

MGT389 – Case Studies Individual Assessment

1 Essay Question

Identify two key factors relevant to human issues that contributed to the disaster of Titanic? Explain its impact on managing the Titanic project and how it links to the concepts introduced on the module?

2 Essay Response

Human factors were a large contributor to the Titanic disaster and the failure of the project surrounding the vessels construction. A Project Sponsor with too great an influence over major decisions and a change in Project Team led to an environment with poor communication and change management.

Joseph Bruce Ismay, chairman of the White Star Line and the Project Sponsor, had far greater influence than his position should allow. This allowed for significant scope creep towards the end of the design phase where it can be significantly damaging to project delivery [1, p. 15]. Ismay introduced several design changes, despite his lack of design expertise and the timing within the project schedule. Changes included the reduction of lifeboat numbers to 20 (seating for only 50% of passengers) to improve panoramic views [2, p. 5], shortening of 3 watertight compartments (designed to provide additional buoyancy redundancy) for the main dining room [2, p. 5] and almost complete removal of the double hull to improve space in passenger cabins [2, p. 5].

Ismay's influence resulted in a "forcing" method of conflict resolution [3, p. 17]. This did not allow for any questioning or scrutiny of his decisions and resulted in the departure of his initial Project Manager, Alexander Montgomery Carlisle, from the project [2, p. 5]. Montgomery managed the project throughout almost the entirety of the design phase. Additionally, Ismay's influence caused significant bypassing of the project lifecycle [1, p. 12]. The planning phase was ignored for many changes made to the final design, no additional time was given for this change and no procedure was put in place to manage change. This style of management - and lack of leadership - generated a feeling of distrust between the Project Sponsor and Team, leading to a lack of communication and therefore an ineffective group for tackling conflicts and change [3, p. 8].

These issues can be attributed to the fact that this influence was not challenged by a project board as there was no group of people involved to act as one. A project board allows for a more democratic and considered view with parties from all sectors of the project allowed to contribute and scrutinise decisions. Ultimately this contributed to large sections of the vessels design that were inadequate for the voyage it was set to perform (a crossing of the Atlantic in icy conditions) [2] and that could not fulfil the contingencies required by passengers in an emergency [2, p. 5].

This example links to Joe Burns' lesson about leading by example rather than ordering people around [4]. People are more willing to cooperate and compromise when they see their leader has an appreciation and understanding of their work, life and the struggles they face. People like a leader that listens to them [4]. As Burns suggests; trust, shared vision and collaboration are required on large projects such as the Titanic [4].

Following the completion of basic testing the vessel was passed from Harland and Wolff (shipbuilders) to White Star Line, resulting in a complete change in Project Team towards the end of Implementation [2, p. 7]. Only one day's testing was completed by White Star line on Titanic as opposed to the month's testing on the Olympic [2, p. 8]. This would have been avoided with a consistent project team who understood the design, its differences from Olympic and the requirement for testing.

Communication about previously performed testing was also poor. Members of the crew believed that lifeboats could not be lowered into the water during an emergency when loaded, despite successful testing by Harland and Wolff [2, p. 13].

Ultimately this lack of communication generated a crew that could not respond quickly and efficiently during an emergency due to a lack of understanding about the vessel. Additionally, the required testing of the vessel was not completed and as a result an unproven vessel was allowed on a maiden voyage with passengers. As suggested by guest speaker Steve Pugh, it is important to communicate how delays and setbacks will affect you to the whole Project Team [5]. Both people who are waiting on your section of the project and people you are waiting on must be informed of the effects of the delay [5]. Good communication leads to a project where all parties can react to change coherently and efficiently [5].

In conclusion, a lack of sensible leadership by example inspired a hostile culture between members of the Project team and the Project sponsor. This resulted in a lack of communication between different sections of the project and poor conflict resolution, ultimately leading to bad design. Scope was increased without a corresponding increase in resource; resulting in poor quality project delivery and the tragic loss of 1488 lives [2].

3 References

- [1] G. Wood, Writer, *Project Management Fundamentals*. [Performance]. The University of Sheffield, 2019.
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- [3] H. Abulrub, Writer, *Leadership and Teams in Projects*. [Performance]. The University of Sheffield, 2019.
- [4] J. Burns, Writer, *A career in projects*. [Performance]. Pell Frischmann, 2019.
- [5] S. Pugh, Writer, *Why project management is the greatest skill you will ever need in your career*. [Performance]. Tekmar, 2019.