



The Captain Who Fell into the Lifeboat

By [Zeno Franco](#) and [Matt Langdon](#) | January 20, 2012 | [0 Comments](#)

What the Costa Concordia disaster reveals about heroism—and how we can train ourselves to be heroes.

It is a heroic tradition as old as the Sea itself—in a crisis, the captain is the last person

to leave the ship. The privilege of being the master of a vessel also comes with the “burden of command”—the responsibility for every soul aboard.

The term “hero” is overused in today’s media-driven culture and has been equated with everything from being a celebrity to just being a good person. Heroism is different than altruism because it always involves accepting some form of risk in order to uphold a noble cause. In prior research we have noted that these risks can be broken down into “physical peril” or “social sacrifice.” Further, heroes who accept these risks may be either “duty bound”—soldiers, police officers, or a ship’s captain—or “everyday heroes,” the average person who performs in an extraordinary way when faced with a crisis.



Il Fatto Quotidiano

Yet on January 13th, Captain Francesco Schettino of the Costa Concordia cruise ship, with 3,000 passengers and 1,000 crew, did the opposite of what we expect of someone in his role. Instead of trying to heroically recover from an error in judgment (as did the Captain of the Titanic) after the

ship was crippled, Schettino left his post before the rescue efforts were even underway.

An article one of us (Zeno Franco) wrote with Philip Zimbardo, “[The Banality of Heroism,](#)” advanced five key features of heroism:

- Developing a “discontinuity detector”—that is to say becoming more mindful of situations in which conflicting information is present;
- Being willing to accept some interpersonal conflict—heroic decisions are often controversial;
- Remaining aware of a more distant time horizon and what the consequences of our actions in this particular moment may mean in the future;
- Resisting the urge to rationalize inaction and to justify evil deeds as somehow righteous; and
- Learning to control fear—heroism is not the absence of fear, but the ability to act despite it.

Captain Schettino appears to have failed in all five of these areas, leaving a cruise liner full of people in clear danger and without an obvious leader. His example allows us to examine

the fine line between becoming a hero, bystander, villain or fool.

First, about 40 minutes elapsed between the hull breach and the order to abandon ship. Although it is speculation at this point, this suggests that the captain and crew did not take the initial accident seriously enough in the first few minutes after the crash—their “discontinuity detectors” did not register the severity of the situation quickly enough to mount an effective response.

The second area of heroism deals primarily with “social sacrifice.” The captain apparently allowed the ship to come dangerously close to shore so that a crew member, possibly a friend, could wave to their family on the coast. There are also indications that the delay in declaring an emergency aboard the vessel may have resulted from pressure from the captain’s supervisors. Each of those interactions involved Schettino weighing the importance of a social relationship rather than focusing on the more immediate danger.

Third, transcribed recordings of the captain’s conversations with rescue personnel suggest that he was more worried about immediate concerns than longer term consequences. It appears that he did not consider the long term impact of his actions (or inaction), the profound human cost of this decision, the impact the event will have for his own reputation and career, the financial burden for the owner of the ship, and the environmental consequences for the area around Giglio Island.

Fourth, the captain has claimed that he averted an even greater disaster by maneuvering the ship into shallower waters after the accident occurred. Moreover, people from his hometown are asserting that he is a hero for this attempt to get the ship closer to shore to facilitate the rescue of passengers. These self-justifying statements often start during the crisis event itself, and can be fairly small initially, but turn into a cascade of decisions and justifications that make it impossible for a leader to consider alternatives.

Fifth, heroes must be able to act in spite of their fear. Being aboard a sinking ship is a scary prospect for anyone. Yet, the passengers aboard the Costa Concordia needed leadership. At its most dramatic, the role of the captain is to provide steady, unflinching leadership in the face of crisis. The captain’s actions influence the willingness of the crew to maintain or abandon their posts; it is the captain’s words that have the power to create resolve and calm amongst unprepared passengers: “This is your captain speaking...” Instead, Captain Schettino claimed that he accidentally fell into a lifeboat!

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In contrast to Schettino’s failure to be a duty-bound hero, there were numerous examples of everyday heroism on display. Giuseppe Girolamo, a drummer aboard the ship who is currently missing, was witnessed giving up his spot on a life raft to a child. Individuals and groups of people used their own bodies to form human ladders to allow others to escape, exhibiting individual and shared bravery. And, as is the case in all similar events in history, we will never know about the heroic struggles of some of those who were lost in this event.

It is easy for us as outside commentators to assume we understand what occurred aboard the Costa Concordia a few days ago. Reality is always more complex than what we can glean from a few news reports. Our reflection on these events is not intended to join the choir condemning the actions or inaction of Captain Schettino. None of us know how we would react in a true crisis. However, events such as these allows us to reflect on our own readiness and think about how we can train our imaginations for heroism.

About The Author

Zeno Franco, Ph.D., is an assistant professor

in the department of family & community medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin. He studies the social psychology of heroic action and disaster management. He recently published an article differentiating heroism and altruism with Dr. Philip Zimbardo, and is a research adviser for the [Heroic Imagination Project](#). **Matt Langdon** created the [Hero Construction Company](#) to build heroes in schools around the world. He creates training programs that prepare students for acts of heroism, large or small. He is the author of the soon-to-be-published "Hero Handbook" and also sits on the advisory council of the [Heroic Imagination Project](#).