

TRIANGLE OF SAFETY

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After several years of conducting Fishing Vessel Safety Dockside Exams throughout Alaska, I've concluded that there are three elements that must be present to be successful in any commercial fishing endeavor. They are:

- Seaworthy Vessel
- Professional Mariner
- Good Fisherman

I like to call these three concepts the "Triangle of Safety." These three concepts may seem obvious; however, nearly every fishing vessel casualty I've investigated or studied was lacking in at least one side of the triangle. Let's look at these three sides in detail:

Seaworthy Vessel

Plainly speaking, the vessel must be able to get its crew from point "A" to point "B" and back home again. This sounds simple. Who in their right mind would take an unfit vessel to sea? Believe me, there are reams of paperwork detailing vessel casualties where the skipper believed his vessel was seaworthy. Use this simple checklist to help determine if your vessel is seaworthy:

Is the hull sound, not leaking, can you see daylight through the planks?
Bilge pumps and bilge high water alarm operable.
Is the vessel's engineering plant in good working order?
Hatches operable and secured to ensure the vessel is watertight.
Freeing ports unblocked to allow flow of water off the deck.
Deck loads and bait shacks properly secured so that they won't break loose.
Bin boards in place to keep the load from shifting.
Deck cargo stowed down low and not atop the house.
Liquid loads topped off.

Professional Mariner

Sure you are! I bet you've been fishing most of your life! Does that make you a professional? Webster defines a professional as "One who is participating for gain or livelihood in an activity or field of endeavor often engaged in by amateurs." Three traits separate a professional mariner from an amateur mariner: attitude, skill, leadership.

Attitude – You recognize it when you see it; a family member or an old skipper you worked with. They all seem to carry themselves differently than others. He is confident

but not overly confident. She is steady and reliable, and knows when to joke around and when to be serious.

Skill – This guy knows the “pointy end from the blunt end” and everything in between. He can feel the way the boat is handling in his legs. He knows the fishing grounds like the back of his hand. He can navigate without relying solely on the electronics. He is constantly aware of his surroundings, and knows his vessel and his own limitations.

Leadership - Many books have been written describing what is or what isn't a good leader. Some say that one is born with the ability to be a leader. Others say leadership is a quality we all have, more in some and less in others. Leadership in the professional mariner goes beyond the ability to hire and fire crewmen, or getting the boat and crew back in one piece. A professional mariner must be a leader. He or she must focus on the task ahead, meet deadlines, provide structure, give instruction, handle emergencies, stick firmly to the final decisions he or she makes, give direction and develop challenging goals for him or herself. I'm sure you can think of other qualities to add to the list. Ultimately, a leader is accountable to his crew and his boat. A leader gains legitimacy through task completion, skill application, and growth in proficiency.

Good Fishermen

A good fisherman catches many fish! That's one definition. There are probably a hundred more. Basically, if he doesn't catch many fish, he won't make any money. And if he doesn't make any money, the first thing that suffers is the very same thing that makes him money, his boat. We all know what goes into the up-keep of a fishing vessel. It doesn't take long for the deferred maintenance to get out of hand. Good fishermen realize this. He or she takes the time to maintain not only the boat, but safety equipment as well. A good fisherman can be judge by the amount of fish he catches, but it's safe to say that a good fisherman knows that if he doesn't come back, then he won't be paid. It would be an injustice to try to describe the traits of a good fisherman in just a few words. Perhaps there is no definitive definition. However, I am confident you will agree, good fishermen always hold up their side of the triangle.

I've thought about this “Triangle of Safety” idea for a long time. I have kicked it around and used it to evaluate many vessel accident reports I've written or read about. I even ran it past some of the old crusty fishermen I know. In my attempt to find a pattern of events and to make a concrete point, I have found that this triangle of safety makes sense. It's important to remember that if one side or more of this triangle is missing it collapses.

The triangle of safety is only as strong as its weakest side, and safety is the key component of each of those sides. People die needless deaths! How many fishermen have you known who have died while fishing? Who, with a little training and the proper lifesaving equipment, could be fishing today? Nobody thinks an accident could happen to them, it's always the other guy. Try not to be the other guy! Answer these few questions and see where your weakest side of the triangle is:

When was the last time you looked at your safety equipment?
Do you test your EPIRB monthly?
Do you maintain your life raft and have it inspected annually?
Does your immersion suit or PFD fit?
Are there enough Immersion suits for everyone?
Are there enough fire extinguishers aboard?
Can every crewman make a distress call on the VHF?
Do you and your crew conduct monthly drills?
Do you participate in the courtesy dockside exam program?

If you answered no to any of these questions, then you need to reevaluate your triangle. But if you think that you're not the other guy then the only advice I can give is... well, my friend... maybe you should drive a truck for a living.

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