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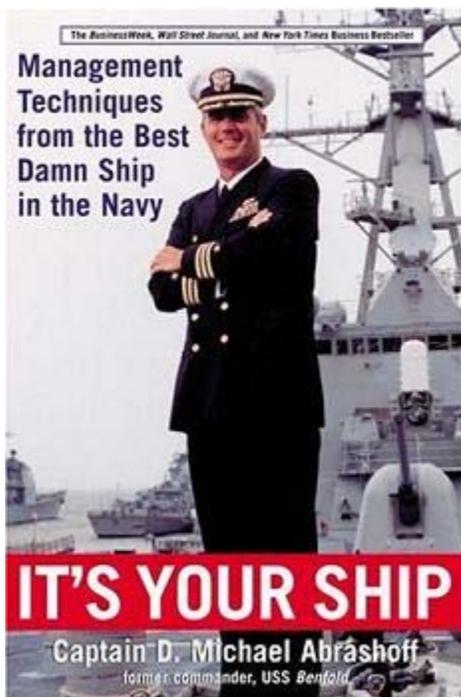
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“It’s Your Ship” by Captain D. Michael Abrashoff

by Ben Dinsmore on May 23, 2011



In *It’s Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy*, Captain D. Michael Abrashoff shares his leadership skill in turning one of the Navy’s most underperforming war vessels into the “best damn ship in the Navy”.

I had the opportunity to meet Capt. Abrashoff in early April of 2010 when he was the guest speaker at one of my company’s annual meetings. His speech was well received by my colleagues and I.

For the most part, his speech was in-line with the content of his best selling book reviewed in this article. Interestingly enough, I’ve also sailed with a few former Navy folks who worked with Abrashoff before he became a “commander”. They didn’t offer too many details, but they did say he

must have changed his ways “significantly” before he became commander of the ship featured in his story.

Although the *USS Benfold* was one of the most technologically advanced fighting machines sailing the high seas, morale within the crew was low and the vessel’s performance scores routinely dipped below the Navy’s expectations.

From his first day on board, **Captain Abrashoff set out to improve the moral and competence of his new crew.** He improved living conditions on board the vessel, improved training, and restored a sense of pride that had long since disappeared on the vessel.

He freed up his crew member’s time by eliminating tasks on board that added no real value, and he also reduced maintenance costs by replacing mediocre equipment with products of more durability.

While some of the leadership techniques described in his book had his superior officers scratching their heads, Abrashoff stuck to his guns. In his mind he answered to his crew, and the taxpayers who were paying for his ship. **Traditional practices of the Navy were of little importance to Abrashoff if there was a way to do things safer, more efficiently, or less expensive.**

It’s Your Ship begins with Abrashoff reflecting on the day he assumed command of the USS Benfold. His predecessor was not the most highly regarded skipper and during the change of command ceremony, the departing skipper’s crew let him know exactly how they felt. “I can still feel my face flushing with embarrassment when I remember how some didn’t give him a respectful send-off” Abrashoff says in the book.

Abrashoff wasn’t worried about being “liked” as the Benfold’s new commander, **all he really cared about was restoring the respect, trust, and effectiveness the former captain had lost.**

During his first few weeks onboard the Benfold, Capt. Abrashoff begins implementing his belief that there is always a better way to do things. To improve the ships food he sent the cooks to culinary school, to prevent painting over rusty fastener stains on the superstructure of the vessel he ordered stainless steel fasteners instead (stainless steel is heavily resistant to rust).

Captain Abrashoff made a point of connecting directly with every crewmember on board his ship through idle conversations and formal (and informal) interviews. What he discovered was an alarming number of individuals who couldn’t wait for their time in the Navy to come to an end.

Curious about the real reasons people wanted to leave the Navy, Abrashoff read exit interviews from Navy personnel who had not “re-enlisted” for another tour with the navy. His research revealed a large number of people leaving for unnecessary reasons:

They were not treated with respect.

They were unable to impact the organization.

They were not listened to.

They were not rewarded with more responsibility.

Armed with this new information, Abrashoff set out to retool his crew member’s perception of the Navy. He wanted them to realize that they were important, and they could make a difference. **Captain Abrashoff made a commitment to listen to (and respect) any member of his crew who had an idea to improve the vessel.** He cross trained various departments’ duties with each other, and gave entry level navy personnel responsibilities unheard of on other Naval vessels.

The book is packed full of useful managerial skills and ideas, suitable not only in a military environment, but for the entire maritime and offshore industries as well.

It may sound cliché but it’s true, *It’s Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy* is a great resource for anyone looking to improve their own leadership ability. It is an entertaining look inside the inner workings of the Navy and a perfect example of how traditional values can limit our ability to reach full potential. If you want to take command of your own leadership potential, you need to take command of this book.

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