

## Guide to Abrashoff's *It's Your Ship*

### Introduction:

... the challenge of getting the most out of our crews ... depends on three variables:

- the leader's needs
- the organization's atmosphere
- the crew's potential competence

### *Ownership*

The command-and-control approach is far from the most efficient way to tap people's intelligence and skills. To the contrary, I found that the more control I gave up, the more command I got. In the beginning, people kept asking my permission to do things. Eventually, I told the crew "it's your ship. You're responsible for it. Make a decision and see what happens." Every sailor felt that *Benfold* was his or her responsibility.

### Chapter 1: Take Command

Reasons for low job satisfaction:

- 1) not being treated with dignity or respect
- 2) being prevented from making an impact on the organization
- 3) not being listened to
- 4) not being rewarded with more responsibility
- 5) low pay

Organizing principle: The key to being a successful skipper is to see the ship through the *eyes of the crew*. Only then can you find out what's really wrong and, in so doing, help the sailors *empower themselves* to fix it.

A ship commanded by a micromanager and his or her hierarchy of sub-micromanagers is no breeding ground for individual initiative. ... instead of constantly scrutinizing the members of my crew with the presumption that they would screw up, I assumed that they wanted to do well and be the best.

I began with the idea that there is always a better way to do things, and that, contrary to tradition, the *crew's insights* might be more profound than even the captain's.

I would have to train my people to think and make judgments on their own. Empowering means defining the parameters in which people are allowed to operate, and then setting them free...

But what are the limits? Whenever the consequences of a decision had the potential to kill or injure someone, waste taxpayers' money, or damage the ship, I had to be consulted. Short of those contingencies, the crew was authorized to make their own decisions. Even if the decisions were wrong, I would stand by my crew. And hopefully, they would learn from their mistakes. And the more responsibility they were given, the more they learned.

My second assumption was that the secret to *lasting* change is to implement processes that people will enjoy carrying out...

Subordinates are more perceptive than you give them credit for, and they always know the score, even when you don't want them to.

*My job was to create the climate that enabled people to unleash their potential.*

## **Chapter 2: Lead by Example**

A leader will never accomplish what he or she wants by ordering it done. Real leadership must be done by example, not precept (principle).

*It's funny how often the problem is you:* Whenever I could not get the results I wanted, I swallowed my temper and turned inward...

Did I clearly articulate the goals?

Did I give people enough time and resources to accomplish the task?

Did I give them enough training?

example: admiral's barge breaks down in Subic Bay, radio breaks, admiral says: "take my flag down", towed in by a garbage scow. Abrashoff hadn't put any time/effort into the barge or training its crew...

*Never forget your effect on people:* leaders need to understand how profoundly they affect people, how their optimism and pessimism are equally infectious, how directly they set the tone and spirit of everyone around them.

Example: go to bosses' office, boss continues to type and email while you try to talk...

As a manager, the one signal you need to steadily send to your people is how important they are to you. example: CAPT asks sailor (who has been on board for two years) – are you new? sailor says “yes, and what is it that you do aboard the ship?”

Show me an enthusiastic leader, and I will show you an enthusiastic workforce.

*Leaders know how to be held accountable:* strive for a culture that allows people to candidly acknowledge mistakes and take responsibility. It’s far more useful to focus on making sure the incident never happens again, rather than on finding someone to blame.

*Never fail the Washington Post test:* would you feel comfortable if your decision was made into a headline? Do the right thing!

*Obey even when you disagree:* Important to make your objections to a policy known in a private manner, and to offer alternatives. But if you lose your argument, it’s crucial that you carry out your orders as if you supported the policy 100% from the beginning.

If you undermine your superiors, if your crew sees you “freelancing,” they will feel free not to support *you* when they disagree with your policies.

### **Chapter 3: Listen Aggressively**

*See the ship through the crews’ eyes:* good ideas from the crew frequently came to nothing because no one was listening. The Navy seemed to put managers in a “transmitting” mode, which minimized their receptivity. They were conditioned to promulgate orders from above, not to welcome suggestions from below.

*Find round people for round holes:* match your crew members’ personal and professional goals with the tasks that needed to be done...

give me performance over seniority any day! (example of young SN who was tossed out of previous office b/c he questioned orders, assigned to Abrashoff’s admin office but turned out to be better than the chief at paperwork. old manager had mistaken initiative for insubordination...)

*Use the power of “word magic”:* if leaders back their words with action – if they practice what they preach – their words create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Confidence is infectious.

## Chapter 4: Communicate Purpose & Meaning

The whole secret of leading a ship or managing a company is to articulate a *common goal* that inspires a *diverse group* of people to work hard *together*.

Make your crew think “we can do anything”

Praise in public, correct in private

*Explain policies and changes in policy:* People can absorb anything if they are not deceived or treated arrogantly. Lies and arrogance create an “us-versus-them” atmosphere that poisons productivity.

