

# It's your ship

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Book Information Title: It's Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy Author: Captain D. Michael Abrashoff Publisher's Name: Warner Books, Inc.

Publisher's Location, Year of Publication: New York, NY, 2002 Number of Pages: 210 pages Content The overall objective of the book is to teach new, and old, leaders to become better leaders. While anyone can benefit from reading this book, the intended audience is leaders in any organization. One statistic that should be alarming to all leaders of businesses was that 65 percent of people leave their companies because of the managers (Abrashoff, 2002). How do leaders change that statistic?

Abrashoff believes that running a ship is very similar to running any business; it takes motivating a crew to perform at the best of their abilities to achieve optimal efficiency and completion of tasks. He successfully takes his experiences from leading a Naval crew and teaches the audience how to apply it to their organizations. Along with highlighting every winning moment he and his crew experienced on the USS Benfold, Captain Abrashoff also shows failing moments the team had to endure. Those examples show the audience that in order to succeed, there has to be some trials along the way.

Abrashoff introduces readers to the 11 lessons he has learned that helped him become a better leader: 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 people up; generate unity; and improve the crew's quality of life. He dedicated a chapter to each lesson and explains the importance of each and how to apply them to any business. Chapter one talks about how

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Abrashoff became the captain of USS Benfold and how he had to take command.

His first obstacle was wondering if everyone was going to like him. He quickly realized that “be likable is not high among a ship captain’s job requirements... to be respected, trusted, and effective” is (Abrashoff, 2002, p. 12). After that, he realized “a challenge for leaders... is attracting and retaining ... the best employees and more important, how to motivate them so that they work with passion, energy, and enthusiasm” (Abrashoff, 2002, p. 12). Leaders need to listen to their employees so they can better understand what they are going through. Along with listening, employees need to be motivated.

Motivation helps employees want to do their work and do the best job. Another obstacle was learning the real reason why soldiers were not re-enlisting. Abrashoff (2002) stated the following: I read some exit surveys, interviews conducted by the military to find out why people are leaving. I assumed that low pay would be the first reason, but in fact it was fifth. 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. p. 13) All of those reasons are very similar to why people are leaving civilian jobs. Only one conclusion could come from it: all leaders are making the same mistakes. The best answer for those obstacles was summed up perfectly when he talked about his organizing principle. Abrashoff (2002) said “the key to being a successful skipper is to see the ship through the eyes of the crew” (p. 13). The leader does not always come up with the ideas; leaders

would benefit greatly if they listened to their crew more. Empowering employees makes them realize their potential.

When “ given the right environment, there are few limits to what people can achieve” (p. 31). After taking command, a great leader must lead by example. In chapter two, Abrashoff discovered “ 90 percent of the time, I was at least as much a part of the problem as my people were” (p. 33). When things go wrong and tasks are not completed, a manager usually blames the employees. Abrashoff used a different approach; he looked at himself and wondered what he may have done wrong in certain situations. By recognizing their own faults, a leader can learn from them and show their employees that they are learning from them.

There were four sections of the chapter that was very important. The first section was on remembering the effect one has on people. Leaders need to understand how they affect their people, “ their optimism and pessimism are equally infectious” (p. 35). If the leader is in a bad mood, the employees will sense that and be in the same mood. Abrashoff talks about his “ dark side” and how he purposely stays away from his crew when he is having a bad day. The second section talks about holding leaders accountable. Leaders need to make sure they recognized their part in a mishap and take some of the blame.

The Washington Post test was the next section. If there is any concern on whether something is the right thing to do, picture it being on the front page of a newspaper. Would it cause embarrassment or would it be something to celebrate? Abrashoff thinks that every decision a leader can make should be based on that test. The last section is about obeying a policy even when a

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leader disagrees. There are plenty of times a manager will disagree with a policy or procedure handed down by upper management; a great leader will support it anyway.

