



**It's Your Ship**  
**Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy**  
**Notes by Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, PhD.**

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**Author's Bio:** Captain D. Michael Abrashoff is a graduate of the US Naval Academy in Annapolis Maryland, and was a military assistant to the former secretary of Defense, the Honorable Dr. William J. Perry. Abrashoff left the navy in 2001 and became the founder of Grassroots Leadership, Inc. in Boston.

**Author's big thought:** The story of Captain D. Michael Abrashoff and his command of USS *Benfold* have become legendary inside and outside the Navy. When he took over the ship it was armed with every cutting-edge system available, it was like a business that had all the latest technology, but only some of the productivity. Knowing that responsibility for improving performance rested with him, he realized that he had to improve his own leadership skills before he could improve his ship. Within months he created a crew of confident, inspired problem solvers eager to take the initiative and take responsibility for their actions. The slogan on board became "It's your ship," and *Benfold* became recognized far and wide as a model of naval efficiency. In this book, Abrashoff shares his secrets of successful management.

## **Chapter Notes**

### **Introduction**

- This story might be called "The Education of the USS *Benfold*," which is a guided missile destroyer that the author commanded for twenty months beginning in June 1997. He inherited a crew of 310 men and women.
- To be given this spectacular vessel as his first sea command was thrilling, but also ironic. Opportunity had called, but in a troubled industry. Although the military continued to invest in the latest technologies and systems, technology is only a

facilitator. The people operating the equipment are what give the fighting edge, and the military seemed to have lost the way when it came to helping them grow.

- Despite her potency, the *Benfold* was not as prepared for the threat of attack as she could have been. The dysfunctional ship had a sullen crew that resented being there and could not wait to get out of the Navy. The achievement of which the author is most proud was turning that crew into a tight-knit, smoothly functioning team that boasted - accurately, many felt - that *Benfold* was the best damn ship in the Navy.
- In this book he offers his experiences, his successes and his failures as a practical guide to any leader in any business or organization. Like the Navy, the business community has to figure out how to help people grow.
- A recent Gallup study found that when people leave their companies, 65 percent of them are actually leaving their managers. As true in the Navy as it is in business, leaders are failing - and the costs are astounding. Conservative estimates put the cost of losing a trained worker at one and a half times the annual salary of the outgoing employee, as measured by lost productivity and recruiting and training costs for the replacement.
- What all leaders have in common is the challenge of getting the most from their crews, which depends on three variables: the leader's needs, the organization's atmosphere, and the crew's potential competence.
- Hard experience taught him that real leadership is about understanding yourself first, then using that to create a superb organization. Leaders must free their subordinates to fulfill their talents to the utmost. However, most obstacles that limit people's potential are set in motion by the leader and are rooted in his or her own fears, ego needs, and unproductive habits. When leaders explore deep within their thoughts and feelings in order to understand themselves, a transformation can occur.
- That understanding shifts the leader's perspective on all of the interactions in life, and he or she approaches leadership from a completely different place. As a result, a leader's choices are different from those he or she made when blinded by fear, ego, and habit. More important, others perceive the person as more authentic, which in turn reinforces new behavior. This can vastly improve how people respond to their leaders and makes their loyalty to the source of gratification more likely.
- Helping people realize their full potential can lead to attaining goals that would be impossible to reach under command-and-control.
- The book narrates episodes in Benfold's two-year voyage through uncharted waters of leadership, and is organized around the lessons learned. A chapter is given to each one: lead by example; listen aggressively; communicate purpose and meaning; create a climate of trust; look for results, not salutes; take calculated risks; go beyond standard procedure; build up your people's confidence; generate unity; and improve your people's quality of life as much as possible.

- Leaders must be willing to put the ship's performance ahead of their egos. The more control Captain Abrashoff gave up, the more command he got. Every sailor felt that *Benfold* was his or her responsibility.
- *Captains need to see the ship from the crew's perspective.* They need to make it easy and rewarding for crew members to express themselves and their ideas, and they need to figure out how and when to delegate responsibility.
- One of the ways the Captain demonstrated his commitment to wanting the rules challenged and questioned was to question and challenge rules to *his* bosses. He discovered a way to create change without asking a higher authority's permission. What the boss wanted, he decided, was a ship that met all operational commitments and did so under budget, while achieving high morale and a high retention rate. He thought that if he could deliver these things, his bosses would leave him alone. He also made sure to act in the least threatening manner possible. He took prudent, calculated risks. Never once did he do anything to promote himself, just the organization.

