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# Public Safety, Public Morality

## *Thoughts on the Korean ferry disaster*

On April 15 the MV *Sewol*, a ferry boat of some 6,825 tons, departed Incheon, Korea enroute to Jeju, a journey of about 250 miles. The ship carried over 450 passengers, mainly high school students and teachers on a field trip and a crew of 18, roughly half of the 900+ passengers for which she was rated.

The vessel also carried almost 4000 tons of cargo, well beyond her rated limit of 987 tons. To compensate, the crew reportedly discharged a considerable amount of ballast water, making the vessel top heavy.

The vessel had been renovated in 2012 to add additional passenger cabins to the upper deck before being placed back in service in 2013, further adding to her top heaviness. The vessel had reportedly passed a Coast Guard safety inspection two months previously.

Around 9:00 AM the following morning, the vessel reported taking on water and being in danger of capsizing. The Korean navy and nearby vessels rushed to the scene but their efforts were largely in vain. Confusion aboard the vessel and lack of leadership from the captain meant that few of the passengers were saved.

By day's end, some 288 passengers were dead and 16 missing. The 172 survivors included the captain and 14 crew members. Three crew members died at their posts trying to help passengers evacuate the ship.

Later investigation showed that the ship had made an unexpected and sharp turn to starboard, even though the weather was clear and there were no reefs in the area. The turn caused the overloaded cargo to shift, causing the vessel to heel over. The crew was unable to right her and she capsized.

The captain was arrested almost immediately on charges of negligence (he was one of the first to leave the vessel, in violation of Korean law). He has since been charged with homicide through negligence, which carries a potential death penalty. Three other officers have also been charged. The eleven remaining crew face lesser charges. The chief executive of the vessel's parent company has also been arrested on homicide charges.

There has been considerable political fallout from the tragedy as well. Public anger over lax enforcement and perceived bungling of rescue operations led to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Jung-Hong-won, and a proposal to disband the Coast Guard.

## The Question

A couple of weeks ago, my sister-in-law sent me a series of questions related to the *Sewol* disaster. One question in particular struck a chord with me:

*What is the relationship ... between the public safety standard and public moral and ethics?*

This is not an easy question to answer because so many different factors come into play. In this case, part of the problem is that shipping in Korea is handled by the Korean shipping Association, an industry trade group, rather than by the government. This would appear to create an obvious conflict of interest.

However, the larger issue is the level of trust that must exist within a society. In his book, *Liars and Outliers: Enabling the trust that society needs to thrive*, security technologist Bruce Schneier discusses this at length. He points out that within a society there are always those who will comply with the rules but there are also outliers, people who will look to their own advantage first rather than to what is best for society as a whole. To safeguard itself, society creates pressures to reduce or discourage defection from the rules. These are the societal, moral, reputational, and institutional pressures we encounter daily.

When these pressures to conform become lax or fail entirely defection becomes the norm. In the case of the *Sewol* tragedy, the severe overloading of the cargo on the vessel and the unsafe attempt to compensate for the extra weight by discharging needed ballast suggest that there were few or no pressures discouraging these acts. Despite existing safety regulations, there was little or no incentive to comply and certainly nothing to discourage the practice.

The mere existence of a standard does not automatically imply acceptance. One of the things that we have learned from mitigation in the United States is that if a mitigation measure is not acceptable of the public it stands little chance of being implemented. By the same token, if a safety standard is seen as unnecessary or limiting profit and there are no negative consequences for ignoring it, it is a paper standard that will be ignored.

The fact that the Korean government has also charged the chief executive officer of the *Sewol's* parent company suggests that the overloading of cargo was a common practice within the company and that senior management was well aware of it.

Even more telling is the action of the crew. The vessel remained afloat for over two hours. Had lifeboats been launched and an orderly evacuation begun under the direction of the crew it is possible that many more could have been saved. Instead, the captain was one of the first to leave and only three crew members stayed with passengers, suggesting that there were no pressures to encourage the crew to remain at their posts.

We can certainly find many causes for this tragedy: poor leadership, lax enforcement of standards, poor judgment, and corporate greed. But ultimately, it was a failure of trust. The passengers on board MV *Sewol* placed their trust in a system that was supposed to protect them; in the end that system failed.

I'm not sure that there are such things as public morals and ethics. These must reside within an individual. However, when a society chooses to disregard the psychological safeguards necessary for public trust, tragedy inevitably follows. 