Undermining superiors will show employees that they can do the same. In chapter three, Abrashoff stresses the importance of listening. He talked about his experiences with watching William Perry have conversations with people and how Perry always gave his complete attention to each person. In result, Perry was respected and people felt good in his presence. Abrashoff started to focus on really listening to his crew and treating each conversation like it was the most important conversation he was having. While having these conversations, Abrashoff learned to “ see the ship through the crew’s eyes” (p. 4). He discovered that his crew had many good ideas about how to make the environment more enjoyable; they were there every single day and knew a lot about the day-to-day operations on the ship. It would make sense to listen to their ideas. One of his first goals was to learn every soldier’s name, their spouse’s name, and all the names of their children. Then, he continued to learn different things about each of them. He talks about realizing his crew was just like him, “ they had hopes, dreams, loved ones, and they wanted to believe that what they were doing was important” (p. 46).

In turn, his crew earned more of his respect and it became easier for them to talk to him and share their ideas. Finding round people for round holes was his next point in the chapter. Since he knew his people so well, he was able to match them with the perfect job. After having an assistant that was not good at handling paperwork, Abrashoff found a younger seaman named

David Lauer, who was labeled as a “troublemaker” to take over the task. Lauer shined in that task and Abrashoff asked him why he had so much trouble in his last job. The seaman said that he felt like his suggestions were not being heard and he just gave up.

This example proved that listening aggressively can benefit leaders immensely. “Word magic” was the last lesson Perry taught Abrashoff. Abrashoff believed “if leaders back their words with action... practice what they preach, their words create a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 50). Every time someone talked about the USS Benfold, it was referred to as “the best damn ship in the Navy.” He wanted his crew to say it so they believed it and in turn, everyone else believed it. The next lesson is about communicating the purpose and meaning of every task.

Abrashoff said it best in the first sentence of chapter four, “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” (p. 52). When employees understand why a task is needed and how they can benefit from it, they are more likely to give their all in completing it. It is a shame that someone spends so much time at work and does not believe in the work they are doing. He wanted his crew to really love what they were doing every time they boarded that ship.

If a leader makes their crew think they can do anything, they will believe it. Abrashoff thought that if he communicated with his crew about everything, they would understand and be more involved. He was against keeping his people in the dark, “secrecy spawns isolation, not success” (p. 55). It would be an advantage to the entire team when everyone knew the goals. That ties

into opening up the clogged channels in an organization. By communicating the information effectively, the team produced better results. Abrashoff gave the example of the communications system in the Gulf War and how vital messages were never received.

With the idea from one of his crew members, John Rafalko, the airways were cleared and messages were received. Abrashoff gave complete credit to Rafalko, claiming he only listened to the idea and supported Rafalko. Chapter five addressed the importance of creating a trusting environment, “ the best way to keep a ship—or any organization—on course for success is to give the troops all the responsibility they can handle and then stand back” (p. 63). When employees are trusted to do their jobs, it makes it easier for them to focus on the task, not the micromanaging.

Another way to encourage trust in the workplace was to not make employees compete against each other. Abrashoff wanted his candidates to work together instead of working against each other. He believed that that competition created distrust and division among the crew and in the long run, did not help the entire crew. Abrashoff said that anyone can bounce back from a bad decision. By helping someone recognize their screw up, it sends a message to the entire team that they will receive the same attention. By giving up on someone, “ they understand instantly that there's no room for redemption...” (p. 7). Also, never bring a problem to the boss if it can be fixed without him; Abrashoff did advise to only get the boss involved if it cannot. Finally, when dealing with a difficult boss, it is best to shield the crew from that person. The morale stays high and it is less likely for employees to be corrupted or turned off by that person. The chapter on

looking for results, not salutes, talked about looking at every one as an equal. Abrashoff encouraged leaders to let their crews speak up with their ideas; they should be able to question the authority.