### **Chapter One: Take Command**

- Abrashoff took over a very tough crew who didn't exactly adore their former captain. While being likeable is not high among a ship captain's job requirements, what is essential is to be respected, trusted, and effective. He knew he would have to come up with a new leadership model, geared to a new era.
- However the economy is doing, a challenge for leaders in the twenty-first century is attracting and retaining not just employees, but the best employees - and more important, how to motivate them so that they work with passion, energy, and enthusiasm.
- Pondering all this in the context of his post as the new captain, Abrashoff read some exit surveys conducted by the military to find out why people were leaving. He assumed pay would be the first reason, but in fact it was fifth. The top reason was not being treated with respect or dignity; third, not being listened to; and fourth, not being rewarded with more responsibility. Further research disclosed an unexpected parallel with civilian life.
- Abrashoff decided that during his two years commanding *Benfold*, he would concentrate on dealing with the unhappy sailors' top four gripes. His organizing principle was simple: the key to being a successful skipper is to see the ship through the eyes of the crew.
- He 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. Accordingly, they spent several months analyzing every process on the ship.
- His second assumption was that the secret to lasting change is to implement processes that people will enjoy carrying out. To that end, he focused his leadership efforts on encouraging people not only to find better ways to do their

jobs, but also to have fun as they did them. Seeing results, the crew began saying "This is not your father's Navy." That is when he knew he had taken command - not just in name, but in truth. One sailor told him that the crew thought he cared more about performance and them than about his next promotion. That's another thing you need to learn about your people: They are more perceptive than you give them credit for, and they always know the score - even when you don't want them to.

- Though Abrashoff brought with him a lot of negative leadership styles that he learned early in his career, he had already decided that if he was every going to fill his father's shoes, it was time for him to leave his comfort zone and chart his own course. Luckily, he also had positive role models outside of his family, notably Secretary of Defense William Perry. It was time for him to confront everything he had hated about the Navy as he climbed through its ranks, and fix it all. Though the goal was presumptuous, he told himself that it was important that he try to do this. He might never get promoted again, but he decided that the risk was worth it. He wanted a life he could be proud of. He wanted to have a positive effect on young people's lives. He wanted to create the best organization he could. And he didn't want to squander this leadership opportunity.
- He was terribly insecure, scared, and full of doubts at first. He had never been in such a position before, and he kept asking himself whether or not he was doing the right thing. But he had to make a leap, and he knew he wasn't doing it for himself. He was doing it for his people.
- What's needed now is a dramatic new way of inspiring people to excel while things are happening at lightening speed. They achieved that on the *Benfold*. In fiscal 1998, they operated on 75 percent of their budget, not because they consciously decided to save money, but because his sailors were free to question conventional wisdom and dream up better ways to do their jobs.
- The *Benfold* served in the Persian Gulf during the Iraqi crisis of 1997, they were the go-to ship of the Gulf Fleet, and they got the toughest assignments. They made the highest gunnery score in the Pacific fleet. They set a new record for the Navy's pre-deployment training cycle. The numbers don't lie. The ships' retention rate for the two most critical categories jumped from 10 percent to 28 percent, and stayed there. All of *Benfold's* career sailors reenlisted for an additional tour. The considerable dollar savings as a result of retention is only the beginning. The ultimate benefit - retaining highly skilled employees - is incalculable.
- Whenever a decision had the potential to kill or injure someone, waste tax-payers' money, or damage the ship, the Captain had to be consulted. Short of those contingencies, the crew was authorized to make their own decisions. Even if the decisions were wrong, he would stand behind his crew. The more responsibility they were given, the more they learned.
- Learning experiences were created at every turn. As a result, they had a promotion rate that was over the top. *Benfold* sailors were getting promoted at a rate twice that of the Navy average.

