



— SAFETY & OPERATIONS

# Expecting the unexpected: why true readiness goes beyond compliance

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I learned one of my most important lessons about operational safety not at sea, but behind the wheel of a car.

Shortly after getting my driver's license, I signed up for some personalised advanced car control training (because I wanted to race rally cars, of course). I'd already completed a few defensive driving courses, so I thought I was ready to handle anything. As we pulled into a deserted car park outside Canberra, I was eager to get started on honing my Scandinavian Flicks, slides, drifts, and everything else I thought I knew.

Instead, the instructor asked me to step away from the car and promptly threw a tennis ball at my face.

The message was clear: expect the unexpected.

Back in the car, he had me practicing double clutching and rev matching while also calling out every potential hazard I might encounter. I'd already learned the theory; if you're surprised, the average human freezes for about two seconds, and at 60km/h, that's 20 metres of travel before even reacting. But I hadn't yet internalised the reality that real-world hazards don't announce themselves politely.

The tennis ball changed that.

Fast-forward a few years, and a few thousand nautical miles, I've come to realise that lesson's relevant not only to individual performance, but also to teams that operate in complex scenarios. And, in my case, that's ships and ports.

Ships don't stop in 10 metres. And emergency situations, whether a machinery failure, a sudden weather change, or a navigational challenge, don't just test technical skills; they test the entire system - ships, their crews, pilots, tugs, port teams, and everything in between.

Compliance training often focuses on what should happen under normal conditions. But what about when the plan doesn't fit the situation? How do teams make decisions under pressure when time's short, information's incomplete, and ambiguity's high?

That's where the experience of High Reliability Organisations (HROs) and concepts like Naturalistic Decision Making (NDM) comes in. Industries like aviation and healthcare have long understood that technical skill is only part of the equation. Scenario-based simulation, cross-team training, and psychological safety - the ability for people to speak up, question, and collaborate without fear - are just as critical.

My own experience tells me that in pilotage and shipping emergencies, these elements are non-negotiable. It's not just about individual technical competence. It's about adaptive thinking, collaboration, leadership, and a culture that encourages the questioning of assumptions before it's too late.

The most resilient ports and pilotage operations aren't necessarily the ones with the thickest manuals. They're the ones where teams are prepared to anticipate, adapt, and recover together.

Preparing for emergencies shouldn't be seen as a checkbox exercise to satisfy regulatory requirements. It's an opportunity to build stronger communication, trust, and resilience across the entire port community.

Because when the pressure's on, it's not the checklist that saves the day. Nor is it only expecting the unexpected. It's the people, trained, trusted, and ready, who catch the tennis ball.

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