

## COVER STORY

# Build Up Your People

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by **D. Michael Abrashoff**

Leadership is mostly the art of doing simple things very well. However, we sometimes make it far tougher than it needs to be. Unlike some leaders, I prefer to build myself up by strengthening others and helping them feel good about their jobs and themselves. When that happens, their work improves, and my own morale leaps.

I left drill-sergeant bullying to other leaders with other goals. Running the USS *Benfold*, a guided missile destroyer, demanded brains and initiative, not brawn. Only competent and self-confident sailors could handle the ship's complexities and fulfill its missions. These sailors could not be sculpted into a fighting crew by ruling with fear and punishing them as though they were inept kids. My job was to turn kids into grownups who would make [Navy Petty Officer] Edward C. Benfold proud.

**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—could anything be clearer? But how many managers give this fact more than lip service? How many really live it? Not enough.**

I focused on building self-esteem. I know that most of us carry around an invisible backpack full of childhood insecurities, and that many sailors often struggled under the load of past insults, including being scorned at home or squashed at school. I could make the load either heavier or lighter, and the right choice was obvious. Instead of tearing people down to make them into robots, I tried to show them that I trusted and believed in them.

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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 nearly anything you seek to accomplish.

## Little Things Make Big Successes

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Within a couple of months of my taking over, other ship commanders began visiting *Benfold* to find out how we were getting our sailors to work so well. I was delighted to share all our secrets. They were hardly profound; mainly, we were attentive to people's feelings and potential. A lot of seemingly small gestures added up to a friendly and supportive atmosphere.

For example, I ordered a big supply of greeting cards that read "The Officers and Crew of the USS *Benfold* Wish You a Happy Birthday." Each month, my ship's office gave me a birthday list of my sailors' spouses. I would write, say, "Dear Marie" at the top and sign it "Love, Mike." Every card included my P.S., saying, "Your husband or wife is doing a great job," even if he or she were not. I knew the cards worked because sailors often came by to express their appreciation. It was my way of bringing their families into our orbit.

### Conference Connection

D. Michael Abrashoff will be a keynote at ICMA's annual conference in San Diego City/County, California.

The CO of one of our sister ships loved the idea and immediately ordered his executive officer to send out birthday cards to the spouses of all his sailors. Of course, he meant they should be sent out at the appropriate time—on the spouses' birthdays. The next day, a year's worth of cards went out on the same day in one huge batch. Ouch.

But in fact, this was symptomatic of that ship—the officers were good, but they sometimes didn't get things quite right. They weren't *Benfold's* officers. I think they hit a performance ceiling because they didn't create a supportive climate that encouraged sailors to reach beyond their own expectations. Ultimately, that was *Benfold's* edge.

I observed that most of my young sailors came from hardscrabble backgrounds and had struggled to make it into the Navy. I put myself in their parents' shoes and imagined how they would feel if they got letters from their kids' commanding officer, and I imagined how the kids would feel when their parents told them.

I began writing letters to the parents, especially when their sons or daughters did something I could honestly praise. When the letters arrived, the parents invariably called their children to say how proud they were of them. To this day, I get Christmas cards from grateful parents.

One young man who wasn't star material was working on a project with four outstanding sailors. I debated whether he deserved one of my letters; because he was part of a stellar group, I went ahead. His parents were divorced, so I sent a letter to each parent. About two weeks later, the sailor knocked on my door with tears streaming down his face.

**People seem to think that if you send somebody a compliment online, it's as good as the human touch. It is not. It's easier but much less effective. Social interaction is getting lost in a digital world that trades more in abstractions than in face-to-face relations. It's more than a shame—it's a bottom-line mistake.**

"What's wrong?" I asked. "I just got a call from my father, who all my life told me I'm a failure. This time, he said he'd just read your letter, and he wanted to congratulate me and say how proud he was of me. It's the first time in my entire life he's actually encouraged me. Captain, I can't thank you enough." My own tear ducts held, but I was very moved.

