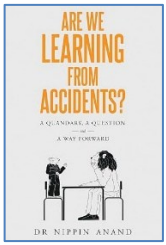
Book Review



Paul Hampton, SCSC Newsletter Editor, reviews the book: "Are We Learning from Accidents? A Quandary, A question and a way forward" [1], by Dr Nippin Anand.

In the SCSC's last newsletter editorial, I asked whether we were still learning from accidents and I happened across this apt 2024 work from Dr Nippin Anand that asks the very same question, so I was intrigued and interested not least, to hear a fuller description of the events of the *Costa Concordia* sinking in 2012 [2].

The *Costa Concordia* was a €450 million cruise ship that grounded and partially sank after striking a rock in 2012. At the time, the ship was carrying over 4,000 passengers and crew, from which 32 died.

The ship struck rocks after the Captain, Francesco Schettino, ordered an unscheduled route change to pass within half a nautical mile of Isola del Giglio, Tuscany in order to perform a 'sail-by salute'. Schettino was vilified for causing the accident and leaving the boat prematurely during the evacuation. He was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 16 years in prison.

I, and I suspect like others, thought the incident at the time was pretty much an 'open and shut case': a rogue overconfident captain going 'off-piste' to please the crowd, and I actually wondered how much could actually be learned from it.

My narrow expectation was soon dispelled – Nippin's exclusive interviews with Schettino reveal a much more nuanced and complex situation and, in fact, I realised that the *Costa Concordia* incident was really being used as a springboard to convey much more far-reaching ideas. In particular, Nippin shows how perceptions are shaped by our Western culture, our *mythology* (in the sense of the stories we believe, sometimes unconsciously, to be true) and our deeply held assumptions and cherished belief.

Examples are our 'Hollywood' culture that celebrates the heroes of our stories and vilify the anti-heroes, to always seek a 'root cause' to an accident – to find something or someone to blame, a scapegoat, and to assume human fallibility can in some way be 'fixed' through more procedures and regulations. Much to my surprise, the book helped highlight my own prejudices and how I have participated in helping promote these same entrenched cultural narratives.

Nippin's argues that there is never one 'truth' about an event and we should embrace and hold in balance multiple and nuanced narratives to truly understand why accidents happen and to get meaningful learning from them. He uses the "One Brain Three Minds (1B3M)" model based on the Social Psychology of Risk to help explore the sense-making of an individual in the lead up to and during the aftermath of an accident. This model brings in not only the rational and logical analysis of a human but also incorporates decision making from experience-based heuristics as well as automatic non-rational 'gut thinking' intuition.

This *embodied Mind*, as Nippin calls it, acknowledges that decision making is not restricted to the brain; our entire body participates in the process.

This more rounded model of a human being helps develop more insightful narratives around why humans make decisions in a given environment and situation. For example, Nippin notes that our senses do not give us an objective view of the external environment. How we perceive the world is locked in what actions are unconsciously 'afforded' to us (this important concept he calls "Affordance").

As well as describing the problems with our approaches to accident investigation, Nippin describes a concrete solution and way forward to address these issues through his iCue methodology. This brings in the 1B3M considerations and through finding connection and tensions between the three mind perspectives, provides greater insights and opportunities for learning.

Nippin argues that as much of our decision making is unconscious, true learning comes from surfacing the unconscious. Once the iCue maps are developed, linkage between the three aspects of the *embodied Mind* questions can be framed to promote greater learning. This helps dispel the perception that an investigator is asking questions to support their own agenda; to simply find someone or something to blame. For example, changing the enquiry from "Why did you use the wrong equipment?" to "What can we learn from the crew's perception of the use of the equipment?"

If you read the book, and I encourage you to do so, then I wonder if like me you will see an alternative view of Schettino's actions. While not suggesting that Schettino's behaviour was acceptable, there is an additional narrative here: *"one where Schettino absorbed all the sins of our society – cheap design, questionable regulations, a race-to-the-bottom approach to operating standards, material consumption habits. Instead of being a superhero he allowed distress and trauma to take over his decision making. In an investigation framed as a quest for heroes and anti-heroes, such a narrative is not possible".*

Let me conclude by saying that the book is very easy to read and although 448 pages, the font is quite large and includes a reproduction of the *Nozomi* Accident Report, another highly informative accident, referenced in the book and used to illustrate the use of the iCue method. My only criticism would be in the diagrams; they are black and white and some of the text is sometimes too small to read. The Kindle version of the book is however in colour and allows diagrams to be expanded.

In summary, I don't think I would be exaggerating by suggesting that everyone should read this book! Some of the ideas are, possibly controversial, calling into question deeply held assumptions and cherished beliefs as well as the long-established cultural and regulatory rituals that seem only to provide comfort and certainty to society rather than learning. It would require seismic changes in our industry to immediately adopt all of Nippin's ideas but as an industry, we already sense there is a need for change with concepts such as "Restorative Just Culture" [3]. By giving us a much broader and profound perspective, I hope this book and its methodologies can help guide us in the right direction of travel.

References

[1] Are We Learning from Accidents?: A quandary, a question and a way forward, Novellus, 25th April
[2] Costa Concordia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Costa_Concordia, accessed Dec 2025
[3] Adam Johns, Introducing a Restorative Just Culture and the Learning Review at the Docklands Light Railway, Proceedings of the Thirtieth Safety-Critical Systems Symposium, 2022