

# Church Management Lessons from the Titanic

By Rob Faulk, Partner

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On April 14, 1912, the *Titanic*, the newest flagship of the White Star Line, set sail on her first voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. We all know what happened next: just five short days into the trip the luxury liner collided with an iceberg and sank, killing more than 1,500 people. The resulting tragedy was so epic that it remains a topic of fascination and discussion to this day.

While many of the mistakes made before and during the journey did not individually cause the accident and resulting deaths, the accumulation of bad decisions made one right after the other sent the *Titanic* to its tragic end. It seems clear that the White Star Line had organizational weaknesses that prevented it from effectively achieving the vision promised by the *Titanic*. This includes weaknesses in organizational philosophies that led to the poor leadership decisions that ultimately sank the ship. So what can we learn from these mistakes, more than a century later?

I have seen similar poor decisions in other organizations, including churches. Although of course they do not result in the same level of tragedy as the *Titanic*, they can lead to avoidable challenges and weaknesses in a church. Let's look at some key assessments, behaviors, and causes associated with the organizational philosophies underlying these poor decisions, and compare them to corresponding philosophies held by the White Star Line.

## **Assessment #1: Does the organization place a high value on good leadership and leadership development?**

The majority of the *Titanic* crew members were recruited less than three weeks before the ship set sail, and only came aboard a few hours before the launch. They had not been trained how to adequately carry out an evacuation. The officers did not know how many people they could put in each lifeboat, and many were launched half-full.

*Behavior:* Does management believe that leadership development, including leadership training, is important to the health and future of the organization? Clearly White Star Line did not consider leadership development important to its health and future, but it should be a key component of your church's management approach. A significant portion of salary increases and bonus awards

should be based on demonstrated leadership skills appropriate for the employee's responsibilities.

*Underlying cause of behavior:* Is leadership development training a regular part of employee development and is it available, as appropriate, to all employees? It is important for management to value and implement leadership development.

White Star Line was notably lacking in this area. The company needed to identify categories of employees (or individual employees) who would benefit from immediate leadership training and implement such training. Can you imagine how much differently a crew with trained leaders would have responded to the crises the *Titanic* faced that fateful night?

## **Assessment #2: Does the organization have a positive view of support functions and their importance to achieving organizational objectives?**

The *Titanic* had many advanced safety features, including watertight compartments and remotely activated watertight doors, that had never been tested. Further, the crew was not fully informed about the vessel and the capabilities of its equipment, including a state-of-the-art wireless messaging system that could have sent out the communication for help.

*Behavior:* Is your environment such that leaders of the support functions fully participate in strategic and operational planning? Or are they excluded from strategic and operational planning and other key discussions?

If the White Star Line had consulted and listened to the input of its support functions, would it have still decided to send out such a massive vessel before testing its state-of-the-art equipment? Clearly the individuals who made the decision didn't consult with the support staff members who were actually going to use those systems and be up to speed on that equipment in an emergency.

*Underlying cause of behavior:* Does management in your organization understand the vital role played by support functions and value the input of the support leaders? Or do they undervalue it or not feel that support function leaders can contribute to achieving the organization's

objectives? I often hear the comment “Nobody ever asks my opinion.” That makes me wonder about the organization’s view of support function leaders. I also am confident that if White Star Line’s management had a successful platform for support functions to be full participants in key planning and other discussions, it would have made very different decisions. If you believe that this is an area of weakness for your organization, ensure that leaders of support functions are aware of the organization’s plans and objectives *and* have the ability to communicate concerns regarding their ability to support those plans and objectives.

### **Assessment #3: Has the organization developed and enforced a culture of transparency and accountability?**

In 1911 Edward John Smith, a very experienced sea captain, took command of the *Olympic*, a White Star Line ocean liner that was the largest vessel in the world at the time. On September 20, 1911, the *Olympic* collided with a British warship, HMS *Hawke*. The collision left two of the *Olympic*’s compartments filled with water and a propeller shaft twisted, but she was able to limp back to Southampton, UK. Captain Smith was on the bridge of the ship during the accident.

The incident and resulting out-of-service time for the *Olympic* had huge finance costs for White Star Line. Despite his past trouble, however, in 1912 Captain Smith was appointed to be in command of the *Titanic*, the company’s newest ship.

*Behavior:* Do team members hold each other accountable for broken promises, poor performance, or behaviors that negatively impact the organization?

Captain Smith does not appear to have been held accountable for his past actions while working for the White Star Line. Although he had incurred huge financial losses for the company due to his poor safety record, the company put him in charge of their newest and most expensive ship, the *Titanic*. Why would they do this after he had demonstrated such poor performance with such a severely negative impact for the company?

*Underlying cause of behavior:* Is there a high degree of trust and commitment to transparency among the team members? Are they committed to achieving the organization’s objectives?

It seems as though many of White Star Line’s employees were focused on personal objectives, and these often had nothing to do with the company’s overall objectives. Many of the decisions related to how quickly the *Titanic* was placed into service, its inexperienced crew, and even who

would captain it were very poorly made, without thought as to past performance.

If you believe that this is an area of weakness for your church, assess how the board models accountability of management. Establish requirements for periodic performance evaluations and comparison of achieved results to goals and objectives.

Because of weaknesses in organizational capacity, White Star Line failed to achieve the vision that inspired the *Titanic*. Organizational philosophies were just one area where such weaknesses appeared to undermine the promise provided by the state-of-the-art vessel. Further study of areas such as the board, the leadership team, financial management, employees, and how the various internal departments did or did not cooperate with each other may shed additional light on what led to the *Titanic* disaster.

Many churches fail to achieve their God-given visions because one or more of these areas cannot support those visions. If you are concerned that your church may not be achieving your vision due to such weaknesses, you need to thoroughly assess these areas and come up with a plan of action. You may determine that you need a third party to be an objective sounding board or to provide additional assessment tools. Make sure to do what is necessary to keep your church sailing smoothly and safely.

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## About the Author

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