One of my true star sailors was a second-class petty officer, Darren Barton of Little Rock, Arkansas. Darren was one of the sailors who did an outstanding job with the Tomahawk cruise missiles. I wrote his mother, Carol, about how well her son had performed, and she was so proud that one day, when President Clinton was visiting Little Rock, she staked out his motorcade and asked him to countersign my letter. She sent me a copy of that letter signed by the president of the United States, and I was extremely happy to share in her pride of her son.

My officers knew that they could always use me in their leadership toolkits. They never hesitated to knock on my door and say, "Hey, Captain, next time you're out walking around the ship, Sonarman Smith really aced that databank," or "Seaman Jones is doing a helluva job in the laundry. Could you stop by and tell him how much you appreciate him?"

Those conversations were the highlight of my day, and they didn't cost me or the Navy a dime. The more I went around meeting sailors, the more they talked to me openly and intelligently. The more I thanked them for hard work, the harder they worked. The payoff in morale was palpable. I'm absolutely convinced that positive, personal reinforcement is the essence of effective leadership.

Yet some leaders seem to be moving away from it. They stay connected electronically with e-mail and cellphones, but they're disconnected personally, and many leaders almost never leave their offices. People seem to think that if you send somebody a compliment online, it's as good as the human touch. It is not. It's easier but much less effective. Social interaction is getting lost in a digital world that trades more in abstractions than in face-to-face relations. It's more than a shame—it's a bottom-line mistake.

My sister Connie works for a major bank. One of her people did a phenomenal job, making hundreds of thousands of dollars for the bank, and Connie's boss sent an e-mail congratulating and thanking her. That very afternoon, he rode the elevator with her and didn't even acknowledge her existence. It completely wiped out any good his e-mail could have done.

Recall how you feel when your own boss tells you, "Good job." Do your people (and yourself) a favor. Say it in person, if you can. Press the flesh. Open yourself. Coldness congeals. Warmth heals. Little things make big successes.

The Navy has a program that assigns an ombudsman for every ship as a contact point for sailors' families. The idea is to make it as easy as possible to keep families informed of new orders, events aboard ship, the ship's movements in general, and, of course, to have a communications link between sailors and their families. In practice, the ombudsman is usually the spouse of someone on the ship and is the hub for all the other families wanting to keep in touch with their relatives on board. We set out to make *Benfold's* ombudsman program the best in the Navy, and in fact our om-budsman was phenomenal.

Sylvia Schanche had a special phone line for families to call and leave messages for her, which she responded to by calling the ship or sending an e-mail. She kept everyone informed about the ship's changing schedule; if there was an accident on board, we told her immediately what was happening, and she passed the word to the families of anyone involved. If there was a death in a sailor's family, the ombudsman would make the arrangements to fly him or her back to the States.

If a relative was hospitalized, she passed information back and forth. She even helped families who were having trouble coping with the stress of separation. She was a great resource and another way of keeping the crew strong and united. The less they have to worry about home, the more time and attention they have for the ship.

Most businesses should have a similar program, but hardly any do. For instance, I know of a manager who had a heart attack while on the road, but the company had no procedure in place to fly his family out to be with him in the hospital, and in general to ease a time of trauma. Personnel departments aren't usually organized to do that.

In fact, many of the techniques that I developed in the Navy could be easily adapted for personal reinforcement in the civilian workplace. For example, the Navy hands out medals for superior performance, but not when a sailor leaves the service. Leaving is perceived as breaking ranks and mildly inconsiderate of those left behind. I disagreed with that policy, believing that medals send

two important signals even when they are given to departing people. They tell those leaving that their services have been valued; equally important, they show those remaining that their hard work will be recognized in the same way when they leave.