- The fact is that the new environment aboard *Benfold* created a company of collaborators who were flourishing in a spirit of relaxed discipline, creativity, humor and pride. *Benfold* went on to beat every metric in the Pacific fleet, and frequently the crew broke the existing record. Directly, Abrashoff felt he had nothing to do with these triumphs. As he saw it, his job was to create the climate that enabled people to unleash their potential. Given the right environment, there are few limits to what people can achieve.

## Chapter Two: Lead by Example

- While the image of a Navy captain conjures up gold braid and firmly barked orders, neither of those things makes a leader. A leader will never accomplish what he or she wants by ordering it done. Real leadership must be done by example, not precept. The signals you send are important. You train your crew how to operate through every decision you make and every action you take.
- *It's funny how often the problem is you.* Whenever he could not get the results he wanted, he swallowed his temper and turned inward to see if he was part of the problem. He was at least as much a part of the problem as his people were.
- *Never forget your effect on people.* Leaders need to understand how profoundly they effect people, how their optimism and pessimism are equally infectious, how directly they set the tone and spirit of everyone around them. Mediocre leaders don't even take the time to know their people. As a manager, the one signal you need to steadily send to your people is how important they are to you. In fact, nothing is more important to you. Realize your influence, and use it wisely. Recognize the effect you have on them, and how you can make them grow taller. It is well-known that every leader sets the tone for his or her organization. On the days when you can't be cheerful and positive the key is to minimize the damage you impose.
- *Leaders know how to be accountable.*
- *Never fail the Washington Post test.* Abrashoff's self-test was simple, and it allowed him to decide whether to go or stop in terms of obvious consequences. He just asked himself this: "If what I'm about to do appeared on the front page of the Washington Post tomorrow, would I be proud or embarrassed?" Getting somewhere is important. How you get there is equally important.
- *Obey even when you disagree.* Very so often your chain of command comes up with a policy that you disagree with - yet it's your responsibility to enforce it. It's important to make your objections known in a private manner with your bosses. But if you lose your argument, it's also important that you carry out that order as if you supported it a 100 percent. It's important that you not undermine your superiors. In any organization your people need to know that you support your chain of command. If they see you freelancing, they will feel free not to support you when they disagree with your policies. There is nothing wrong with trying to offer a better way to meet a requirement that has been imposed on you.

### Chapter Three: Listen Aggressively

- Shortly after he took command of the *Benfold*, Abrashoff vowed to treat every encounter with every person on the ship as the most important thing at that moment. It wasn't easy for him, and he didn't do it perfectly, but his crew's enthusiasm and smart ideas kept him going.
- *See the ship through the crew's eyes*
- He decided that his job was to listen aggressively and to pick up every good idea the crew had for improving the ship's operation. After all, the people who do the nuts-and-bolts work on a ship constantly see things that officers don't.
- The Captain decided to interview each crew member on the ship so he or she could hear his expectations directly. He began to interview five crew members a day. He asked questions to establish a personal relationship with each crew member. He learned by listening that 50 percent enlisted because their families couldn't afford to send them to college, and 30 percent joined to get away from bad situations such as drugs and violence.
- In just about every case, his sailors were trying to make something meaningful of their lives. This is one of the great strengths of our all-volunteer military force. They are all good, young, hardworking men and women. They deserve nothing but our respect and admiration. As a result of the interviews he came to respect his crew enormously.
- Most of these sailors had never been in a commanding officer's cabin before. But once they saw the invitation was sincere, the response was overwhelming. The Captain had a microphone for the ship's public-address system on his desk. Whenever he got a good suggestion, he hit the button and told the whole ship about it - the turnaround time for launching a good idea was about five minutes.
- From these conversations he composed two lists of all the jobs performed on the ship. List A consisted of all their mission-critical tasks. On list B were all their non-value-added chores - such as chipping and painting. He tackled list B with gusto and reduced non-value jobs to a minimum with several innovative ideas. With more time to learn their jobs, the crew began boosting readiness indicators all over the ship. The Navy has since drastically increased the capacity to do this for every ship.
- *Find round people for round holes.* The interviews gave him the data that enabled him to match his crew members' personal and professional goals with the tasks that needed to be done. Knowing his people was a huge asset.
- *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. Call it "word magic." Abrashoff decided *Benfold* was going to be the best damn ship in the Navy. He repeated it to his sailors all the time, and eventually they believed it themselves. Sure it was corny, but it worked because confidence is infectious.

