



Turn the Ship Around!

A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders

L. David Marquet

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Rating

8

- 9 Applicability
- 8 Innovation
- 7 Style

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Take-Aways

- Captain L. David Marquet inherited the worst-performing, worst-morale submarine in the fleet and turned it into the best-performing by deviating from the traditional “leader-follower” (command and control) model and implementing a “leader-leader” model.
- In the leader-leader model everyone thinks and acts like a leader.
- Over the next 10 years, more submarine captains came from the *Santa Fe* than any other submarine. The new system improves morale and performance and builds leaders.
- Telling people they are “empowered” is inherently contradictory as it presumes you are the one giving them power. It reminds them that they have no power.
- Instead of telling sailors what to do, Marquet had them state their intentions. The “leader” gives intent, not instructions, and the team gives its intentions.
- Giving control like this rests on technical competence and organizational clarity.
- Giving control is fundamentally scary for leaders and needs to be done in small steps.
- Organizations based on intent generate a bias for action, not permission.
- “Deliberate action” – a process in which the *Santa Fe*’s sailors plan their work and say aloud what they are going to do – became an effective strategy for preventing mistakes.
- Marquet moved “authority to information” instead of moving “information to authority.”

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) How “leader-follower” systems disempower followers, 2) Why the “leader-leader” system works, and 3) How to use the “I intend to” and “deliberate action” strategies.

Review

The US Navy operates with a traditional “leader-follower” management structure. Corporations call this command and control. In the Navy, officers make decisions and enlisted personnel carry them out. This structure is a tremendous source of frustration and inefficiency while giving leaders the illusion they are “in charge.” These limitations were at a breaking point aboard the USS *Santa Fe* – once the worst performing nuclear submarine in the US fleet. In 1999, Commander L. David Marquet assumed command of the *Santa Fe* and developed an innovative management system known as “leader-leader.” This transformed the *Santa Fe* into a top-performing sub. Marquet explains how to implement leader-leader and how to use his “deliberate action” and “I intend to” management strategies. *getAbstract* recommends his hard-earned, applicable lessons to executives, HR managers, entrepreneurs, business students and professors, and anyone at sea.

Summary

“A nuclear-powered submarine is an unlikely place for a leadership revolution...it operates in an unforgiving environment.”

“People who are treated as followers treat others as followers when it’s their turn to lead. A vast untapped human potential is lost as a result of treating people as followers.”

How Bosses Kill Motivation

Most people are enthusiastic when they begin new jobs. They have innovative ideas and suggestions to share with their supervisors. But most inadvertently shut down their new employees pretty quickly, telling them to be “team players” and follow instructions. Such top-down direction destroys initiative and turns motivated, positive employees into depressed cynics who go through the motions. This frustrates both bosses and followers. Such disengagement costs US firms \$300 billion annually. As a former commanding officer in the US Navy’s submarine fleet, Captain L. David Marquet has firsthand experience with disenchanted employees who perform at substandard levels.

The Navy’s attitude about leadership – like the approach of the typical boss – can also foster disenchantment. The Navy divides people into “leaders and followers,” the traditional leadership model. The leader-follower model promotes rote followership. It functions particularly badly for intellectual work. When people see themselves as followers, they stop thinking and do as their bosses say. Some leaders get around the leader-follower dilemma through “empowerment” of their employees. But providing empowerment – arbitrarily telling someone they can make limited decisions for a short period of time – only reminds people that they have no real power.

Everyone’s a Leader

As the captain of the USS *Santa Fe*, a \$2-billion nuclear submarine with a crew of 135 men, Marquet replaced leader-follower management with “leader-leader,” a system he developed based on treating everyone as a leader. When each employee is a leader, agility, efficiency, productivity and morale improve. Leader-leader organizations are more resilient than leader-follower ones. Yet everything about a submarine is unforgiving. Deadlines shape all decisions and actions. Mistakes can be deadly. No one is ever more than 150 feet away from the control room. In this challenging environment, hierarchy is unavoidable, but how hierarchy is used can be shaped. Most hierarchies push information (at the bottom) to

“Followers... have limited decision-making authority and little incentive to give the utmost of their intellect, energy and passion.”

“People who are treated as followers have the expectations of followers and act like followers.”

“When you follow the leader-leader model, you must take time to let others react to the situation as well.”

“Create a space for open decision by the entire team, even if that space is only a few minutes, or a few seconds, long.”

authority (at the top). Onboard the USS *Santa Fe*, Marquet pushed the authority for making decisions toward the bottom, where the information is native.

