*Notes on:*

It’s Your Ship

Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy

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14. **Take Command**

When taking command of the Benfold, Abrashoff noticed that no one particularly cared for the captain that was departing. He decided that he was going to try and do better himself. Retention rates on the ship were very bad, with most sailors leaving because of 1) not being treated with respect, 2) being prevented from making an impact on the organization, 3) not being listened to, and 4) not being rewarded with more responsibility. Pay was number 5 (and this list closely mirrors that of private business). He decided to improve retention and help others succeed by trying a completely new management style that differed greatly from typical Navy command-and-control, barking orders technique. His approach was “to see the ship through the eyes of the crew.”

He gave a brief overview of his background including:

* Attending the Naval Academy and majoring in political science
* Getting posted to the USS *Albert David* (not the best ship, but providing several opportunities to stand out from the crowd an take on extra responsibilities)
* Serving as aide to Admiral ugh Webster in Subic Bay (the Philippines, where he was required to read all the admirals correspondence and learned how they view the Navy)
* Assigned as combat systems officer on the USS *Harry W. Hill*, a destroyer.
* Assigned as combat systems officer on the USS *England*, a guided missile cruiser,
* Working in the Bureau of Naval Personnel, assigning officers to ships in the Atlantic
* Executive Officer (XO) on the USS *Shiloh*, a guided missile cruiser
* Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, William Perry
* Captain of the USS *Benfold*

He saw much of the command-and-control style that left crewman beaten down and feeling worthless. He decided to take the opposite approach and empower his crew. In his time as captain, Abrashoff increased retention of critical positions from 28% to 100% with all career sailors re-enlisting for a second tour. He also believes that his management techniques can be just as effective in business as they were in the Navy.

1. **Lead by Example**
   1. It’s funny how often the problem is you

Whenever you don’t get the results you want ask yourself: Did I clearly articulate the goals? Did I give people enough time and resources to accomplish the task? Did I give them enough training?

He gives an example of a time that a crew member fell asleep on guard and was about to be court-marshalled. Upon investigation it was revealed that he had worked all night to clean a workspace. This was commanded by his leader, who was commanded by his leader, who was commanded by Abrashoff to clean the workspace by 8 AM – an arbitrary time, but it made the crewman work all night without sleep.

* 1. Never forget your effect on people

Always make sure you are paying attention to your people. Every conversation with someone should be the most important thing you are doing at that moment. Also, don’t intimidate people or scare them from providing feedback. Provide a positive example and try not to spread pessimism or a bad mood through the workplace.

* 1. Leaders know how to be held accountable

Don’t try to spin or minimize failures. Admit them and be accountable.

* 1. Never fail the Washington Post test

Never do anything that you wouldn’t want to see published on the front page of the Washington Post.

* 1. Obey even when you disagree.

Never undermine your superiors. Stay within their rules. If you disregard your manager, your employees will feel free to disregard you.

1. **Listen Aggressively**
2. See the ship through the crew’s eyes

He decided to listen aggressively to his crewmember to find every good idea they had and implement it. He started interviewing 5 crewmen a day, asking about their personal life and their past – getting to know them – and asking if they had problems or suggestions for improvements. Good ideas were implemented immediately (he would pick up a microphone and communicate them to the whole ship). He also came to greatly respect the intelligence of his crew and their ability to solve problems in this way.

1. Find round people for round holes

Once you know your people, their skills and their interest, you can find jobs that suit them best. This can greatly improve efficiency and morale.

1. Use the power of word magic

The Secretary of Defense taught him the power of words when he told Congress that we had “the best damn Navy in the world.” Abrashoff had his crew start greeting visitors by looking them in the eye and welcoming them to “the best damn ship in the Navy.” They also said that “the sun always shines on Benfold.” Eventually, the crew (and others) began to believe that.

1. **Communicate Purpose and Meaning**

The secret of leadership is to: “Articulate a common goal that inspires a diverse group of people to work hard together.”

1. Make your crew think “we can do anything”

Communicate with your team as much as possible. Send emails, newsletters, and communicate in person. Praise them publicly, and if you have to reprimand them, do it in private. When things are changing, make them feel safer by communicating to them constantly. Don’t keep them in the dark.