## Chapter Four: Communicate Purpose and 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.
- No one had ever thought to give the crew a compelling vision of their work, a good reason to believe it was important. So they spent time and thought, and came up with a compelling vision that they could believe in. They began by making improvements. And slowly they stopped leaving their enthusiasm in their cars in the parking lot and began bringing it to work.
- *Make your crew think "we can do anything".* On *Benfold* they used every possible means of communication, including private e-mail to key superiors; a daily newsletter for the crew; his own cheerleading for good ideas and walking around the ship chatting; and topside light shows and loud music that expressed *Benfold's* exuberance.
- Like any other workforce, he appreciated hearing from top management. It is important to tell everyone personally what's in store for him or her - new goals, new work descriptions, new organizational structure, and yes, job losses, if that's the case. Explain why the company is making the changes.
- Some leaders feel that by keeping people in the dark, they maintain a measure of control. But that's a leader's folly and an organization's failure. Secrecy spawns isolation, not success. Leaders need collective power and that requires collective knowledge.
- *Open up the clogged channels.* As he rose in the Navy, he was continually frustrated by how information was stopped at mid-level regions. He decided when he took command that he would focus on creating communication that actually conveyed information. His reasoning was that there was a direct relationship between how much the crew knew about a plan and how well they carried it out.
- The Captain tells a story of how he listened to a Radioman who, as a result of his support, single-handedly unclogged a monstrous communication blockage. The force of his talent and thinking did everything - what this one radioman did for the Navy was phenomenal. He pulled them out of a crisis in wartime and exponentially increased their effectiveness throughout the Persian Gulf and the world.
- *After creating a great brand, defend it.* While they were in the Persian Gulf, his crew of 310 built a collective reputation that made the *Benfold* the star ship of the Fifth Fleet. They wanted to protect their terrific reputation and make sure they gave no ammunition to their potential detractors. They were all ambassadors, and they had to behave accordingly. There was zero tolerance for misbehavior.
- *Freedom creates discipline.* His interviews with the crew worked to empower his sailors to think and act on their own. Equally important was their follow-up process which they lifted from the Army. It's called the *After Action Review*. They documented what they were trying to do, how they did it, what the conditions and variables were, and how they could improve the process in the future. The ground rules for these sessions were that they checked their ego at the door, and that

there was no retribution for any comments. When people saw the Captain opening himself to criticism, they opened themselves up. That's how they made dramatic improvements. To his continued amazement, discipline actually improved under his regime. There was a corresponding drop in workmen's compensation cases. When people feel they own an organization, they perform with greater care and devotion.

- Previously people were fighting to get off the ship. Now they were fighting to stay aboard. That kind of desire translates into performance. With good leadership freedom doesn't weaken discipline - it strengthens it.

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

- Once leaders have set the terms of the new social contract with their workers, they need to have the courage of their convictions. Trust is a human marvel - it not only sustains the social contract, it's the growth hormone that turns green sailors into seasoned shipmates and troubled companies into dynamic competitors.
- *Never pit dog against dog.* When he took over *Benfold*, he found distrust throughout the ship. The competition to be named commander of a ship in the Navy is fierce, and the four department heads on *Benfold* were competing to get the highest rankings. One of the first things the Captain did was to tell the four heads that their futures in the Navy depended on the overall success of *Benfold*. As the department heads called off their war and focused on purpose, their people started trusting one another more and stopped questioning motives. People started communicating with one another.
- *Even the worst screw up may be redeemable.* 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 instantly that there's no room for redemption in this outfit, and they could be next to go. If they see you intervene to help someone who is worth your effort, they will be reassured.
- *Welcome the bad-news messenger.* It's critical that leaders don't shoot the messenger who brings bad news. It can be a matter of life and death to create a climate of trust in which people are not afraid to deliver news that they know you don't want to hear.
- *Protect your people from lunatic bosses.* This is one of the trickiest and most delicate situations a manager can be in. On the one hand you must support the boss - any company expects loyalty as a condition of employment. On the other hand, you must somehow help to minimize the damage that this behavior will do to the ship's well-being or the company's common interest. There is no easy solution.
- *Being the best carries responsibility.* The price of being the go-to ship is that you often get the toughest jobs, and honoring that sometimes feels dubious. They had created so much trust in their reliability that they were victims of their own success. They were selected for lengthy times at sea and difficult missions as a result of their numerous successes.