When Marquet assumed command of the *Santa Fe*, it was the poorest-performing nuclear submarine in the fleet. It had the worst retention rate of all submarines. A candid photo of crew members not paying attention to their duties became notorious – a prime example of what sailors on submarines must not do. Within a year of taking over, thanks to changes Marquet made in its management and operations, the *Santa Fe* became the fleet’s top-performing submarine in numerous categories – including, most satisfyingly to Marquet, the number of crew members who re-enlisted at the end of their service.

Before Deploying

Submarines operate at sea away from their home ports for deployments that last six months. They may sail 30,000 miles during a deployment, stopping at in-transit ports only for repairs and resupply. Submarines represent the tip of the naval spear and often operate in “hostile waters,” ready to take the fight to the enemy at all times.

On December 15, 1998, 25 days prior to formally assuming command, Marquet first boarded the submarine. As he walked through his inspection, the crew’s downtrodden demeanor made a strong impression on him. He knew that feedback constantly reminded the crew members that they served on the submarine with the fleet’s worst reputation. They were humiliated, embarrassed and dejected.

Marquet’s lack of deep technical knowledge about the ship’s sophisticated onboard systems proved to be a catalyst to discover a better approach than telling people what to do. Marquet asked the men: “What are the things you are hoping I don’t change?” “What are the things you secretly hope I do change?” “If you were me, what would you do first?” “What will be our biggest challenge to getting *Santa Fe* ready for deployment?” “What are your biggest frustrations about how *Santa Fe* is currently run?”

The Minimum Required

To familiarize himself with the sub, Marquet had the chief petty officers escort him around the spaces they supervised and explain their jobs. He learned that the crew members were obsessively concerned about not making mistakes, which biased the organization even more strongly toward waiting to be told what to do and not taking initiative.

One conversation Marquet had with a crew member deeply disturbed him. When he asked the sailor what his job was, the man cynically replied, “Whatever they tell me to do.” This was an insulting response to an honest question from a superior officer. The sailor communicated that he saw himself only as a follower avoiding responsibility for his work.

Marquet learned that this was a typical attitude among *Santa Fe* crew. The men on the *Santa Fe* felt that they were trapped. Pervasive faulty work under stress caused mounting errors, which in turn lowered the already poor morale. In turn, bad morale worked against anyone who tried to take the initiative to make things better. On the *Santa Fe*, things had been going from bad to worse. Marquet had his work cut out for him.

The New Commanding Officer

On January 8, 1999, Marquet assumed command of the *Santa Fe*, operating out of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. His plan included changing how information moved on the *Santa Fe*. Normally, in the Navy, information moves up the chain of command from the enlisted

"We were going to deconstruct decision authority and push it down to where the information lived."

"In our modern world, the most important work we do is cognitive; so, it's not surprising that a structure developed for physical work isn't optimal for intellectual work."

"As you work with individuals to develop their vision for the future...establish specific, measurable goals."

"With emancipation we are recognizing the inherent genius, energy and creativity in all people, and allowing those talents to emerge."

men to the officers, who then make decisions according to what they've learned. Marquet intended to keep the decision making close to the crew level, where information originates. Marquet describes this strategy as "Don't move information to authority, move authority to the information." He was determined to change the crew's orientation from "error reduction" to excellence.

Marquet began this transformation with the *Santa Fe*'s chief petty officers. Tradition holds that "the chiefs run the Navy," and that's how Marquet wanted operations to flow onboard the ship. To make sure the chiefs had the necessary authority, Marquet changed the navy regulation for who authorized vacation – and gave them the authority to control vacation for their sailors. Previously this rested with the second in command. From now on, enlisted men would only have to get the chiefs' permission to go on vacation. For men stuck on ships for months at a time, the person who decides vacation carries great authority. In return for this concession, the chiefs agreed to be responsible for performance in their divisions. This would include their crew's "watch bills, qualification schedules, and training school enrollments" – just about everything important to how *Santa Fe* operated.

"Chiefs in Charge"

This major change – putting the chiefs in charge – vastly improved performance. Directly connecting the chiefs, who were responsible for making sure work got completed, with the enlisted ranks, who did the work, proved to be very effective. It resulted in "greater commitment" and "greater engagement." The principle was to "push authority to information" not information to authority. A leading chief, Andy Worshek, assisted Marquet with the initiative to place the chiefs in charge.