Secrecy spawns isolation, not success. Knowledge is power; leaders need collective power, so they therefore need collective knowledge. The more people know what the goals are, the better “buy-in” you get, and the better results you achieve together.

*Open up clogged channels:* there is a direct relationship between how much the crew knew about a plan and how well they carried it out.

No matter how fantastic your message is, if no one is receiving it, you aren’t communicating. A leader must have mastery of all means of communication, along with the willingness to use them – otherwise, you’re just talking to yourself. (example of sailor who discovered how to unclog message traffic among ships in Persian gulf...)

*Freedom creates discipline:* If the crew had a problem with what I was doing, then I wanted them to tell me so I could fix it or explain why I had to do things that way, thus expanding my crew’s knowledge of limitations or requirements imposed on me.

When people saw me opening myself to criticism, they opened themselves up. The result? We never made the same mistake twice...

When people feel they own an organization, they perform with greater care and devotion. They want to do things right the first time, and they don’t have accidents by taking shortcuts for the sake of expedience.

## **Chapter 5: Create a Climate of Trust**

The best way to keep a ship on course for success is to give the troops all the responsibility they can handle and then stand back.

But trust is a kind of jujitsu: you have to earn it, and you earn trust only by giving it...

*Never pit dog against dog:* don't let "departments" within your team compete with each other. Get your whole team working towards the overall success of the team. (example – you can have the best weapons department in the navy, but it doesn't do you any good if your engines don't work...!)

*Even the worst screwup may be redeemable:* "you may be a screwup, but we believe in comebacks. We will help and not give up on you." Leaders and managers need to understand that their employees are keenly attuned to their actions and reactions. If they see you give up on someone, they understand that they're one screw-up from being the next to go...

(example – officer comes from another ship where he was bullied, in a more welcoming environment he thrives...)

*Welcome the bad-news messenger:* A boss who "shoots the messenger" will not hear about future problems until they're out of hand.

You should never bring petty problems to the attention of your boss if you can solve them yourself. But in critical situations, let your boss know as soon as possible – *bad news does not improve with age.*

## **Chapter 6: Look for Results, Not Salutes**

Last in line for chow – make sure your people eat first. Takes the commodore to the mess decks to eat with the crew.

*Let your crew feel free to speak up:* create a culture where everyone feels comfortable in questioning convention and offering new solutions. "yes-people" (who say "yes, sir" to everything) are a cancer in any organization, and dangerous to boot.

example – man overboard drill, destroyer is towing decoys, XO wants to do man overboard drill, Abrashoff warns that they will cross the lines when they come about, XO ignores suggestion...

example – USS Greenville (sub that crashed into and sunk a Japanese fishing vessel) crew “respected the commanding officer too much to question his judgment”. Abrashoff says: “if that’s respect, then I want none of it...”

Treat all with dignity and respect: golden rule still applies!

*Innovation knows no rank*: listen to everyone. example: petty officer comes up with database to speed up inspections of ships during embargo. when he makes the suggestion, most of the officers on the bridge just turn away...

every leader needs *big ears* and zero tolerance for stereotypes....

## **Chapter 7: Take Calculated Risks**

It’s easier to never change, but an organization that aims to stay alive and strong should make sure to praise and promote risk-takers, even if they fail once in a while...

Unfortunately, organizations all too often promote only those who have never made a mistake. Show me someone who has never made a mistake, and I will show you someone who is not doing anything to improve your organization.

Bet on the people who think for themselves: be serious about making your crew *partners, not peons*.

No ship or company can rely on just one person for a critical procedure – that makes the whole ship hostage to a single individual who may get hurt or sick, leaving you in big trouble.

OK to not have experience – the problem is that people aren’t given the opportunity to learn. example – refueling at sea, only one officer was experienced, had the inexperienced officers run the procedure...

*If all you give are orders, then all you will get are order takers.*

*Take a chance on a promising sailor*: example of sailor who slept late and missed deployment but was repentant, took his lumps and with supervision and guidance turned out to be an excellent air traffic controller...

*If a rule doesn't make sense, break it;* example of renting vans in Dubai instead of giant buses to allow sailors on leave to go where they wanted (and be less of a target for terrorists...)

*if a rule does make sense, break it carefully.* example of packing beer on the ship, was being “slow rolled” by XO and master chief, got them to do it, allowed crew to drink by pulling a barge alongside and having the cookout off the ship...

## **Chapter 8: Go Beyond Standard Procedure**

You will seldom get in trouble for following SOP. on the other hand, you will rarely get outstanding results.

*Keep your priorities in focus:* for a combat ship, focus has to be on combat readiness (example of tracking unknown fighter jets...)