1. Open up the clogged channels

Don’t let good ideas get stopped by mid-level managers. You want communication to be as free as possible. In the Gulf War there was a low-level radioman who was able to solve an enormous communication problem that was delaying electronic messages by weeks. This radioman’s idea was originally stopped and didn’t get up to the high-level managers, but Abrashoff finally took it past his boss to an Admiral. The radioman was flown from ship to ship, implementing the new system, and eliminating the message backlog in the area. Abrashoff says this was probably his greatest accomplishment ever, and it was all because of one person’s good idea.

1. After creating a great brand, defend it

Once the crew began to get a reputation as one of the best crews in the Navy they had to work even harder to protect it. This meant behaving themselves on shore leave. Many said that the Benfold sailors were the best behaved in the Navy.

1. Freedom creates discipline.

Open yourself to criticism. Conduct “After Action Reviews” where you review past performance or decisions. Let your team challenge you, and make it clear that there are no consequences or retribution for any comments made during this session. If you are making a mistake get people to tell you. This freedom will empower them and let them know they have an influence in the organization. Making these changes greatly reduced the number of disgruntled workers and improved retention rates.

1. **Create a Climate of Trust**

Give everybody the responsibility they can handle and then stand back. In order to do that, you need to trust them.

1. Never pit dog against dog

Everyone is competing for recognition and promotions, but it is important to remind them that they are all working together – and they will only be able to shine if the group succeeds as a whole. Encourage this mentality to remove competition and distrust between workers.

1. Even the worst screwup may be redeemable

One of Abrashoff’s best officers turned out to be one who was fired from another ship. He was insecure and a target for bullies. This had taught him to bully back. Abrashoff told him that Benfold didn’t operate that way and offered him a chance to redeem himself. He spent extra time working with this officer, but it paid off as the officer became one of his best and went on to a great career. It also sent a message to the crew that no one would be left behind.

1. Welcome the bad-news messenger

If you punish the messenger, you will never heard about problems when they are about to occur. Benfold had a problem with its AEGIS weapons system which a crewmember discovered and reported. Abrashoff passed on word to his superiors that this might affect other ships. This allowed the ships to catch and correct the problem. Abrashoff gave the crewmember who discovered the problem a medal (and did it immediately, without waiting for the bureaucracy).

1. Protect your people from lunatic bosses

If you get a boss who likes to tear down people, try to take the brunt of it on yourself and in private. Don’t let the bad influence spread to your team.

1. Being the best carries responsibility

Because Benfold was the best, and superiors knew it could be counted on to perform, it was often tasked with the hardest missions and forced to stay out at sea longer than other ships. Abrashoff kept crew morale high by reminding them of how important and indispensable they were to the organization. They also received rewards that other ships didn’t get to compensate for their hardship and hard work.

1. Trust also makes money

Trusting people encourages them to do a better job and can save money. Abrashoff shares some lessons learned from a private businessman who found that when he took out the time clocks in his auto shop people actually worked longer hours. Also, even though he was advised to have a “tool-issue” room to make employees check-in and check-out tools (to prevent theft), the cost of this was greater than the cost of lost/stolen tools. Getting rid of it also improved morale and saved time that employees spent waiting to check-in and check-out tools.

1. **Look for Results, Not Salutes**

Abrashoff encourages officers and crewmen to socialize, to get to know each other, and to work together. He also tried to encourage new ideas, rewarding those who came up with good ideas, and passing successful ones on to his superiors and to other ships.

1. Help knock down the barriers

Benfold found that officers always cut in line in front of crewmen. He discouraged this by himself always going to the end of the line. He also always ate at least one meal a week in the crew’s mess hall. When superiors and VIPs visited the ship, he took them to eat with the crew as well and made them stand in line. He wanted to make it clear that the crew were the real VIPs, to expose them to higher-ups, and to make sure that everyone got to meet and be impressed by his crew.

1. Let your crew feel free to speak up

Make sure people can point out possible problems with your decisions. He provides an example of an XO who ran a “man overboard” drill early in the morning and refused to listen to protests about equipment that was in the water which would be badly damaged during the exercise. The equipment was broken at the cost of $50,000. Many companies make huge mistakes simply because people are afraid to speak up or question authority.