Marquet also changed the way the crew greeted visitors as they boarded the *Santa Fe*. The standard greeting became the "three-name rule." Now, a sailor would say, "Good morning, Commodore Kenny, my name is Petty Officer Jones, welcome aboard *Santa Fe*." Marquet also began to engage in "short, early conversations" – as short as 30 seconds – with members of the crew. In these conversations, he didn't tell sailors what to do. Instead, he provided a helpful perspective that clarified their role and gave them more control over their own actions and activities.

"I Intend To"

One of the fundamental leader-leader changes Marquet instituted was the practice of having subordinates say "I intend to" and then explain the actions they planned to undertake. Marquet stopped giving explicit orders to his subordinates. Instead, they would muster the organizational details they were responsible for, say, "I intend to" to him, and then detail their specific plans. At this point, if he agreed with their intentions, Marquet would say, "Very well." With this confirmation, the subordinates could proceed with their work.

For example, an officer might say, "Captain, I intend to submerge the ship. We are in water assigned to *Santa Fe*, water depth has been checked, all men are below, the ship is rigged for dive, and I've certified my watch team." And Marquet would say, "Very well." This seemingly minor change to the conversational interplay between the crew and the commander shifted ownership to his subordinates.

Initially, Marquet wouldn't ask questions about the proposed action. This dynamic prompted subordinates to communicate their thoughts and explain their thought process up front. Subordinates had to consider their actions as if they were the commander of the ship. Rather than one officer thinking, one leader giving orders, the sub now had

“Leaders like to hang a list of guiding principles on office walls for display, but often those principles don’t become part of the fabric of the organization.”

“When the performance of a unit goes down after an officer leaves, it is taken as a sign that he was a good leader, not that he was ineffective in training his people properly.”

“When you’re trying to change employees’ behaviors, you have basically two approaches...change your own thinking and hope this leads to new behavior; or change your behavior and hope this leads to new thinking.”

“135 independent, energetic, emotionally committed and engaged men thinking about what [they] needed to do and ways to do it.”

No “Top-Down Monitoring”

Initially, the *Santa Fe* relied on a “tickler system” that was a check on the status of all tasks. The officers kept their various status reports in a binder in the executive officer’s stateroom. Every week, the *Santa Fe*’s officers would conduct a “tickler meeting” to go over the status of each operation or project, and to categorize what the ship needed to do and what it had not yet done.

The tracking system’s message to the crew that someone above them was tracking, monitoring and evaluating their performance poached ownership of their jobs. Monitoring suggests that those lower in the hierarchy don’t truly own their jobs. Marquet got rid of the tickler system. He put department heads in control of their own departments. This allowed them to own their jobs and focus on the work, not on cataloging and monitoring tasks. Sailors and officers became “responsible for their own performance and the performance of their departments.”

Another innovation Marquet introduced was “thinking out loud.” This involved not just permitting but actively encouraging the delivery of information in context among enlisted personnel and officers. This ran counter to the standard system of communication, which is to focus on a “formal atmosphere” that discourages chatting. But an excess of context is far better than too little. Quality decision making involving the team requires context.

“Deliberate Action”

“Mistakes just happen” is a common excuse when things go wrong. But mistakes come from a lack of focus, and the crew learned to avoid them. On a sub, serious problems can develop quickly if someone inadvertently happens to “turn the wrong valve” or “open the wrong breaker.” If a crew member doesn’t pay attention and acts “automatically,” the ship could face an unexpected and completely avoidable problem – maybe even an emergency.

Following one mistake, instead of punishing the crew member, Marquet repaired the environment by instituting a policy of deliberate action. Before any crew member would take an action, he paused briefly and stated aloud precisely what he intended to do – and then did it. This brief pause and clear statement forces the crew member to think about what he is getting ready to do. This prevents people from acting on autopilot and making mistakes due to inattention. The introduction of deliberate action was “the single most powerful mechanism” for eliminating mistakes and increasing excellence.

From Worst to Best

Thanks to Marquet’s development and institution of the leader-leader strategy, the *Santa Fe* transformed from the worst nuclear submarine in the US Navy to the best. It developed a record number of new leaders. Leader-leader became a path for attaining excellent performance and developing a solid cadre of superior leaders.

About the Author

A 1981 US Naval Academy graduate, **L. David Marquet** served in the US submarine force for 28 years. He is the former captain of the USS *Santa Fe* and a highly requested global keynote speaker.