## Chapter Six: Look for Results, not Salutes

- Like Military services around the globe, the US Navy is a hierarchy. Rank, seniority, and military discipline govern nearly everything. As gently as possible the Captain set out to chip away at this rigid system. Rigidity gets in the way of creativity. Instead of salutes he wanted results, which meant achieving combat readiness.
- As captain, he was charged with enforcing 225 years of accumulated Navy regulations, policies, and procedures. But every last one of those rules was up for negotiation whenever his people came up with a better way of doing things. As soon as one of their new ideas worked in practice, he passed it up the chain of command, hoping his superiors would share it with other ships. To facilitate that he had to encourage the crew to take initiative - and make sure the officers welcomed it.
- *Help knock down the barriers.* Within a month after taking command, Abrashoff felt that he was making progress in proving to his crew that he genuinely cared about them and would work with them to develop their potential. To help knock down the barriers he had meals on Sunday with his crew rather than the officers. He considered the crew his and he wanted senior officers to spend time with them so they could discover how truly talented and dedicated they were. He resolved that visiting VIPs would always get an opportunity to eat with his crew.
- *Let your crew feel free to speak up.* He was determined to create a culture where everyone on board felt comfortable enough to voice concerns or objections. History recounts countless incidents in which ship captains or organization managers permitted a climate of intimidation to pervade the workplace, silencing subordinates whose warnings could have prevented disaster. Even when the reluctance to speak up stems from admiration for the commanding officer's skill and experience, a climate to question decisions must be created in order to foster double-checking. Make your people feel they can speak freely, no matter what they have to say.
- When leaders and managers behave as though they are above their people, when they announce decisions after little or no consultation, when they make it clear that their orders aren't meant to be questioned, then conditions are ripe for disaster. The good news is that every leader has the power to prevent this.
- *Free your crew from top-down-itis.* The fall of 1997 was a heady time aboard the *Benfold*. The ship was improving, and morale was soaring. Still the Captain was determined to turn the ship into an institution of continual learning, which entailed a systematic and methodical analysis of what worked and what didn't. Freed from top-down-itis, *Benfold's* sailors were given responsibilities to make decisions, correct mistakes, and prove to themselves that they were part of a superb crew. He anticipated some short term problems. He knew performance would dip a bit as people were learning and growing comfortable with their new responsibilities.
- *Nurture the freedom to fail.* He never once reprimanded a sailor for attempting to solve a problem or reach a goal. He wanted his people to feel empowered so they

could think autonomously. Empower your people; at the same time give them guidelines within which they are allowed to roam.

- *Innovation knows no rank.* His officers were about to discard a great idea because it came from a lowly enlisted man. The Captain happened to hear his recommendations. This resulted in creating a database to catalogue all the necessary information for boarding and inspecting ships in the Gulf, normally a very long and tedious process. Their database was promptly distributed to every other Navy ship performing boarding duties in the Gulf.
- *Challenge your crew beyond its reach.* The crew used technology to leverage their training time. They made their training tougher than anything they would see in combat. If two people were weak, they got remedial training apart from the other 8 members of their team, which obviously saved time and presumably strengthened their confidence and skills. No one had ever thought to computerize the records. The petty officer who had created the Persian Gulf database, now made another one, you could see the training results: dates, scores, laggards, stars. The program even scheduled the training sessions. It was a phenomenal leap forward, ensuring snarl-free training and focusing on whomever needed special attention.
- *Benfold*aced the final graduation challenge at week one of the six-month process. He got the highest score ever. The sailors themselves had redesigned the training program and made it more effective than the Navy had ever dreamed. So for the next two months, unprecedented in Naval history, they cruised the coast making port visits. His sailors were in hog heaven and they had earned it.