The commanding officer of a ship is authorized to hand out 15 medals a year. I wanted to err on the side of excess, so in my first year I passed out 115. Nearly every time a sailor left, I gave him or her a medal. Even if they hadn't been star players, they got medals in a public ceremony, as long as they had done their best every day.

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I delivered a short speech describing how much we cherished the recipient's friendship, camaraderie, and hard work. It wasn't unusual for people to cry at those ceremonies. Sometimes, the departing sailor's shipmates told funny stories, recalling his or her foibles, trials, and triumphs.

The award I handed out was called the Navy Achievement Medal. I often think that every company should have an equivalent—the General Electric Quality Star, say, or the IBM Order of Excellence, or the Microsoft Medal of Distinction. There is absolutely no downside to this symbolic gesture, provided it is done sincerely and without hype.

### **Trust People, They Usually Prove You're Right**

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Once a year, all Navy ships undergo a thorough assessment in which outside inspectors validate the ship's readiness. The ship as a whole and the crew's abilities and proficiencies are rated in 24 categories, on a scale ranging from basic Level One to advanced Level Four.

The purpose is to determine how much additional training the crew needs to be ready for combat. But if you assume that the higher a ship's level was, the less time it would spend training at sea, you would be wrong. In fact, regardless of its readiness rating, every ship spends the next six months training at sea. Thus, there was no incentive to reach Level Four, and in fact, no ship ever did. Level One was the required minimum, and that was usually considered good enough. Then, *Benfold* came along.

Originally, my goal was to reach an overall rating of Level Two, but when I recognized the enormous potential of my crew, I raised the bar to Level Three, much to the chagrin of those who saw it as a quantum leap in their labor and my hubris.

I must also admit that, in addition to my noble motive of making the ship as good as it could be, I wanted to blow my archrival out of the water. That ship's assessment was scheduled to begin the week following ours. My rival's strategy was to do little and attain basic Level One. The CO had no idea that we were laying the groundwork to shake things up a little. In fact, we were about to rock his world.

Our first challenge was finding enough senior people to supervise the 24 areas of testing. My combat systems officer hit me with the unexpected news that we had only 20 qualified people who were not involved in other critical operations. Thinking fast, I said, "Fine—pick supervisors from the next group down. You don't always need a senior person in charge. It could be a young, third-class petty officer."

"That's never been done before," he said. "See what they can do," I said. "The alternative is to do nothing, right? Let's assign senior people to the most demanding areas, and work our way down to the junior ones. If we don't get Level Three in some categories, so what? We will get Level One or Two. We have nothing to lose."

As it turned out, the third- and second-class petty officers were so honored to be chosen that they worked hard enough for several of their teams to outshine those supervised by senior people. The search-and-seizure team was particularly impressive. We assigned it to one of the ship's most junior sailors because we suspected he had the ability to honcho it.

The outside inspectors protested, saying they could not validate the work of an important team that wasn't headed by a commissioned officer. But I insisted, and the young sailor did such a fantastic job that the inspectors ate their words and placed us at Level Four in that category.

Breaking out of our stratified systems to trust the people who work for us, especially those at or near the low end of the hierarchy, was a useful, progressive change. It let us unleash people with talent and let them rise to levels that no one had expected, simply by challenging them: Make *Benfold* the readiest ship afloat. In that context, how could we not have done well?

The huzzahs for our incredible performance were just rolling in as another ship was starting the assessment process. Its skipper, sensing disaster, exhorted his people to forget about Level One and shoot for Level Four. But you can't "order" an outstanding performance. You have to plan, enable, nurture, and focus on it. Indeed, that ship finished at Level One.

Four months later, the Navy's top boss, the chief of naval operations, streamlined the assessment process and settled on a formal program that allowed ships to skip the six-month training process if they could achieve the same performance levels that the *Benfold* had managed. This model is now standard throughout the Navy. And it came about because we delegated responsibility to people who were ready and able to accept it.