1. Free your crew from top-down-it is

Don’t chastise people for their mistakes. Instead, help them and encourage them to learn. Let them “own” their job, and encourage them to find better ways to do their job without needing to be micro-managed.

1. Nurture the freedom to fail

Empower your crew, even if their ambitions seem out of reach. Abrashoff relates a story about the team learning rugby and challenging a professional rugby team to a match. They were massacred, but it was still a fun experience, and he appreciated their zeal and ambition.

1. Innovation knows no rank

Abrashoff relates a story about a Petty Officer who came up with a way to greatly improve boarding and inspections of ships in the Middle East. Each inspection required a lengthy survey which took hours to complete over the radio. This crewman suggested a database for this information which would greatly reduce the time needed to survey ships that were inspected more than once. This idea was almost ignored by officers, but it turned out to be a great innovation that was passed up the chain and spread to other ships in the region.

1. Challenge your crew beyond its reach

Training was greatly improved on Benfold when the Navy was rolling out a new program (which people weren’t terribly excited about). Abrashoff decided to raise the bar even beyond what this program required and had his crew train for situations that were much harder than anything they would be assessed on. They also had crewmembers suggest that they ask the crew what the areas they felt they needed to learn more about and keep an electronic database of crew skills and proficiencies in test areas. When the crew was finally tested by the assessment group they passed the most difficult test (the one that was expected to take 6 months of training and attempts to pass it) in the first week. Abrashoff tried to get the next 6 months off for his crew, but they were told that to be fair they had to stay at sea. Since they didn’t have anything to do though, they just cruised up and down the California coast, from port to port, enjoying shore leave at each stop.

1. **Take Calculated Risks**

Risk-takers are the people who can change an organization for the better. Don’t be reckless though. Only take risks that you think your boss would want you to take and that can be defended publicly.

1. Bet on the people who think for themselves

Abrashoff encouraged his crew to stretch test themselves in new situations. He gave them authority they didn’t usually have and put them in situations that were outside their normal range of duties. During a tricky re-fueling mission when once officer kept asking permission for every tiny decision he said “Hey, it’s your ship, take responsibility for it. Don’t ask permission; do it.” Encourage responsibility, and encourage people to think for themselves.

1. Take a chance on a promising sailor

One crewman missed the boat when it left port. He could have been discharged, but Abrashoff had him flown out to the ship. After confirming that he did in fact want to stay in the Navy and stay on the ship, he had him write a letter of apology to the rest of the crew and gave him double duties for 45 days. To complicate things, during this time his mother became sick and he requested to be flown back to see her. This is normally only allowed if she was near death – which was not the case. He decided to let him go, even though he was on restricted duty still. When he came back, the crewman worked extra hard and became an expert on his systems. He re-enlisted in the Navy and went on to a very successful career.

1. If a rule doesn’t make sense, break it

Dubai is a great port for officers, who are driven around in a chauffeured car and can see anything they want. Abrashoff found out that enlisted crew hated it though, because some accounting decision required them to travel in 60-person buses where the drivers wouldn’t let them out to see any sights. Abrashoff broke this rule and allowed his men to rent vans and drive themselves around as they pleased. This greatly improved their experience, and (presumably) also made them less of a target for terrorists. He also assigned “fun coordinators” to make sure that everyone had a good time. They coordinated concerts, light shows, sand-skiing, swimming, shopping, theaters, beach clubs, and restaurant visits. When word of this spread to other ships, everyone was jealous. Abrashoff was asked for an explanation of his policy, and he eventually convinced several other ships and then the entire Navy to change their policy as well.

1. If a rule doesn’t make sense, break it carefully

A very firm rule on a ship is that the crew is not permitted to consume alcohol onboard. It is believed that this can lead to mutinies. Despite this – and despite several objections from his officers – Abrashoff ordered 100 cases of good beer to be kept locked up on the ship, in case of an emergency need for it. The chance to use this came when the ship was ordered to sea on New Year’s Eve while other ships partied in Bahrain. Abrashoff had a barge brought up alongside the ship, and they had a cookout and party (with beer) on that ship. Technically, he said he was still within the rules of not consuming alcohol on the ship. Some crewman said it was their best New Year’s Eve party ever. (The party in Bahrain was damped by heavy rains which knocked out the power and caused sewage to backup in the streets).

