

## Normalized Deviance

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What the heck is this? This is a term that I recently ran across that needs some thought to figure out. Once you wrap your mind around it, you can apply it to your job and anything else you do. It is the intermingling of these two terms that will open your mind to what is right, what is wrong, and what needs a dose of professional judgement.

Normalized: (definition) *refers to the norm, the standard of performance*— at Harley Marine Services, our normalized standard of performance is our Safety Management System commonly known as the Marine Operations Manual (MOM).

Deviance – (definition) *wandering, changing, deviating*

Put these two words together and you can start to understand Normalized Deviance which means basically deviating from our declared standards. Standards are very important to managing a company, conducting operations, maintaining our equipment, hiring and training our personnel; just about everything we do needs standardization to a point. There is a fine line sometimes when our standards need to be exercised “to the letter” and other times when company-prescribed guidance, with a dose of professional flexibility, is the answer.

A very good example of company-prescribed guidance that needs a balance of standardization and deviance is our MOM 06-063 “Bridge Resource Management”. Imbedded in this guidance document are a set of rules and guidelines for our tug crews to utilize when underway. Undoubtedly, movement of vessels through waters of the United States and International waters are dictated by the International Regulations for Prevention of Collisions at Sea, 1972 (then commonly known as the COLREGS).

Today, they are more commonly referred to as the “Rules of the Road” or “Navigation Rules and Regulations”. There is a balance between strictly following vessel rules of meeting and overtaking and complying for instance with company guidance regarding number of watch standers in restricted visibility. A judgement call (normalized deviance) by our captains allows them to deviate from our MOM standards of Bridge Resource Management guidance yet requires them to strictly follow the Rules of the Road. For all the captains and mates reading this,

always follow the advice of Capt. Sven Christensen (VP, Pacific Northwest and Offshore) whereby normalized deviance for navigating vessels is pretty much summed up in the Rules of the Road by following rule number 6.

Now let me present another situation whereby “normalized deviance” can get away from us. We are all paid to use our education, skills and experience to manage our staff, work with our teammates, and maintain our equipment while performing our jobs. Over time external forces come into play while we perform our jobs day in and day out. Whatever those external forces may be, (a tighter schedule, less experience of teammates, lack of training) we start to modify the way we do our jobs as “normalized deviance” creeps in. Here is an example: before approaching a dock at an oil facility, the crew is mustered for a discussion on sequence of line handling, duty assignments, and communication procedures. Pretty much a routine occurrence.

Over time, on this particular vessel, the pre-arrival meeting gets shorter, assignments are pretty much understood therefore not discussed as they should be, sequence is almost always the same, therefore goes without saying. This vessel crew is deviating from the norm and in many cases doesn't even realize it. Hence a missed approach to the dock, a crushed piling, a parted line and possibly a debilitating injury to a crewmember and teammate. The crew has fallen victim to “normalized deviance” whereby we have allowed ourselves to become complacent, we have “let down our hair” and we have unwittingly become careless.

Think about how you may be deviating from the norm. If you feel that you are becoming “off center” from previous written or verbal guidance, stop, slow down, ask for additional guidance and then go.

Prudent seamanship is what we all learn in our early maritime careers. Jobs change, conditions change, equipment changes, therefore *you* as the front line operator owe it to yourself, your shipmates and the company to recognize Normalized Deviance. When you recognize ND, then question existing guidelines or directives in order to keep us efficient, informed and safe. We are all in this together!