*Stay ahead of the competition:* rivalry is OK, but you should really be in competition with yourself to have the best ship and crew you possibly can...

how well the crew is prepared and how well it performs typically is a reflection of how well the CO leads...

*Push the envelope for innovation:* information is power – those that have it prosper, while those who lack it whither. example of pushing to get satellite TV on ships

*Go for the obvious – it's probably a winner:* sometimes a solution is so simple and so apparent that we ignore it. we think it isn't innovative or “cool” or complex enough, or that others have considered and discarded it. That's a big mistake...

*Work smarter, not harder:* example of working with the shipyard to schedule different work on the ship, so that things didn't have to be painted and then ripped out then welded and repainted, saves money and is finished early...

Don't fight stupidity, use it: example – sailors under 21 couldn't go on leave unless they were SW qualified. first one to be qualified in FN, gets pinned by USMC Gen Zinni, then Abrashoff tells Zinni that FN will conduct tour of the ship...

## Chapter 9: Build up your people

I left drill-sergeant bullying to other leaders with other goals. running Benfold demanded brains and initiative, not brawn. Only competent and self-confident sailors could handle the ship's complexities and fulfill its missions. These sailors could not be sculpted into a fighting crew by ruling with fear and punishing them as though they were inept kids. my job was to turn kids into grown ups...

Praise is infinitely more productive than punishment...

positive, personal reinforcement is the essence of effective leadership... face-to-face relations are essential (especially in the days of email, facebook etc...) example of woman who receives email from boss about her spectacular work, but same boss doesn't even acknowledge her presence in the elevator...

*Little things make big successes:* example of birthday cards to sailors' spouses.

must create a supportive climate that encouraged sailors to reach beyond their own expectations

*Trust people – they usually prove you're right.* challenge people, and let them unleash their talent and rise to new levels

you can't order good performance – you have to plan, enable, nurture, and focus on it.

delegate responsibility to people who are ready and able to accept it...

Newbies are important – treat them well. example – no “welcome aboard” program for brand new sailors...

*Expect the best from your crew – you will get it:* how much brainpower does the Navy waste b/c those in charge don't recognize the full potential hiding at the low end of the hierarchy? If we stopped pinning labels on people and stopped treating them as if they were stupid, they would perform better. Why not instead assume that everyone is inherently talented, and then spur them to live up to those expectations?

anything you can do to understand your people, support them in tough times, and nurture their gifts will pay benefits to your bottom line. example – gets SAT help for sailors who never took them in high school...

*Build a strong, deep bench.* don't rely on just one person to do each job – then you're hostage to that person if they get sick or retire... train the second, third, and fourth string to do the job and do it well...

*Counsel continuously – and honestly.* give constant feedback, not just at an annual evaluation. remove guesswork and let people know what their evaluation criteria is going to be so they're not surprised. skipping this preparation only leads to heartache and discontent.

the key to a successful evaluation is whether or not your people are surprised the day you give them their grades. if they're surprised, then you clearly have not done a good job of setting their expectations and providing feedback throughout the year.

whenever I had deficient performers, I always laid out a game plan for them to improve. I'd bring them in, tell them what their problems were, what they needed to do to correct them, and provide training if they needed it. I would give them a deadline by which I expected them to have their deficiencies corrected. If necessary, I would clearly lay out in advance what would happen if they didn't...

## **Chapter 10: Generate Unity**

treating people with respect and dignity is not only morally right, but also highly practical and productive. unity became the fundamental purpose of my leadership model. we achieved that goal b/c we learned how to make people want to belong to our 310-member club, ready to give their best to a fair-dealing ship that clearly valued them, no matter what color/sex/etc...

*Forget diversity – train for unity:* a ship of 310 people who looked and acted just like me would probably be one of the worst ships in the navy. if you surround yourself with people exactly like yourself, you run the dangerous risk of groupthink, and no one has the creativity to come up with new ideas

while good news makes you feel warm inside, it's the negative news that makes you learn and helps improve your performance at your job.

how we get there is just as important as getting there – can you be proud of what you did?

responding to sexual harassment and prejudice: if you don't intend to act, don't bother to ask if it's going on – it will only make matters worse.

I'm a big believer in getting resentments and grumbling out in the open, where they can do a lot less damage.

articulating the feelings that your people are afraid to speak is a large part of what leaders, including ship captains, do for a living...

Deal out punishment strictly but fairly: I wanted people who screwed up on my ship to know two things: first, they will be appropriately punished; second, they will get another chance...

### **Chapter 11: Improve Your People's Quality of Life**

*The secret of good work? Good play:* giving our people the freedom to act a little crazy seemed to confirm that we really cared about them. it boosted their pride in serving aboard a "happening" ship that others admired and envied...

### **Chapter 12: Life After Benfold**

Let's all stipulate the winning leader's first principle: Optimism rules. And the corollary: opportunities never cease. The bottom line: It's your ship. Make it the best.