

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

(Review by Gary Tomlinson)

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The story of Captain D. Michael Abrashoff and his command of USS *Benfold* has become legendary inside and outside the Navy. Now Abrashoff offers this fascinating tale of top-down change for anyone trying to navigate today’s uncertain business seas.

When Captain Abrashoff took over as commander of USS *Benfold*, a ship armed with every cutting-edge system available, it was like a business that has all the latest technology but only some of the productivity. Knowing that responsibility for improving performance rested with him, he realized he had to improve his own leadership skills before he could improve his ship. Within months he created a crew of confident and 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* was soon recognized far and wide as a model of naval efficiency. From achieving amazing cost savings to winning the highest gunnery score in the Pacific Fleet, Captain Abrashoff’s extraordinary campaign sent shock waves through the U.S. Navy. For these reasons, I have chosen Captain Abrashoff’s *It’s Your Ship* for this month’s book review. His book can help you change the course of *your* ship, no matter where your business battles are fought.

In his book, Abrashoff details the ideas and techniques that he used to win his sailors’ trust and, eventually their enthusiastic commitment to their joint goal of making their ship the best in the fleet. His book narrates episodes in *Benfold*’s two-year voyage through uncharted waters of leadership, and is organized around the lessons he learned.

Abrashoff’s recipe for running this phenomenal crew and ship are simply the chapter headings of his book: 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.

Against the backdrop of today’s United States Navy, Abrashoff’s shares his secrets of successful management including:

- *See the ship through they eyes of the crew:* By soliciting sailor’s suggestions, Abrashoff drastically reduced tedious chores that provided little additional value.
- *Communicate, communicate, communicate:* The more Abrashoff communicated the plan, the better the crew’s performance.
- *Create discipline by focusing on purpose:* Discipline skyrocketed when Abrashoff’s crew believed that what they were doing was important.

- *Take Command:* Being likable is not high among a ship captain's job requirements. What is essential is to be respected, trusted, and effective.

- *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?" If he knew he would be embarrassed, he wouldn't do it. If he'd be proud, he knew he was generally on the right track.

- *Lead by example:* Real leadership must be done by example, not precept. Whenever Abrashoff could not get the results he wanted, he turned inward to see if he was part of the problem. He asked himself three questions:

1. "Did I clearly articulate the goals?"
2. "Did I give people enough time and resources to accomplish the task?"
3. "Did I give them enough training?"

He discovered that 90 percent of the time, he was at least as much a part of the problem as his people were.

- *Don't work harder, work smarter:* Abrashoff realized, first-hand, the power of information. Those that have it prosper. Those that don't, wither. There is no downside to having employees who know how every division of an organization functions.

In all sorts of thriving businesses, the managerial role has changed from order-giver to people-developer, from authoritarian boss to talent cultivator. Nowadays, the most effective managers work hard at showing their people how to find their own solutions, and then get out of their way. Abrashoff offers his book as a guide to showing people how to join in leading themselves for a purpose larger than themselves.

The bottom line: It's Your Ship – Make it the Best!

Enjoy this month's selection, *It's Your Ship* and share it with others in your life because as Alvin Toffler says; "*The illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.*"