

Crowd and crisis management

Effective crowd and crisis management is paramount in managing an emergency on board passenger vessels. In the event of an emergency, passenger vessels face additional challenges to that of other vessel types, due to the added risk associated with passengers and therefore, crew need to be more vigilant and show greater awareness of the risks that are faced. To manage behaviour in a crisis, it is first necessary to understand the roles and rules of passengers and crew separately.

Roles and rules

Passengers

Passengers usually perform an everyday role away from a vessel and will naturally continue this when they are on board. They will combine this with the role of a passenger, however, the perception of the role will be determined by the abilities of the company, ship, officers and crew. If passengers are confident in the crew's abilities, then they will follow orders and behave appropriately in emergency situations.

Officers and crew

Crews have predetermined everyday roles on board which they are very familiar with. In addition to their usual duties, they should also have clearly defined responsibilities in the event of an emergency. To improve familiarity and competency with these defined tasks, emergency drills should be carried out regularly.

The difference between these two groups of people is that passengers need to be informed of their roles during an emergency, whereas the roles of officers and crew should already be clearly defined.

Crisis Behaviour

To better understand and react to the behaviour of a passenger in a crisis *Odyssey Training* have defined four stages of a crisis; *Warning, Impact, Evacuation* and *Post-event Reaction*. At each stage the pattern of behaviour will change as the passenger is influenced by the effects of the crisis.

Warning

The way that people react to warning signs differs depending on the role they are playing in a situation. Crew are trained to raise an alarm at the first sign there is something abnormal or dangerous. Passengers, on the other hand, will require a number of signs before recognising that there is a problem. These differing attitudes greatly influence the response in an emergency. Due to their training and familiarity with the scenario crew will generally react more efficiently than passengers. Passengers will require instruction to be given to ensure that they act accordingly in an emergency.

Impact

Once the alarm is raised the physical and psychological effects of the emergency will start to set in. The abnormality of the situation means passengers will experience a host of emotions that will very often render them scared and helpless and will also lead to stress. Passengers may also begin to conjure up worst case scenarios which may further intensify these feelings and start to influence their reaction. The role of the crew is key in ensuring that these emotional responses are minimised and have therefore, limited impact on the emergency. If not effectively managed, it is estimated only 25% of passengers¹ will act in a rational way to tackle the threat posed by the emergency. This reinforces the need for a calm and concise approach, with good communication from officers and crew to the passengers about the actions they need to take.

Evacuation

In an evacuation situation, clear instructions and effective organisation is essential. At this point, it is key that crew know their responsibilities and proceed to follow the instructions set out in the vessel's emergency response procedures. As already outlined, people react differently in emergency situations and quite often the individuals responsible for the safe evacuation of people make incorrect assumptions¹ which can include:

1. *Individuals will move as soon as they hear an alarm.* – In fact, unless they are led, some people will be slow to leave a potentially dangerous area or situation.
2. *The motivation to escape underpins any movements people make or actions they carry out.* – Passengers will take time to switch into escape mode and may need strong instruction to realise the extent of the danger.
3. *The time it takes to evacuate is only dependent on the time it takes to physically move to, and through, an exit.* – Reaction time, anxiety levels and group dynamic will influence time taken. Anxiety may also cause an individual to take longer than normal.
4. *People are most likely to move towards the exit they are closest to.* – They will move towards the exit which appears safest, suits their needs or are already familiar with.
5. *People move as individuals, without considering others.* – Families will most often move as a unit and the build-up of a dense crowd will mean individuals inevitably have to follow others.
6. *Fire exit signs help to ensure people find a route to safety.* – As anxiety sets in, people can lose sight of peripheral objects like exit signs, meaning they have little or no impact.
7. *People are unlikely to use a smoke-filled escape route.* – If passengers are already familiar with a route and believe it leads to safety they may choose to go through it

despite the risks.

8. *All people are equally capable of exiting the vessel.* – Age, experience and alcohol intake are among the factors that can affect an individual's ability to evacuate the vessel. The elderly and young will take longer than an experienced traveller.
9. *Peoples' safety cannot be guaranteed since they are very likely to panic* – Panic is caused by a lack of information. Providing information will lead to clarity and allow passengers to better understand the situation.

Passengers will more often display the following reactions:

1. The surprise of an event may cause them to freeze.
2. They will look for an easy route to escape and try to gather valuables.
3. They will start to lose control and move from protecting others to self-preservation.
4. Passengers who behave in a non-panicked way may act rationally and even look for ways in which they can assist.
5. Some individuals (approx. 25%) take on rational behaviour and approach the emergency as it is presented.

A good understanding of these behaviours is key for crew and will enable them to best assist and direct passengers.

Post- event reaction

At this stage crew must be prepared for the resulting effects of the emergency and the behaviours of passengers upon the realisation that the crisis is over. There could be many scenarios at this point ranging from no problems having occurred to the abandonment of a vessel. In some of these scenarios the crew will have to deal with possible casualties, and the way in which passengers will react to having witnessed this, as well as the way passengers will behave when re-boarding a vessel, having been told that a crisis has been averted.

Following an emergency, passengers will take time to process what has occurred and will do so at different paces. Officers and crew need to reassure and act in a manner which is both calming and encouraging. They must eliminate feelings of tension or stress because of the event and must maintain control as passengers will continue to look to them for guidance. The crew's behaviour is critical to managing the long-term effects of an emergency on passengers. The quicker the passengers are calmed, the sooner they will recover from the shock and effects will be minimalised.

The Club recommends the implementation of an emergency response framework, which includes drills and crew training for the care and assessment of passengers. Emergency response procedures should take into account the varying human behaviours and reactions to an emergency and should factor in ample time to react accordingly.

[1] [Odyssey Training – A manual for the Cruise and Ferry Sector](#)