1. **Go Beyond Standard Procedure**

Businesses must innovate and change if they want to adapt to a changing environment. For this reason you have to go beyond Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and try something new.

1. Keep your priorities in focus

As a combat systems officer on the USS England, Abrashoff was in the Gulf War and almost accidentally fired on a squadron of twenty-one jets that were heading towards the ship without announcing themselves or responding to radio calls. It turned out to be the last of the Kuwaiti Air Force leaving, and Abrashoff decided never to be caught unprepared again. He trained his crew for all kinds of “what if” scenarios, analyzing possible attacks on the ship, and trying to think of every possibility – no matter how remote or crazy. Preparing for more challenging situations than they would ever see kept them alert and ready to make decisions in a crisis.

1. Stay ahead of the competition

In a training exercise where several ships tried to shoot down a simulated missile, Abrashoff decided to put much more preparation into the exercise than the other ships. They decided that they should not shoot first (even though everyone wanted to be the first to hit the missile). The first shots usually miss. Instead, they were going to wait until the missile got close to make sure that they hit it. The two other ships fired early and missed the missile. Benfold waited and scored a direct hit. Before this, they were also able to avoid several days training and get in shore leave instead, since they had already prepared extensively for the exercise.

1. Push the envelope for innovation

Noticing that ships with satellite TV ran much better than ships without – since crew were able to watch CNN, keep up on current events, and keep plugged into decisions that affected them – Abrashoff asked if every ship could be equipped with it. He was discouraged by several who said this would never happen, but it did. The Benfold was included in the early pilot tests (greatly improving morale) and this eventually was spread to every ship.

1. Volunteering benefits everyone

Abrashoff met one crewmember who hated his ship, and just wanted to get out of the Navy to be a social worker. Abrashoff decided to enlist his social worker talents before he left the Navy by asking him to pick a local school in San Diego for the ship to adopt. He eagerly led this initiative and soon the crew were volunteering around the city and mentoring at the school. In every port there would be a group that would go off to offer assistance at hospitals and schools. Abrashoff also recommends this to private companies. He found one nuclear power plant in a poor community where substitute teachers were rare, under-payed, and under-skilled. The nuclear engineers were encouraged to take a day or two off and substitute teach when the opportunity presented itself, and this had a great impact on the community.

1. Go for the obvious. It’s probably a winner

When the ship was engaging in training with a foreign, German task force to simulate naval battle, Abrashoff suggested that they spend some time meeting the German crew, exchanging visitors between the two ships. No one seemed particularly interested, but this turned out to be a great opportunity to share experiences with the other crew and improve relations.

1. Don’t work harder. Work smarter.

Regular maintenance in a shipyard can be a trying experience. The shipyard rarely coordinates work well, and just doesn’t manage the maintenance project in a way that makes sense. Benfold decided to see if they could improve the process, using a database to define the tasks that needed to be done, sequencing them, and keeping track of progress. They were able to refit the ship in 7 weeks instead of 9 and came in $800,000 under an initial budget of $3 million. They were rewarded with 2 weeks extra shore leave.

In a separate incident, they noticed that two of their $1.5 million generators had failed due to faults with cheap reservoir tubes. Strong, replacement parts cost $7,000, but the Navy was not able to move fast enough to let them fix this. Instead of waiting, they simply bought the parts themselves and re-fitted the ship. They also spread word to other ships which were able to do the same. The problem had already cost the Navy $60 million before the Navy had noticed it, and the new refits were saving untold millions more while improving combat readiness of ships.

1. Don’t fight stupidity. Use it.

Abrashoff turned one “stupid” policy against itself. The Navy’s Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialist (ESWS) program is incredibly difficult to pass, and when someone had the idea to limit the ability of sailors under 21 to take shore leave (for fear of bad behavior) by requiring them to pass the ESWS test before being granted shore leave, this became a chance to improve the ship’s training. Abrashoff encouraged younger crewmen to focus on this test and to give tours of the ship to help prepare for it. This encouraged the majority of the young sailors to learn more about the ship and to qualify for shore leave. As a result, the crew also started showing the ship off to more people and getting word about Benfold to spread faster. Abrashoff even let the young sailors provide tours to Admirals by themselves, allowing them to greatly impress these VIPs while simultaneously making Abrashoff look good.

