

“IT’S YOUR SHIP”

Insightful Leadership Lessons

“It’s Your Ship” is absolutely a **must read** for everyone who leads people.

Captain Michael Abrashoff adopts a relaxed conversational voice to describe his twenty months as Commander of the *USS Benfold*, a guided missile destroyer that served in the Gulf War in 1997. In so doing, he shares a myriad of practical leadership lessons.

His detail of the transformation of *USS Benfold’s* crew into a committed and productive team provides fertile examples of what can be possible. It is the story of how the *USS Benfold* became “The Best Damn Ship In The Navy”, as a direct result of his leadership.

The chapter titles provide the first insights.

- ◆ Take Command
- ◆ 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
- ◆ Generate Unity
- ◆ Improve Your People’s Quality Of Life

Employees’ Needs

Abrashoff first examines exit interviews from former military personnel as to why they left the armed services. He was surprised to learn that “The top reason was not being treated with respect or dignity; second was being prevented from making an impact on the organization; third, not being listened to; and fourth, not being rewarded with more responsibility.”

From this, he concludes that “The key to being a successful skipper is to see the ship through the eyes of the crew.”



Leadership Model

Even as a naval Commander, Abrashoff notes that “A leader will never accomplish what he or she wants by ordering it done. Real leadership must be done by example, not precept.”

Furthermore, “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.” His commitment was “to treat every encounter with every person on the ship as the most important thing at that moment.”

Process Improvement

He compiled two lists of all the jobs performed on the ship. List A consisted of mission-critical tasks including planning, training, and conducting exercises. List B were all the non-value-added activities. Through conversations with the sailors, a significant opportunity was identified and a brilliant solution was developed and implemented.

A young sailor pointed out that the ship was completely re-painted every two months, because the bolts and nuts were rusted and the rust was bleeding down the sides of the ship. The sailor suggested that they could replace these with stainless steel fasteners.

The Navy supply system didn't stock stainless steel fasteners, so Abrashoff had these purchased at the nearest hardware store, using the ship's credit card. As a result, the ship now needs to be re-painted just once a year and the Navy has adopted stainless steel fasteners for installation on every ship.

This serves as a powerful metaphor. Where are your “rusted bolts”? Are you actively searching for them and developing solutions that will eradicate mindless, dreary work and free up your employees to engage in more meaningful and rewarding activities?

Motivation

Abrashoff realized that in order to motivate his crew, he needed to get to know them personally. He interviewed all 310 sailors, learning their names, their backgrounds and families, and their aspirations.

He ate in the sailors' mess once a week, something that the officers never did, and he would wait in line for his turn. He listened to the crew and demonstrated that he cared. In return, they gave him their respect and loyalty.

His goal was to strengthen others and “helping them feel good about their jobs and themselves.” He writes, “Show me a manager who ignores the power of praise, and I will show you a lousy manager. Praise is infinitely more productive than punishment.”

He goes on to say that “The task of the leader is to assemble the best team possible, train it, then figure out the best way to get the members to work together for the good of the organization.”



Throughout the book, numerous poignant examples are described that touch at the very heart of his crew and highlight the power of his leadership style.

“How much brainpower does the Navy – or any organization for that matter – waste because 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? Too idealistic? On the contrary, that’s exactly how *Benfold* became the best damn ship in the U.S. Navy.”

Time spent reading “It’s Your Ship”, definitely will be time well spent.

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