

From Philosophy to Practice - The 4Ps

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The sea has a way of reminding us that no two days are ever the same. Conditions change, plans shift, and decisions must often be made in the moment. For those working at sea, this is everyday reality. At The Swedish Club, we have seen how safety depends as much on human judgement as it does on written rules. Procedures and policies can provide structure and clarity, but they can never replace the need for experience, awareness and the ability to adapt.

The 4Ps framework, which stands for Philosophy, Policies, Procedures and Practice, offers a simple but valuable way to understand how work is imagined, written and ultimately carried out. It was first developed in aviation, but its message is universal. It reminds us that safe operations do not rely only on what is written in manuals, but also on how people interpret and apply those instructions in real situations.

In shipping there is a natural desire to create order through documentation. Safety management systems, checklists and risk assessments all exist for good reason. Yet seafaring is complex, and no document can capture every detail of what happens on board. The work as imagined, the version written in company procedures, often looks very different from the work as done, which is what crews actually experience.

Practice is the reality of operations. It is the hundreds of decisions made every day on board, sometimes routine and sometimes critical. It reflects the skill, professionalism and adaptability of the people involved. Practice is where safety truly lives. Crews balance commercial demands, changing weather, machinery limitations and fatigue. Their ability to make sound decisions within this shifting environment determines whether work remains safe and efficient. Recognising this reality means understanding that safety depends not only on compliance but also on the competence and confidence of the people doing the work.

Procedures are there to support that work. They describe how a task should be carried out and help ensure that jobs are completed safely and consistently. They are essential for training and communication. But even the most detailed procedure cannot account for every situation at sea. Conditions rarely unfold exactly as expected, and a degree of judgement is always needed. Procedures should guide seafarers, not confine them. When too many are introduced, or when they are applied too rigidly, they can begin to restrict rather than support. Crews may hesitate to act, unsure which rule applies or whether it is safe to adapt.



This is where policies come in. Policies provide the bridge between procedures and practice. They express intent and define the principles behind the rules. A good policy helps people understand the reasoning behind a procedure and how it fits within the bigger picture. Policies also help guide decisions when no specific procedure applies. They provide clarity and consistency across operations, giving seafarers the confidence to make the right call when faced with uncertainty.

Even the best policies cannot anticipate every possibility. There will always be situations that fall outside the scope of written guidance. When this happens, it is the organisation's philosophy that provides direction. A clear philosophy sets out what a company truly believes in, what it stands for and what it will always prioritise. It provides the compass that guides decision-making when rules or procedures no longer apply.

A well-defined philosophy helps everyone understand what matters most. It sets a clear order of priorities, ensuring that when two values conflict, such as safety and schedule, there is no confusion about which one comes first. It also creates alignment within the organisation, shaping policies and procedures so that all decisions and actions stem from the same values.

Imagine a bridge team preparing to berth in worsening weather. The policy may say that operations can continue within certain limits, and the procedure may explain exactly how the berthing should be carried out. But the master and officers are uneasy. Proceeding would keep the ship on schedule, but it may also put the vessel and crew at risk. In this moment, philosophy makes the difference. If the company's philosophy clearly states that safety always comes before punctuality, the decision is simple. The berthing is delayed, and everyone knows it was the right call.

At The Swedish Club, we believe that frameworks like the 4Ps are essential for strengthening the human element in shipping. They help organisations design systems that support the realities of seafaring rather than simply controlling them. The 4Ps encourage companies to trust their people, to build coherence between their written rules and their lived values, and to ensure that seafarers understand how their judgement fits into the bigger picture.

Ultimately, safety at sea depends on people. Human beings are not the weakest link; they are the strongest connection between policy and performance. The 4Ps remind us that every procedure should have a purpose, every policy should reflect a value, and every philosophy should be visible in everyday practice. When these four layers work together, they create consistency, trust and clarity from the boardroom to the bridge. That is how we move from managing compliance to truly supporting the people who make shipping work.