### **Chapter Seven: Take Calculated Risks**

- The US Navy is no more fond of people who go out on a limb than is any other bureaucracy. In fact, taking a risk is seen as a danger to your career. 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.
- *Bet on the people who think for themselves.* An opportunity came up for the Captain to do so four days after he took command, when they faced the challenging job of refueling at sea. Refueling at sea is great fun but also very dangerous. The message raced through the ship: This captain doesn't want parrots - he wants people who think for themselves. This was his first opportunity to demonstrate a new style and it paid off handsomely. Trusting a neophyte to perform this tricky maneuver was a powerful metaphor as well as the reality of his way of leading. Refueling at sea became a symbol for the positive changes that lay ahead. That refueling was when he started to believe in himself as a leader.
- *Take a chance on a promising sailor.* - his belief in a sailor who had a less than stellar start made the sailor feel he was treated fairly and he repaid them by becoming the best sailor there was. He trained himself to operate a very demanding watch station, monitoring the computer systems that handle secure transmission of

enemy data between ships. He became the best at it, not only on the ship but in the whole battle group.

- *If a rule doesn't make sense, break it.* Dubai was regarded by officers as a great liberty town. Enlisted people on the other hand couldn't wait to leave. Their only transportation was sixty-person rattletaps. Against regulations the Captain used 10 person vans - the crew was happy and he felt they were safer. Not knowing whether he would be reprimanded or cheered, he decided to fess up and wrote a five-page summary of how *Benfold* transformed Persian Gulf duty from onerous to a great trip. His boss sent his five-page manifest to every ship on the Persian Gulf, and currently, it's okay for Navy ships to hire vans instead of buses.

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

- In the Navy, as in business, SOP - standard operating procedure - tends to rule. You will never get in trouble for following standard operating procedure. On the other hand, you will rarely get outstanding results.
- Innovation and progress are achieved only by those who venture beyond standard operating procedure. You have to think imaginatively, but realistically, about what may lie ahead, and prepare to meet it. You have to look for new ways to handle old tasks and fresh approaches to old problems.
- *Keep your priorities in focus.* The captain's main focus was combat readiness, because without it people could die. If you prepare for the most challenging scenarios, chances are good that you will be much better prepared for the unforeseen.
- *Stay ahead of the competition* - a little forward planning can give you an enormous advantage. One ship's going to do better than the other. The point is to be sure to take responsibility as the CO, because 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.* Had they stopped at standard operating procedure, had the Captain not called the Navy commander in charge of a program for TV satellites, they would not have gotten their satellite. It was the right thing to do to fight for it. That equipment is now being installed on every ship in the Navy, and it is doing wonders for the morale, not to mention performance, of ships on long sea duty.
- *Volunteering benefits everyone.* Forty shipmates volunteered to establish a relationship with an elementary school when they were at base in San Diego. They went on to mentor elementary school students after school, read to them, and help them with math.
- *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 those others have considered and discarded it.
- *Don't work harder, work smarter.*

## Chapter Nine: Build Up Your People

- Leadership is mostly the art of doing simple things very well. Unlike some leaders, the Captain preferred to build himself up by strengthening others and helping them feel good about their jobs and themselves. When that happened, their work improved, and his morale leapt too.
- He focused on building self-esteem. Instead of tearing people down to make them into robots, he tried to show them that he trusted and believed in them.
- The same principle applies when you're dealing with bosses: Never tear them down; help them grow strong. If you want to achieve anything in a large bureaucracy, get inside the bosses' heads. Anticipate what they want before they know they want it. Take on their problems; make them look so good that you become indispensable. When they can't get along without you, they will support anything you seek to accomplish.
- *Trust people - they usually prove you're right.* Breaking out of the stratified system to trust the people who work for us, especially those at or near to the low end of the hierarchy was a useful, progressive change. It let them unleash people with talent and let them rise to levels that no one expected, simply by challenging them: Make *Benfold* the readiest ship afloat.
- *Newbies are important, treat them well.* Recognizing that the Navy was miserable at welcoming new people the *Benfold* designed a welcome-a-board program. New sailors were met at the airport, and assigned to a "Running Mate". In addition to welcoming these new hires, the program was designed to infect the jaded vets with their enthusiasm. Their new sailors appreciated their efforts, which paid dividends in the form of workforce enthusiasm and self-confidence.
- *Build up your bosses.* Abrashoff could not have succeeded as a self-promoting careerist. He aimed to be the consummate team player, a loyal servant to harassed bosses, whose needs he would anticipate before they even realized they had them. In the language of business, he became a master of customer service. If he got his unit operating independently and delivering outstanding results, they could concentrate on other issues and do their jobs better - that's what any boss wants, as well as bragging rights.
- Despite being the most junior commanding officer in the entire Persian Gulf, he wanted to be part of the decision-making process. He established an individual relationship with each boss. He wanted them to look good and, more important, to be able to influence decisions. Had he acted intrusively or as though he had a personal agenda, he would have been shut out. Instead he got a seat at the table where his bosses made decisions.
- They also made a lot of grateful friends among staff officers - the immediate aides of the generals, commodores, and captains. By privately helping them, they made them look good to their bosses- a win/win deal that moved them to praise the *Benfold*, which enhanced both its reputation and responsibilities.