1. **Build Up Your People**

Praise people and build self-esteem. Don’t tear them down.

1. Little things make big successes

Abrashoff kept a list of crew member’s spouse’s birthdays and sent birthday cards to each of them. In each one he would write that the crewman was doing a good job (even if they weren’t). He would also write personal letters to family members when crewmen stood out in his duties. Some of these made a big difference. One crewman came to him crying with thanks after his father got a letter. He said that his father had always told him he was a failure, and called him to tell him how proud he was after getting the Captain’s letter. Officers also knew that if they asked the Captain to visit someone and give them a personal congratulations or “good job” he would be happy to. These visits became one of his favorite parts of the job.

He also encourages this in private businesses, improving morale in the company and encouraging everyone to get to know each other. He also recommends having an HR group that can respond to emergency situations (like an employee having a heart-attack on the road and needing to fly his family out to see him).

Another easy way to recognize people is to give them an award. Abrashoff gave pretty much everyone who left the ship a medal, honoring their service. Altogether he gave out 115 medals a year (when he was only authorized to give 15). He thinks every business should have similar awards: the General Electric Quality Star, or the IBM Order of Excellence, or the Microsoft Medal of Distinction. When these are awarded sincerely and without hype there is no downside.

1. Trust people. They usually prove you’re right

In preparation for a thorough assessment, the crew began training extensively. The crew could be rated Level 1 to Level 4 in 24 different areas. Level1 is the minimum, and usually what ships aim for. Abrashoff decided to aim for Level 2. Eventually, he was convinced they could do better and aimed for Level 3. Since they didn’t have enough senior officers to oversee the 24 training areas (officers were busy with other commitments) he had lower-level crewmen fill in for them in less important areas. The crewmen were so honored to be given this chance that they often went above and beyond what the officers were doing. One of the lowest crewman actually obtained a Level 4 certification in his area.

1. Newbies are important. Treat them well

Abrashoff found out that no one really had a formal training program for new recruits. They didn’t even know they were coming, and the new recruits were left to try and find the boat and then left without any help while everyone else was on shore leave. They decided to welcome people to the boat as if it were their own child. They found out who was coming and on what flights. They met them at the airport and brought them straight to the captain’s stateroom (even though he wasn’t there) so they could call home and let their family know they arrived. Then they were assigned a Running Mate – a senior crewmember - whose side they would be at for their first 5 days of duty. They also would meet the Captain one-on-one sometime within their first 2 days. Newcomers learned a lot that way, and the older crewmen were inspired by the newcomers’ excitement. This program also spread quickly to other ships, and it is likely that many companies could improve their onboarding programs similarly.

1. Be the rising tide that lifts all boats.

The foul-weather jackets used in the Navy cost $150, are ugly, and don’t keep anyone warm or wet. One crewman found a civilian version of the jacket which cost $90, looked a lot better, and even had a place on the back where they could write “USS Benfold.” Abrashoff bought these for the entire crew, and everyone loved them. Other crews were so jealous that one Captain ordered Abrashoff to have his crew take them off for fear of mutiny on his ship. Abrashoff refused, protesting that the order was illegal and saying that if he wanted to press the matter he could court martial him. The lesson was to not give into jealous co-workers or groups that try to pull you down. Instead, pull them up. Success is almost always a collective achievement.

1. Build up your bosses.

Don’t try to take your boss’s job or try to suck up. Instead, think about what your boss wants and expects from you. What can you do to make them look good? They probably just want you to be self-reliant, excel in everything you do, and make them look good by achieving greatness.

Abrashoff also developed personal relationships with each of his bosses, trying to become part of the decision-making apparatus so that he could positively influence his own group. He would gather information for new superiors and brief them on new environments as they entered them. He would keep the conversations private, making sure they knew he wasn’t trying to gain attention. In this way, he would gain their trust and help them succeed in their jobs. Helping bosses and their assistants succeed is good for the organization as a whole and a good way to make influential friends who can help you later.