By knocking down barriers between the captains and the crew members, it encourages people to get to know one another and be more likely to speak up when something can be done better. Abrashoff gave many examples throughout the book about his team questioning some of the decisions and policies in place and in the end, the team improved some things. Here, again, he stresses the importance of involving the team in everything and letting them get involved in the decision-making process, “innovation knows no rank” (p. 96). With the achievements, he did tell leaders to accept failures.

Leaders should not reprimand employees when they make an attempt to solve a problem and it does not work; everyone should have the “freedom to fail” (p. 94). The next chapter talked about taking calculated risks. Employees worry about taking risks because the consequences can be devastating. Disciplinary action, even termination, can be the result of taking a risk and failing. Abrashoff believes in celebrating the risk-takers, even if it ends in failure. Everyone makes 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” (p. 04). The people that make their own decisions are the ones leaders should really be behind. Abrashoff said “if all you give are orders, then all you will get are order-takers” (p. 107). Leaders need to let their employees take responsibility; that is how self-starters are born. When that self-starter is unearthed, leaders need to take a chance on



them. Abrashoff proved that even the delinquent crew member can turn out to be a hard working one. He used the example of the crew member who was left behind because he forgot to set his alarm.

The sailor was placed on restriction since it was a serious offense, but he continued to excel in his job. When he found out his mother was ill, he put in for leave and was turned down by every leader. Abrashoff decided to grant him the leave and it did wonders for the sailor. He was very motivated to do a great job and to not let down his team mates again. In the end, the sailor left the Navy and became a defense contractor. The last section of the chapter was about breaking rules. Abrashoff said to break the rules that did not make sense and break the ones that did make sense, just very carefully.

This part was pretty self-explanatory; it is okay to challenge the rules. As he was saying throughout the entire book, if something is wrong, find another way to do it. There are bad rules and it is the leader's job to find a better way to do things, or encourage their employees to find a better way. Chapter eight was all about going above and beyond. Abrashoff thought to get outstanding results, leaders had to go beyond the standard procedures, "innovation and progress are achieved only by those who venture beyond standard operating procedures" (p. 119).

Like he has said many times in the book, Abrashoff wanted his crew to take those risks and really think of way to change the system. He wanted self-starters and people with great ideas because it was not just his ship, it was everybody's ship. In chapter nine, Abrashoff goes back to his people and talked about building them up. This chapter had a lot of points in it and it is one of the important lessons in the book; confident employees help any

organization. Building self-esteem in the individual benefits the entire team, “ never tear them down; help them grow strong” (p. 41). The message ties in with the trust piece; showing an employee that they are trusted and cared for makes a big difference in the way they work. Praise every single success, no matter how big or small, was important to Abrashoff. He believed that this practice, not only, worked on crew members, but it could be used on the big bosses: If you want to achieve anything in a large bureaucracy, get inside the bosses' head. 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 nearly anything you seek to accomplish. (p. 141) If leaders just trusted their people more, they would see that they usually get it right. People with talent, when motivated, can surprise people and move up in the ranks. Employees want to do a good job and prove they can do the job; leaders should trust that they can. And leaders must trust the new people and teach them well. New people are a great asset to any organization; they can be molded, with the proper training, into anything the leader wants.

It is important to keep them fired up; any old influences—older crew members—can ruin their attitudes with any negativity. A proper “ welcome aboard” program is imperative; newbies can be discouraged very easily if their first day is a disaster. Most importantly, expect the best from every employee. Leaders need to invest fully into their people and they will get it back tenfold. Abrashoff stated that if we “ stopped treating them as if they

are stupid, they would perform better” (p. 158). When they are not performing at their best, leaders should give honest feedback constantly.

The employees cannot fix their problems if they do not know what they are doing wrong. This reduced the surprises during the review process; leaders would not have to talk about all the things that need improving during the review if they do it in the moment. Another best practice is to ask the bottom performers to rate their performances themselves. They are more honest to the fact that they are the bottom performers compared to their team mates. After that, come up with an action plan and set expectations on when to fix the problems.