## **Newbies Are Important, Treat Them Well**

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One of the things the Navy was absolutely miserable at, as are many companies, was welcoming new employees. Recruits were sent to the Navy boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois, just outside Chicago. They graduated on a Friday morning, boarded a plane in the afternoon, and landed in San Diego that night. And somehow, they found their way to the ship—to be greeted by no one.

**Think about the welcome-aboard program in your company. Do newcomers arrive for the first day of work and find that no computer awaits them, their pay and benefits are delayed by red tape, and the only employee available to answer their questions is second-rate because the best people are too busy? If so, it isn't surprising that they become discontented with their jobs and disparage the organization. It's the end of their idealism.**

Worse still, no one even knew they were coming. After enduring boot camp, their first encounter with the actual Navy was to walk in on a bunch of sailors who were getting ready for weekend leave and would have no time for them.

I started talking with new arrivals, asking them about their first day. They said they felt totally intimidated, that they had no friends and knew no one. They were lost for the first 48 hours, on their own aboard ship while nearly everyone else was on leave. I was 17 when I first entered the Naval Academy, and I remember how scared I was. If that was frightening for me, I could imagine what arriving in San Diego must have been like for these young men and women.

I called my XO, Lieutenant Commander Harley, into my cabin. "What's our welcome-aboard program?" I asked. "I don't have a clue," he answered. "Well, go find out and report back to me." The next day, he was back in my cabin. "Captain, the news is pretty embarrassing. We do nothing to prepare for their arrival."

"You have a 5-year-old daughter," I told him. "Twelve years from now, she may join the Navy. How would you want her treated on that first day?"

"I'd want her treated very well," he said.

Every sailor who reports to us is someone's son or daughter. We owe it to them to treat their kids well. It is our duty. "What's the first thing you'd want her to do if she was 17 and just showing up on ship?"

"I'd want her to call home and tell me she'd arrived safely."

"Bingo! Why not bring them up to my cabin, and they can call their parents or boyfriends or girlfriends and tell them that they have arrived and are okay? With the government's telephone rates, a 30-minute call will cost Uncle Sam only 90 cents. It will be the best 90 cents the Department of Defense ever spent."

We designed our welcome-aboard program. We found out who we were getting from boot camp, what flights they would be on, and we met them at the airport to bring them to the ship. Since I didn't sleep on the ship when it was in port, the command duty officer met the new people on the quarterdeck, shook their hands, brought them to my cabin, and let them call home. Their beds were made, their names were on their lockers, and the best performers from their divisions, assigned to be their "Running Mates," led them on a tour of the ship.

The next morning, the Running Mates drove them all over the base, pointing out the gym, the pool, the theater, the commissary, and the medical and dental facilities. They also got the hot skinny on base life—inside info that's very important to a 17-year-old just stepping out into the world: who and what to avoid, and why; or warnings about, say, places not to go after dark because they could be attacked or robbed.

The Running Mates acted as tour guides, showing them San Diego's Sea World and the Hotel del Coronado. We wanted these young men and women to feel as though San Diego were their new home and we were their new family.

For their first five workdays on the ship, they weren't allowed to stray from their Running Mates. And within the first 48 working hours, they came to see me for a get-to-know-each-other talk. I greeted each the same way: "Welcome. I appreciate having you on our ship." In addition to welcoming these new hires, the program was designed to infect the jaded vets with their enthusiasm.

**Jealousy and envy are powerful emotions and, if acted upon, can cause serious problems. Leaders must always watch out for them. A jealous commander may behave in ways that inhibit and soon paralyze his or her subordinates, who eventually turn off and tune out.**

All too often, a gung-ho newcomer runs smack into a poisoned corporate culture that sucks the enthusiasm right out of her. I wanted the newcomers to remain so revved up that they would recharge the batteries of those who no longer felt that way.

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second-rate because the best people are too busy? If so, it isn't surprising that they become discontented with their jobs and disparage the organization. It's the end of their idealism.