1. Expect the best from your crew. You will get it.

50% of Abrashoff’s crew reportedly joined the Navy because they couldn’t afford college and were hoping to use the GI bill to attend college later. Despite this, many of them hadn’t even taken the SAT to get ready for college admission – having been discouraged by their teachers and guidance counselors. Abrashoff instituted an SAT training course and courses that offered electronic college credits. This helped his people succeed and encouraged them to take Navy-related courses and tests as well. It can be difficult to play guidance counselor for all of your people, but it can also be very rewarding.

1. Build a strong, deep bench.

Usual policy on the Benfold was to have one crew member who could perform each job. This left them one-deep in just about every critical position. Abrashoff changed this by diligently working on cross-training and creating backups for each position. Several cruises which would normally be light were instead filled with day-long drills. Once they trained the backups, they went on to train the third-string, the fourth-string, and the fifth-string, greatly increasing the combat readiness of the ship. Having crewmen who understood other positions also increased the sense of teamwork on the ship. During one assessment, Abrashoff put his third- and fourth-string teams in for the tests. They scored better than 90% of the other ships’ first-stringers. The crew wasn’t as excited about this as him. They were just happy when the training was over.

1. Counsel continuously – and honestly.

Don’t avoid providing negative feedback. Tell your people how they are performing. They should not be surprised by their year-end review. If they are, it means you are failing as a manager. One good way to handle low performers is to ask them how they would rate themselves in comparison to the rest of the team. Identify their problems, help lay a path for them to correct these problems and improve. Set a deadline and clearly lay out the consequences of not reaching the necessary improvement. This approach worked very well for a new Master Chief who was used to barking orders and micro-managing. He learned how to fit in with the crew, and learned to trust people who were taking ownership and responsibility for their jobs.

1. **Generate Unity**
2. Forget diversity. Train for unity.

Diversity training was failing on the ship. Racism and sexual harassment were real problems. Abrashoff cancelled the diversity training program (since it was failing), and instead of focusing on differences built a unity training class that focused on getting everyone to see that they were (literally) in the same boat with each other. The goal was to level the playing field so that people could perform without believing that race or sex would adversely affect them.

1. Deal out punishment strictly but fairly.

A chance to demonstrate this policy came when two black crewmembers were blasting music with the N-word in it. When a white crewmember asked them to turn it down, a fight broke out, during which he used the N-word as well. No one wanted to admit to it, but after several hours sweating them (literally, he had turned off the air conditioner) in a court room, he had them admit to what happened. Everyone involved was punished equally and to the full extent allowed. Word got out that this would not be tolerated. All three crewmen were also singled out for extra training and attention by his officers. “I just tore those three sailors down,” he told his officers. “Now it’s your job to start building them back up. I want you to redeem these kids.” They did turn around, and reports of sexual harassment and racism dropped dramatically.

1. What’s bad for women is bad for your ship.

Benfold was one of the first ships designed for both men and women. While they were occasionally taunted for this by other ships, Abrashoff points out that the female crew members were just as capable as the men, and several truly excelled. He mentions one lieutenant who was given responsibility for charting the course of an entire group (she was chosen for this over several more senior officers from other ships because she was so good).

He also discusses a program they instituted to let enlisted crew stand as “officer of the deck.” This is normally a job reserved for officers, but they extended it to crew and even down to third-class petty officers. In this position, several of the crew were given an opportunity to excel. One woman in particular, recommended that sailors who were left out in the rain for an hour, waiting for a ship to depart, be brought in from the rain and given something hot to drink. This seemed so obvious, but several senior officers standing watch on the other ships failed to think of it.

1. **Improve Your People’s Quality of Life**

People need to have fun at work. Especially in this day where technology tethers you to your job 24/7, it is important to unwind away from work and to enjoy the time that you do spend at work. Otherwise, you’ll get burnt out.

1. Fun with your friends makes a happy ship.

In response to crew recommendations, the ship instituted Jazz night and Cigar night on Thursdays. They had happy hours on Fridays (without beer, but still with buffalo wings and good shrimp). Movies were played on Saturday nights with free popcorn and soda (other ships often pulling near to watch the movie with them). A karaoke machine was installed, and music was played during every boring and monotonous task that afforded it.

