



DMi article

“Perhaps if we as a business community can learn the lessons from the Titanic, Covid-19 and Big Mac...”



Lessons from the Titanic

Following my recent article ‘Lessons from Wuhan’ which was a build upon the article that I wrote back in the 1980s ‘Lessons from Big Mac’ my next lesson comes from the Titanic.

There are many theories about the real cause of the loss of the Titanic in 1912 which range from a fire onboard in the ship’s coal bunkers, sub-standard rivets, charting the wrong course, going too fast, lack of equipment (binoculars) and change of plans (speed) mid Atlantic to try to beat the transatlantic crossing record. I am sure that many, if not all, of these factors contributed to the disaster and created a ‘perfect storm’! But are there business lessons that we can learn from the Titanic?

Among a number of theories is that mid Atlantic the White Star owners “instructed” Captain Smith to speed up in order to beat the transatlantic crossing record, despite Captain Smith’s protestation

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A prime mover in getting a division of Rolls Royce to Class “A” in the 1980’s, Dave has huge experience as an inspirational educator to many companies across continents in how to bring change through implementing Integrated Business Leadership. He spent 18 years with Oliver Wight, 5 years with The Delos Partnership and now runs his own company, DM Integration Limited.



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of the safety issues. Whether this is an accurate account or not it is a great illustration of how short-term changes to targets and objectives can create major issues and, in this case, an enormous human disaster. It also illustrates that the focus of targets and measures should always be aligned with strategic objectives. If breaking the transatlantic crossing time on her maiden voyage had been a strategic objective then many different decisions could and should have been taken during the design, planning, building and route/timing phases of the project including safety aspects such as the number of lifeboats and safety equipment could have been dealt with very differently. The target here is not the issue it is the late change, lack of time to plan and lack of alignment with strategy that is the problem.

Another theory is that the coal bunkers were on fire when the ship left Belfast, well before she sailed from Southampton. The belief was that bunker fires are difficult/impossible to extinguish and the best approach is to use up the coal which resulted in the ship in the early part of the journey going 'faster' than planned meaning that the ship needed to take a more dangerous route in order to avoid 'running out' of fuel several hundred miles short of New York. The lesson here is that short term 'firefighting' is often the cause of long-term issues and challenges.

A simple and practical lesson is the importance of process robustness and discipline. The report was that the binoculars were not available to the lookout due to them being locked on the captain's bridge. If the standard process had been observed, then perhaps the iceberg would have been seen earlier and the disaster easily avoided. The lesson here is that long term visibility and process robustness are key factors to ensure business safety.

Perhaps if we as a business community can learn the lessons from the Titanic, Covid-19 and Big Mac then we can embed these lessons into our business processes for the future.

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