I wanted *Benfold's* environment to be exactly the opposite, and it was. Our new sailors appreciated our efforts, which paid tremendous dividends in the form of workforce enthusiasm and self-confidence. Once people heard about it, our Running Mate program was adopted by many other ships on the San Diego waterfront. The commander of our destroyer squadron even made a home movie about the welcome-a-board process for other ships.

## Be the Rising Tide That Lifts All Boats

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Since World War II, and possibly before, the Navy has issued foul-weather jackets that are made of ugly blue duckcloth that keeps you neither dry nor warm. To my young sailors, they were a fashion statement not worth making. While browsing in a marine gear store, one sailor spotted a civilian version he loved—it was made of flashy blue Gore-Tex with reflective stripes and a built-in flotation device.

Naturally, he told me about it immediately. The Navy jackets cost \$150 apiece; these were \$90 and superior in every way. They would actually keep you warm and dry, and they'd be safer than the standard issue because of the flotation device. And, as a bonus, "USS *Benfold*" could be stenciled on the back. Not your usual U.S. Department of Defense procurement, this was more value for less money. "Great idea, sign me up," I said. We used the ship's credit card to buy 310 jackets and passed them out to all hands. We had a very cool-looking crew.

The next day, when another ship pulled into our pier, its sailors saw our sailors wearing the jackets. Half an hour later, that ship's command master chief strode over to say, "My captain has ordered you to stop wearing those jackets."

"Really? Why?" I asked.

"We almost had a mutiny over there—our crew wants the same jackets."

Had that ship's captain not been one of the most senior commanding officers in the Pacific Fleet, I would have laughed in the master chief's face. According to Navy protocol, the senior officer present is responsible for a pier's security, and he had decided that pier security was endangered because his sailors coveted my sailors' jackets.

"Why not just buy the same jackets for your people?" I asked. "They'd steal them," he said. "Before we pull into port, we collect all our foul-weather jackets and lock them up. Can't trust these people."

What a difference between ships: We never worried about *Benfold* sailors stealing their jackets. They could wear them home if they wanted to. In fact, they were so proud of the new ones that they rarely took them off.

I told this gentleman that I considered his captain's order illegal, and I refused to obey it. If he insisted, I said, I would be happy to go to the admiral's office and accept an immediate court-martial. If that was an overreaction, I considered it justified. In part, I was remembering an incident that occurred while I was working for Defense Secretary Perry.

The four military services use their personnel budgets in very different ways. The Air Force stresses quality of life: its people get beautiful housing, great bases, and excellent medical care. The Army and Marine Corps take nearly the opposite attitude. A comfortable Air Force base could be next door to an Army base where soldiers are living in slums.

But this was becoming embarrassing, so while I was in the Pentagon, the Army and Marine Corps asked Perry to take money out of the Air Force budget and give it to them so they could upgrade their bases. He pondered their request for a few moments, then refused, telling them that the goal shouldn't be to reduce the standards for some but to raise everyone else to the highest possible level.

This had struck me as universal wisdom. Now, rather than buy his crew new jackets, this ship's captain wanted mine to stop wearing them, and I wasn't going to let it happen. He could have tried to have me fired, but that was a chance I was willing to take. That command master chief delivered my message and returned half an hour later with a new directive: "My CO has decided you can wear your jackets after all."

That ship could have bought those jackets but never did. Meanwhile, the so-called *Benfold* Jacket became the rage, and my squadron commander ordered them for the five other ships under his command.

Jealousy and envy are powerful emotions and, if acted upon, can cause serious problems. Leaders must always watch out for them. A jealous commander may behave in ways that inhibit and soon paralyze his or her subordinates, who eventually turn off and tune out. The antidote lies in trying to make the people who work for you feel needed and highly valued. Help them believe in that wonderful old truism "A rising tide lifts all boats." With perhaps a few exceptions, every organization's success is a collective achievement.

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