

By Jonette Crowley

Enlightened Leadership in the U.S. Navy

Commander D. Michael Abrashoff had a mission. Through what he calls "Grassroots Leadership," he turned around the operations of the USS Benfold, one of the U.S. Navy's most modern warships. His methods aren't complex, yet the results are astounding.

- Under Mike Abrashoff's 20-month command, the Benfold operated on 75% of its allocated budget, returning \$1.4 million to the Navy coffers.
- During that time, the ship's combat readiness indicators were the highest ever in the history of the Pacific Fleet.
- The promotion rate of his people was 2-1/2 times the Navy average.
- The pre-deployment training cycle, which usually takes a total of 52 days, was completed by the Benfold crew in just 19 days.
- During a 12-month period under the previous command, there were 28 disciplinary actions for which 23 sailors were discharged. During Abrashoff's tenure there were five disciplinary cases and no discharges.
- Under his predecessor 31 people were detached from the ship for limited duty, usually for complaints of "bad backs." He had only two crew members leave for health reasons.
- A third of all recruits don't make it through their first term of enlistment, and only 54% of sailors stay in the Navy after their second duty tour. Commander Abrashoff had 100% of the Benfold's career sailors signing on for another tour. It is estimated that this retention alone saved the Navy \$1.6 million in 1998.

What did he do to stage such a turnaround in less than 20 months? He asked questions, he listened, he acted on what he heard. Almost immediately upon taking command, he had a 15 to 20 minute personal interview with each of his staff of 300. He asked these questions:

- "What do you like best about this ship?"
- "What do you like least?"
- "What would you change if you could?"

He made it a point to "see the ship from the eyes of each crew member."

Abrashoff acted as quickly as he could to institute the ideas that came from these interviews.

He focused on what was important: morale and combat readiness.

"I didn't put an emphasis on paperwork," says Abrashoff. He encouraged his middle managers (junior officers) to delegate the paperwork that had always swamped them and focus instead on the training that enabled them to run the weapons and the ship. "That inspires confidence in the officers for our combat readiness, and the lower level people loved the responsibility for the paperwork stuff that the officers used to do," the commander reports.

Abrashoff analyzed the processes, always assuming that there has got to be a better way.

Simply following SOP (Standard Operating Procedures), or doing things the way they've always been done, didn't hold water. The rules were changed or bent, always with the vision in mind of doing what was best for the crew. "Saving money wasn't the focus, it was a by-product of efficiency. We did things right the first time."

He set the vision and trusted his crew.

He helped people take pride in their work. "I gave my officers my trust and free rein. They didn't want to lose that trust." Abrashoff said, "I focused on doing right by the crew, not by the admirals. I didn't even care if I ever got promoted again. That gave me the freedom to do what made sense."

One of the biggest complaints was the food, so he sent five of the Benfold's cooks to culinary school. The ship is now known as having some of the best food in the Navy, making it a showcase for VIPs. By focusing on the needs and ideas of his people, by relaxing the rules, by giving control over to his officers, a ship's culture has been changed, and with it the lives and confidence of scores of young sailors. A "virtuous cycle" has been set up that is continuing to inspire the crew to do even better. Even after Mike Abrashoff has taken up other duties at his home base in San Diego, the USS Benfold continues to have the highest combat readiness indicators ever seen in the entire Pacific Fleet.