- It was their habit to assume initiative and give their customers the best service imaginable. That's why the Navy's war plan for the Gulf assigned the most difficult missions to them.
- *Expect the best from your crew. You'll get it.* Why not assume that everyone is inherently talented, and then spur them to live up to those expectations? That's exactly how *Benfold* became the best damn ship in the Navy.
- It is also the way leaders in every kind of organization can achieve new levels of success - by encouraging people working for them to express themselves on both a personal and a professional level. . The Captain had more than a hundred sailors enrolled to take college courses through distance learning after encouraging them to take the SATs. He was convinced that whether they stayed in the Navy or not, all this learning was bound to improve their little piece of society. It spurred their sailors on to keep taking other tests - Navy advancement tests - and *Benfold* soon had a promotion rate two and a half times the Navy average.
- *Build a strong, deep bench.* When the Captain took command of *Benfold*, he discovered that the usual policy was to have only one crew member able to perform each job: one job, one person. He started training backups right away, and kept at it for his entire two years aboard *Benfold*. Cross training became their mantra. By grooming people to move up and accept more responsibility, cross training raised morale. By teaching them what their teammates did, it improved their team skills and spirit. According to the assessors, their third- and fourth-string teams were better than 90 percent of other ships' first-stringers.
- *Counsel continuously and honestly.* One of the most difficult tasks for any manager is counseling his or her employees at the yearly or semiannual evaluation. Remove the guesswork and let people know what the criteria are going to be, so they won't be surprised. The captain set up clear and concise guidelines as to what he expected from them. He told them he expected them to be experts in their own fields. They were expected to take on a project or two that would improve the ship's quality of life, or a military process that affected the entire organization.
- 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 clearly you have not done a good job of setting their expectations and providing feedback throughout the entire year.
- More than anything else, your people appreciate honesty from you. That's the key to being a good leader: ongoing counseling and consistent honesty.
- When it came time to inform the bottom performers that, in fact, that's what they were, he found that asking them how they would rate their own performance is effective. He then laid out a game plan for them to improve and gave them a deadline to do so.

## Chapter Ten: Generate Unity

- One of the toughest things for organizations to accomplish is to get people to set aside personal differences and work for the good of everyone involved. The task of the leader is to assemble the best team possible, train it, and then figure out the best way to get the members to work together for the good of the organization.
- Perhaps the most malignant obstacle to forming a cohesive unit is also the US military's worst-kept secret: its inability to end racial and gender discrimination. The military, like any organization, reflects the larger culture of which it is a part.
- Unity became the fundamental purpose of the Captain's leadership model. They achieved that goal because they earned how to make people want to belong to their 310 member club, no matter what color or sex they were.
- *Forget diversity - train for unity.*
- Among the various issues that were brought up in the surveys, a big one dealt with the sailors' perceptions. Some women felt there was sexual harassment on the ship, some minorities felt there was racial prejudice, and some white males felt there was favoritism toward women and minorities. That's a trifecta that's tough to overcome.
- His first move was to cancel the diversity training program and replace it with unity training, concentrating on people's likenesses and their common goals rather than differences. Unity begins by recognizing common interests.
- Unity training was one of the few programs the captain chose not to delegate; he conducted it himself. He reached out to each of the ship's twenty-four divisions and told them how he felt. First there was no place for racial or gender prejudice on the Benfold.
- He applauded strengths and helped them overcome their weaknesses, but above all, he wanted them to treat one another with respect.
- In his interviews with the crew, he also asked if there was any sexual harassment or racial prejudice being expressed on board. And when he heard about an occurrence, he acted immediately. Little by little the crew began to buy into his perspective, especially when they saw him backing up his words with actions.
- To him, diversity training had merely made people more aware of their differences. The unity training focused on common interests and positive reasons to value others instead of a top-down prohibition against devaluing them.
- The payoff was reflected in their equal-opportunity surveys. People changed because they proved the benefits of community. They changed because in their hearts, these sailors wanted and needed to belong to a team that cared for its members.
- *Deal out punishment strictly and fairly.* Two valuable lessons emerged from a story about a disciplinary action the captain took against two black and a white sailor who got into a fight. The first was the importance of taking people's background and circumstances into consideration before passing judgment on them. Not everyone starts out in the same place, but with half a chance and some direction, most people

