**CASE STUDY**

**Could The Challenger Accident Have Been Avoided?**

The Challenger Space Schuttle accident on January 28, 1986, gripped the nation more than any other event in the last dozen years or so. It was a tragic accident in which seven people died. There is mow some evidence that the astronauts may have survived the initial explosion and may have died on impact when the space shuttle hit the water. The purpose of recounting the challenger accident is to briefly explain what happened, why it may have happened, how it may have been prevented and what one can learn from it.

The challenger mission consisted of two complex systems: the technical system and the managerial system. The technical problem was the troublesome O-rings, which under pressure and low temperatures became ineffective and did not provide the required seal. Engineers and managers were aware of the problem. So why was the go-ahead given for launching the spacecraft? Can it be explained by the way the managerial system worked?

The engineers at Morton Thiokol, the contractor for the booster rocket, argued against the launch, citing previous problems at low temperatures. Management on the other hand, may have felt pressure from NASA to go ahead with the launch. Roger Boisjoly, one of the engineers who argued strongly against the launch, stated that he received looks from management that seemed to say: “Go away and don’t bother us with the facts.” He said that he felt helpless. Another engineer was told to take off his engineering hat and put on his management hat.

Eventually the go-ahead was given by managers. Engineers were excluded from the final decision. What then, were some possible reasons for the disaster? Some argued that there was a lack of communication between engineers and managers. They have different goals: safety verses on-time launching. Others suggested that the people with responsibilities did not want to hear the bad news. Thus, no listening. Still others suggested that there was insufficient provision for upward communication outside the chain of command. There was also a suggestion that status differences between engineers and managers and between upper and lower level managers may have played a role in inhibiting upward communication. Perhaps there was also false confidence in the mission because of past luck.

Managers and engineers knew the problem, but nobody was killed before. Moreover, no one in the organizational unit wanted to be the “bad guy” to halt the launch. Morton Thiokol may also have been concerned about a pending contract.

The result of the series of events was the death of seven Americans: Jarris, Mc Anliffe, Mc Nair, Onizka, Resnik, Scobee and Smith. The question on our mind is: Could this accident have been prevented?

Questions:

1. What can you learn from this disaster that may be relevant to your organization or an organization you know?
2. What do you think was the cause or was the causes of the challenger disaster?