



Staying **SAFE** at sea – and in projects

By David Hillson

Sailing is becoming increasingly popular in the UK, both for pleasure and as a serious sport, perhaps driven by our success in recent Olympics. More young people are also taking up sailing, and the RNLI (www.RNLI.org.uk) ran a special education campaign during the summer to encourage young people to be safe at sea.

The SAFE campaign had four simple elements:

- Spot the dangers
- Always go with a friend
- Find and read the safety signs
- Emergency? Stick up your hand and shout

This simple set of messages contains all the important advice needed to stay safe at sea, and has probably saved lives this summer.

The SAFE campaign can also save projects, if we translate its four elements into the project environment.

The first step is to 'Spot the dangers'. The best time to do this is before you set sail, but it's also vital to stay alert while at sea as conditions can change quickly and new dangers can arise unexpectedly.

In the world of projects, the risk management process is designed to spot the dangers in advance, giving the project manager and team early warning of what might happen. When we see potential dangers in advance, we can plan how to respond in order to minimise our exposure. We can set a course that avoids the major risks and try to minimise the risks we can't remove. And like staying safe at sea, we need to monitor the risk situation constantly during the course of our project, staying alert for emergent risks and changing course where necessary.

So the first step to following the RNLI SAFE code for projects is to give proper attention to the risk management process.

The second piece of advice from RNLI to young sailors is 'Always take a friend'. There's nothing worse than getting into trouble on your own. Two pairs of eyes have a better chance of seeing potential dangers than one, and two pairs of hands can deal with most situations.

Most of the time project management is also not a single-handed sport, and the project team play a vital role in keeping the project on track and dealing with things that arise unexpectedly. The risk process should take input from a range of project stakeholders to ensure that as many risks as possible are identified and managed effectively.

The project manager who tries to go it alone may emerge as a solitary hero, but is more likely to miss something important and get into trouble.

In contrast the project manager who involves the team in running the project will have a wider range of experience and expertise to draw on when it comes to managing risks. In addition it will be helpful for every project manager to have an older and wiser colleague who they can ask for advice when they get into new situations outside their previous experience.

Project managers should always take a friend with them when they are managing an important or risky project.

The third RNLI SAFE element is to 'Find and read the safety signs'. These include both permanent signs that indicate dangers often encountered by sailors at this location, as well as temporary signs put up to warn of specific situations that are currently occurring. Projects can find similar 'safety signs' in several places. Firstly the project team should learn from the previous experience of others who have done similar sorts of projects before them, to avoid making the same mistakes again. The lessons learned knowledge base should contain a range of warnings about problems, issues and risks previously encountered, together with suggestions for dealing with these. In addition the routine project management processes developed by the organization provide tried and tested ways of addressing common challenges and risks.

These standard operating procedures should exist for a reason, and project teams must know them and follow them. Ignoring these 'safety signs' exposes the project to additional risks, but taking time to become familiar with them will be a worthwhile investment and could save the project from a lot of unnecessary trouble.

The final piece of advice to stay SAFE at sea is an essential last resort. 'Emergency? Stick up your hand and shout!' When all else fails and you actually get into trouble, don't struggle and sink in silence. Make some noise, attract some attention, get some help!

Too many project managers seem reluctant to admit when their projects get into difficulties. Perhaps it is part of an organizational culture which only rewards success, or maybe it comes from an attitude that project managers must be 'can-do heroes'. But refusing to ask for help when things go badly wrong is a sign of weakness not strength.

We need to know where to look for assistance, perhaps with a couple of more experienced mentors or advisors on hand. And we need to make some noise if our project is in danger of sinking without



This RNLI poster may well have saved many lives this summer

trace, so that we can be rescued and live to sail again. Getting help fast will prevent disaster and ensure that our project survives.

So project managers should thank the RNLI for providing some sound project management advice. The SAFE campaign made sure that more young people stayed safe while sailing at sea this year, and allowed them to enjoy this great sport without coming to harm. Following the same four SAFE principles can also save your project from sinking without trace, and ensure that you make it safely to your intended harbour.

About the author

Dr David Hillson, PMP, HonFAPM, FIRM, is an international risk management consultant, and Director of Risk Doctor & Partners (www.risk-doctor.com). He is a popular conference speaker and award-winning author on risk. He is recognised internationally as a leading thinker and practitioner in the risk field, and has made several innovative contributions to improving risk management. David is an active member of the global Project Management Institute (PMI) and received the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award for his work in developing risk management over many years. He is also a Fellow of the UK Association for Project Management (APM) and a Fellow of the UK Institute of Risk Management (IRM).



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