left behind will catch up fairly quickly. The second was the significance of helping wrongdoers become better citizens, instead of discarding them, as our society often does.

- *What's bad for women is bad for the ship.* The Navy was trying to change its attitude toward women as well as blacks. The Captain was determined from day one that women would be accepted on *Benfold*. The women sailors, were every bit as motivated, if not more, when it came to achieving great results.
- The *Benfold* didn't have the gender integration problems wracking the rest of the military for one reason: They treated everyone with respect and dignity, and required the same of their people. Having accepted the women as equal, the men did not want to be shown up by them. Not only did their performance improve, they were also forced to grow up and stop being juvenile.

### **Chapter Eleven: Improve Your People's Quality Of Life**

- Long ago one of Neptune's admirals must have decreed that working sailors are forbidden to have fun at sea. Their own admirals took the rule as gospel; no alternative had ever occurred to them, and Abrashoff wanted to change that. When he interviewed his sailors, he asked them not only how they could improve the ship's performance, but also how they could have fun at work.
- *Fun with your friends makes a happy ship.* Thursday night became Jazz and Cigar night every other Friday became Feast night. They had Saturday night at the drive in on the Persian Gulf. They tried to instill fun in everything they did, especially mundane, repetitive jobs such as loading food aboard the ship. The point was that having fun with friends creates infinitely more social glue for any organization than stock options and bonuses will ever provide.
- *The first priority: good food.* When he took command, the captain had three top priorities: to get better food, better training, and as many promotions as he could every year. Though some people tittered when he listed food as number one, the fact is that it raised morale and helped start the process of transforming their ship.

**Recommendation:** This book is full of stories that support Abrashoff's key recipe for leadership. Abrashoff learned the right lessons of leadership the old-fashioned way: practicing under fire. His reflections provide a fresh outlook and guide for leaders everywhere. It is full of common sense tips and refreshing stories.



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**About the reviewer: Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, Ph.D**

Frumi is the trusted advisor to go to if you are feeling stuck. She has a passion for helping dynamic accounting and financial services leaders. She helps them emerge from overwhelm and find clarity out of chaos, communicate effectively with their teams, and accelerate their business results. Frumi is a former CEO and CFO herself and has an MBA and a PhD in business administration. She is known as a catalyst for change and when Frumi shows up with dynamite and band aids, change is bound to happen!



Dear Fellow Reader,

I know how much time it takes to read a book and how many books are sitting on the pile, ready to be read. I don't know about you, but after a while they started to make me feel guilty. I wondered when I would read all the books that I knew would make me feel better informed.

There was also another challenge that I encountered with reading a lot - all the books I read started to blend together in my mind and I couldn't remember what I read in which

book. That's why I thought book summaries were a good idea. I could read many more book summaries than I ever could books. I started writing summaries on the books that I read so I could revisit them and remember what I read and where.

Then I started sharing my book notes with all the people I knew. My clients love to hear about what I have read so that they too can learn. That's how a joint journey of learning about leadership, making difficult decisions, knowing how to have tough conversations and many other things began.

I was inspired to start a community of learning and that's when sharing my book notes and starting a book club by teleconference was born.

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