Leaders, then, should continue to coach in the moment and be open and honest with their employees. A team cannot succeed if they is no unity. Chapter ten addressed the importance of unity in a team and how the leader must create that with his employees. He claimed that “ 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” (p. 168). One of his main focuses was to train for unity. He started off with finding common interests among everyone. Then, he wanted his crew to find “ positive reasons to value others” (p. 173).

He, ultimately, experienced a decline in the reports on racial prejudice and sexual harassment because the ship's morale was very positive. Punishment needs to be dealt out fairly in organizations. Leaders need to hold their team accountable for their actions, but also, learn to give them a second chance. Every employee needs to know they will be punished accordingly and after they have paid for their crime, the slate is wiped clean. Going back to the <https://assignbuster.com/its-your-ship/>

chapter about accepting the failures, it is important to learn from it and move on. Abrashoff believed everyone deserves a second chance, just like the sailor who overslept.

Now any man would say if his woman is not happy, he is not happy; Abrashoff agreed with that ideal. By making the women feel like part of the team, just as the men did, Abrashoff prevented gender issues. Sexual harassment was down and everyone respected one another. It, also, helped the men on the ship calm down and be more mature. They saw the women as their equals and pushed them to step it up a bit. This lesson is very important in civilian organizations; equality between the sexes still has not been achieved and many leaders should take notes on this chapter.

Abrashoff ended the chapter with examples of extraordinary female sailors he has worked with and how important they were to his team. The last lesson that Abrashoff talked about was improving the quality of the team's life. He embraced the idea of having fun with the team and making the work environment fun. Many leaders frown upon fraternization and would probably look at Abrashoff's practices as that. But his message was all about enjoying life and friends and he did it in very simple ways. He organized karaoke and alcohol-free happy hour on Fridays, movie nights on Saturdays, and playing music anytime work was involved.

It lifted the morale and everyone was laughing and having fun. Good food was another important part of improving the quality of life in the crew members. Abrashoff saw food as an important part of the ship. People could relax and socialize over a good meal and productivity could only increase. Even having a Thanksgiving meal when one is far away from home sends a caring

message to the crew and makes people feel good. Reviewer's Evaluation In my opinion, this book can be very helpful to anyone trying to be a better manager.

It really opens the reader's eyes on the proper way to manage and how to let go of the " typical" manager style. I really like the part about looking through the employee's eyes and getting the employees more motivated to do a better job. I believe Abrashoff really challenges the common ideal that managers should be unapproachable and listened to; authority and rules should never be questioned and always followed. He promotes risk-taking and challenging bad rules and really wants the leader to empower their team to make decisions and be innovative.

It's Your Ship is an informative book that can help any leader become a better leader or learn new techniques to become the best leader. I am not sure how this book looks compared to other books like it, but I know the title alone is catchy and I would probably pick this one up first if I had to choose (I think it is because the word " damn" is on the cover! ). I think it was very appropriate for us BBA students in the business administration field because most of the jobs are supervisor positions. Not only can we students benefit from it, I think everyone can take some pointers from this book.

Some may not make it to a supervisor position in an office or retail setting, but there are leader positions everywhere: churches, volunteer work, etc. Each and every leader/manager can really profit from this book. The contribution of the book is huge; the message is so important to all managers. From my experience, I have been managed by many managers and became a manager myself. Many of these lessons would have been an

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advantage to my superiors and to me. Some of the chapters really spoke to me, such as learning to trust people to do their jobs.

I can admit that that was one area that I struggled in when I was a store manager. I really feel that Abrashoff did a great job explaining his practices and he made it very interesting to learn about them. I would definitely recommend this book not only to BBA students, but to many of my retail friends and some of my current supervisors. Reviewer's Information Name: Shanita Kitts Affiliation: Averett University Address: 1300 Dover Place, Lynchburg, VA 24502 References Abrashoff, D. M. (2002). It's your ship: Management techniques from the best damn ship in the navy. New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc.