captain Smith showed exceptional leadership during the crisis situation to ensure the best possible salvage. He directed and oversaw the despatch of women and children in the life boats. In such a situation, there would have been stampede for survival without a leader. Men stayed back honoring the norm “Women and Children First”.

4. Clarity, Unity and Agility brings in better implementation. It is not individuals brilliance but a team's synergy that brings in success. Captain Rostron was quick to respond to the SOS from Titanic. He made proper
plan and inspired his team to act to the best of their ability.

5. A right action at a wrong time is a wrong action. Capt. Stanley was very much in a position to act, but didn’t. His ship reached too late near Titanic and was of no help. As human beings we should be sensitive to the distress of others and we should act without any delay.

Conclusion

A Leader makes all the difference. He is visionary and can connect the dots. He guides and inspires the team for ambitious goals. He also makes contingency plans to handle emergencies. Situations change and hence strategy also has to change. In modern times all organizations operate in a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) environment and leaders should be ready to handle crisis. While there can be one CEO or one Captain, there can be leaders across the organization. When the leadership is not concentrated at the apex but is spread across the hierarchy, the organization becomes more resilient and responsive. Leadership and empowerment goes hand-in-hand. Leaders must be generous in delegating and empowering the juniors to be leaders in their own areas of responsibilities. This is more relevant in large organizations where many times bureaucracy creeps in and slows down the decision making process. In short, a leader is one who creates more leaders, not more followers.

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