

MANAGEMENT

on the High Seas

Most Navy brass would say that Commander D. Michael Abrashoff ran a loose ship. But his style of empowering his crew by delegating authority is changing the way the Navy thinks about management. His speech at the recent annual meeting of the American Gear Manufacturers Association offered a simple, common-sense approach that can be applied not only to running a ship, but also to gear manufacturing or any other industry.

Abrashoff's management style went against hundreds of years of naval tradition. As commanding officer of the 300 sailors aboard the *USS Benfold*, he sought to focus on the purpose and performance of the entire ship rather than on the chain of command. He did so by asking questions, probing his crew for ideas about what would make the ship more efficient, productive and combat-ready—never mind what it said in the Navy rule book. He wanted to know how to make every process on the ship better, and he found that the people performing each process best knew how to do this. He called it seeing his ship through the eyes of his crew.

Abrashoff found that many of the sailors grumbled about some of the tedious chores on the ship. One of those chores was the scraping and painting of the constantly rusting ferrous bolts and other hardware on the deck. Since that's the way the Navy had always done it, no one had ever tried to find an alternative. After a suggestion from one of his crew members, Abrashoff had every nut and bolt replaced with stainless steel. Now, the crew no longer has to scrape and paint the hardware. This gives them more time to work on what really counts—combat readiness.

People gain job satisfaction a number of ways, and management often overlooks many of the most important of them. Abrashoff polled his crew and made a list of the things they wanted out of their jobs. They said they wanted to be listened to, they wanted to be treated with respect and dignity, they wanted to know that their jobs have some impact, and they wanted to be told they're doing a good job. Of course, workers also want to be well paid, but according to Abrashoff's survey, pay was a surprising number five on the list. There are far better ways to motivate a crew, he says.

For example, Abrashoff told a story about a young man in his crew who was constantly in trouble. He lacked responsibility, discipline and a sense of purpose. Instead of berating the crewman or calling him out in front of his peers, Abrashoff wrote a letter to the young man's parents, telling them what a valuable member of the crew their son was and what an important contribution he was making to the success of the ship. Shortly thereafter, the sailor came to Abrashoff. The young man

had just spoken to his father, and as it turns out, it was the first time his father had ever told his son that he was proud of him. Abrashoff never had a problem with the young man again.

When Abrashoff took over the *Benfold*, the ship was one of the lowest rated in the Navy. The crew suffered from low morale and had poor performance ratings. The entire Navy has had a hard time recruiting and retaining sailors, but the *Benfold* had one of the lowest retention rates in the fleet.

The results of Abrashoff's changes have been dramatic. The *Benfold* is still one of the most sought-after transfers in the fleet. On average, only 54% of U.S. Navy sailors stay with the Navy after their second tour of duty. Under Abrashoff, 100% of his sailors signed on for an additional tour. The ship has also received numerous awards, including the coveted Spokane Trophy, awarded to the most combat-ready vessel in the Pacific Fleet.

I've always considered myself to be a good manager, as most managers do, in that I try to see things through the eyes of my employees. We have periodic reviews with our employees, and some of the things I've learned about my own operation have surprised me. For example, several years ago, our company had no answering machine. We never thought that we might be missing phone calls until one of my employees suggested it. She was always the first person here in the mornings and would often field phone calls well before normal business hours. I would never have known about it if I hadn't asked.

Seeing through the eyes of your crew is not something that you should do just at annual review time. To be truly effective, it has to be routine. Within any industry, all managers—not only in manufacturing and design, but also in maintenance, accounting, marketing and order processing—can use these ideas to make their departments combat-ready.

On a daily basis, Abrashoff used 600 eyes rather than two. How many eyes are working for you?



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