1. The first priority: good food.

After being embarrassed by the bad food served in the officer’s mess when his parents visited, Abrashoff reviewed the food practices on the entire ship. He attended the monthly menu review boards personally and asked them why the food was so bad and what they could do to fix it. They were able to get the cooks to better follow the recipes, and the Captain would visit frequently and remind them how important their work was. He sent some of the cooks to culinary classes, and he also was able to have the mess hall buy their own food instead of getting it through usual Navy supplies (thanks to changes in Navy spending regulations). Abrashoff’s three top priorities were: better food, better training, and as many promotions as possible. Eventually, Benfold was serving the best food in the Navy and Thanksgiving dinner was just as good as at home.

1. Add to your crew’s bottom line.

Improving your crew’s pay is also important. By running at fast speed, Abrashoff was able to get his crew into a combat zone 1 day early (the last day of the month) and thus make their entire month’s salary tax-empty (an increase of about $350 per crew member).

1. In heavy times, lighten up.

During the Gulf War, times were tense. The ship was ready to launch missiles at Saddam any day. To relieve the stress, they held boat races with two small Zodiac boats with outboard motors (this was a stretch of the rules, since permission from the Commodore was required in order to put boats into the water. The Commodore was just told that the boats were getting maintenance – which was also true). When word of this spread, several sailors from other ships said they would jump ship and swim to the Benfold to serve if they ever got close enough.

1. Let the crew show off the ship.

While the Navy only allows “distinguished” guests to visit the ship, Abrashoff instead encouraged everyone to give tours of the ship. This let them be proud of their work and show it off to friends and family members.

1. The secret to good work? Good play.

When Benfold was getting good at refueling at sea, they started to practice this tricky maneuver at night as well. One crewmen suggested playing music videos at night along with a laser light show. As they approached the refueling tanker they would turn off all lights, then blare out the Olympic theme song, and being the laser light show, followed by music videos. Soon, tankers were fighting over the chance to refuel Benfold.

Even when the crew was down (after having to leave a welcoming port in Australia early to return to the Gulf), they would try little things to improve their mood. On this trip they tried a kite flying contest. When they didn’t have enough wind, Abrashoff ran the ship at full speed to get the kites up in the air. These kinds of activities improved morale and quickly spread their reputation as a group that was just… different.

1. **Life After Benfold**

When it came time for Abrashoff to leave Benfold, the crew was sad to see him go. Instead of having the ceremony in port, with the admiral visiting, and the crew prepping and painting for weeks to get ready, he instead asked to have the ceremony at sea. He ordered 310 live lobsters for his crew and served a fine meal of surf and turf for the occasion. The ceremony was held in regular coveralls – not dress uniforms – and the speech was the shortest change-of-command speech in military history. “You know how I feel” is all that he said. Then he saluted his relief and his crew.

Abrashoff’s replacement admitted to being intimidated by the shoes he had to fill. For several years after though the spirit of Benfold continued, and his replacement went on to achieve great things and win several distinguished medals. Abrashoff suggests that the true measure of a manager or leader is how well his crew performs after he leaves. He thinks that a commander’s final review should be written 6 months after he leaves his position, and that seeing a crew continue to perform well under new management is one of the greatest satisfactions to be had.

In hindsight, he also mentions that he probably made life harder for the other ship captains in his group than he needed too. If he could do it again, he would include them in his improvement processes as he devised and implementing them, instead of waiting for them to succeed and then putting pressure on them to catch up. He admits to failing to put himself into their positions to think about how they might feel. Instead, he was just too focused on his own ship at the time.

Last words of the chapter: “Optimism rules. […] Opportunities never cease. The bottom line: It’s your ship. Make it the best.”

1. **Epilogue: Beyond Benfold**

After leaving, Abrashoff continued to work for change in the Navy. He e-mailed the three-star admiral who was responsible for the Pacific Fleet and shared what he had learned. He urged him to hold commanding officers personally responsible for retention and disciplinary rates of their crews. He implemented this policy immediately and retention rates improved throughout the Navy.

He emphasizes that all of the material in this book is just what he put together as he looked for his own answers about how to be a good manager, and he welcomes other managers to improve upon it and find even better ways to get things done. He also notes that the Navy has a come a long way in its leadership since September 11, 2001. Everyone is working together – even across military branches – and people are focused largely on results. He concludes by mentioning that private companies suffer from many of the same problems that faced Benfold, and he encourages them to find ways to improve their businesses through better leadership and unity.