

Gianmarco Capece Minutolo

The Role of the Superyacht Captain: Operational Governance, Risk Management and Legal Responsibility.

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

Captain's Perspective / Contribution by **Riccardo Del Prete**/Superyacht Captain



In the superyacht industry, the captain represents the cornerstone of the vessel's operational governance and a key figure in ensuring safety and efficient onboard management.

This article examines the evolution of the captain's role within the modern superyacht sector, with particular focus on operational responsibilities, risk management, and emerging organisational trends in the industry.

1. The evolving role of the superyacht captain.

In maritime practice, the captain has traditionally been the ultimate authority responsible for navigation and the safety of the voyage.

Within the modern superyacht environment, this role operates within a highly complex organisational framework, characterised by:

- the frequent presence of owners and guests onboard;
- exceptionally high service standards;
- and increasingly sophisticated operational structures;

Onboard operations involve the continuous interaction of operational requirements, owner expectations, and international regulatory constraints.

In this context, the captain is required to coordinate multiple stakeholders, including:

- owners;
- yacht management companies;
- multinational crews;
- shipyards and refit facilities;
- insurers;
- maritime authorities;

The captain is therefore not merely responsible for navigation but acts as the central figure in the yacht's operational governance, combining decision-making authority, legal responsibility, and high-level managerial competencies.

2. The captain under maritime law and international regulations.

Under maritime law, the captain has historically been recognised as the highest authority onboard.

In the Italian legal system, the Codice della Navigazione assigns to the captain:

the direction of the maritime venture, responsibility for the safety of the vessel and all persons onboard.

Key provisions include:

- Art. 295 – authority over navigation and manoeuvring;
- Art. 297 – obligation to verify seaworthiness prior to departure;
- Art. 303 – duty to abandon ship last in case of danger;
- Art. 306 – legal representation of the shipowner for acts necessary for the voyage.

Alongside national law, the captain's role is defined and reinforced by an extensive framework of international conventions adopted under the International Maritime Organization (IMO), including:

SOLAS Convention (Safety of Life at Sea) – international safety standards for ships;

STCW Convention – training and certification of seafarers;

MARPOL Convention – prevention of marine pollution;

MLC 2006 (Maritime Labour Convention) – minimum working and living standards for seafarers;

ISM Code (International Safety Management Code) – safety management systems and the principle of overriding authority.

This regulatory framework confirms the captain's central role as guarantor of navigational safety and regulatory compliance.

In the superyacht sector, these legal principles translate into extensive operational responsibilities requiring a combination of technical expertise, leadership, and advanced management skills.

3. Superyacht operational governance.

Large yachts can, in many respects, be compared to complex organisations.

Beyond navigation, the captain is responsible for supervising a wide range of operational activities, including:

- voyage planning and navigation management;
- crew coordination and operational oversight;
- liaison with yacht management companies;
- supervision of maintenance, refit, and technical works;
- interaction with owners and guests during onboard operations.

This role requires not only advanced nautical expertise but also strong organisational, interpersonal, and managerial capabilities to ensure operational efficiency in a high-end service environment.

4. Decision-making authority and risk management.

A fundamental principle of international maritime law is that the captain retains autonomous decision-making authority where safety is concerned.

The ISM Code recognises **the captain's overriding authority**, allowing decisions to be taken even against the owner's or management company's instructions where necessary to ensure:

- the safety of the vessel;
- the safety of persons onboard;
- the protection of the marine environment;

In the superyacht context, this principle often translates into critical operational decisions, such as:

delaying departure due to adverse weather conditions;

- altering planned routes;
- restricting potentially hazardous leisure activities;
- suspending technical operations or works.

The ability to exercise this authority with balance and sound judgement is one of the defining competencies of an experienced captain.

5. Leadership and crew management.

Large superyachts typically employ multinational crews composed of individuals from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds.

The captain's responsibilities in crew management include:

- organising work schedules and operational duties;
- coordinating different onboard departments;
- managing internal team dynamics;
- maintaining high standards of professionalism and safety.

In recent years, the industry has placed increasing emphasis on crew welfare and sustainable working conditions, particularly on commercially operated yachts running dual seasons (Mediterranean in summer and Caribbean in winter), where operational intensity remains high throughout the year.

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Within the large superyacht segment—typically above 50–60 metres or over 500 GT—an organisational model based on rotational captain positions is becoming increasingly common.

Under this model, two captains alternate on the same yacht. In industry terminology, this is referred to as “**rotational contracts**” or “**rotational captain positions**”, typically structured as:

- 3:3 rotation → 3 months onboard / 3 months leave
- 2:2 rotation → 2 months onboard / 2 months leave
- 10:10 rotation → 10 weeks on / 10 weeks off

This organisational model is not an inherent feature of the Seafarer Employment Agreement (SEA) under the MLC framework.

The SEA regulates minimum employment standards such as:

- leave entitlement,
- rest periods,
- repatriation,
- conditions of employment,
- working hours,
- code of conduct,

but does not prescribe rotational work structures.

Key advantages of rotational captain models:

- **Reduced fatigue and improved operational safety.**
Continuous operations over extended periods can lead to fatigue. Rotational systems ensure sustained alertness and better decision-making.
- **Retention of experienced captains**
Traditionally, captains would leave highly active yachts after short periods to seek less demanding roles. Rotational systems allow yachts to remain operational year-round while enabling captains to maintain a sustainable work-life balance.

This model is increasingly adopted by forward-thinking owners and is becoming a structural feature of large superyacht operations.

6. Conclusions

The captain remains a key figure in the management of large yachts and a central pillar of effective superyacht operations and governance.

In an industry characterised by increasingly sophisticated vessels and highly demanding operational programmes, the captain continues to serve as the primary point of reference for ensuring safety, operational efficiency and continuity. In this evolving landscape, the rotational captain model is emerging as a potential organisational solution within the superyacht sector.

In practice, however, **the implementation of rotational systems requires careful consideration of several critical aspects:**

- decision-making continuity and structured handover procedures between captains
- alignment and coordination with the owner and yacht management company
- consistency between operational organisation and crew employment structures

If not properly structured, these elements may directly impact the yacht's operational efficiency, onboard governance and risk management framework.

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