Book Review: *It's Your Ship*

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Last May, I attended the CAPSS Spring Conference where Captain D. Michael Abrashoff was one of the speakers. I am really glad that I went.

Abrashoff was captain of the USS Benfold in the late 1990's. He took a ship with a poor rating and turned into the "best damn ship in the Navy" through various management techniques aimed at building the morale of his crew, including providing more empowerment and recognition of sailors, even those who were way down in the pecking order (one could say, *especially* these men and women). This led to great gains in performance as measured against other ships and in that crucial area, combat readiness.

Abrashoff's speech before the superintendents was very well received. He spoke without notes and gave very practical tips on how to build a first-rate staff and increase the effectiveness of all involved, whether in the Navy, the private sector or even a school district.

The tips he gave are contained in more detail in an easily readable and quite enjoyable book entitled, *It's Your Ship,* that was given out at the Conference. It is not your average, long, dull, boring book on management. Like his speech, Abrashoff's book is interesting, fast-paced and helpful.

While many of his suggestions concern running the operational aspects of an organization, which is *not* the role or responsibility we endorse for school boards, building a culture of trust, valuing and rewarding employees and increasing achievement is certainly part of any board's role. While our schools may not have to be "combat ready", they certainly need to get to the highest level of effectiveness if we

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School boards have the opportunity to empower their superintendents to run positive, effective operations based on effective leadership principles. For example, Abrashoff offered many instances in which new ideas, no matter who provided them, were considered and adopted if appropriate. This served to show that the sailors' opinions were valued even if they were low down on the organization chart, since these men and women were often closest to the problem. Ideas that were adopted frequently saved the ship money and increased its effectiveness.

Strengthen the Positive Culture

Sailors also were permitted to fail on some tasks as long as no permanent damage was done. This helped strengthen the culture so that people were willing to take risks without the concern that they would be punished for failure.

This helped build the kind of organization that not only succeeded, as the ship regularly outdid others on Navy tests, but also was a desirable place to be. The captain made sure that all the sailors were rewarded for their outstanding performances and went out of his way to treat them as partners, not mere workers. As you can imagine, retention was not a problem on this ship (it had three times the average Navy retention rate).

Certainly Abrashoff was not (and I would guess, still is not) the average type of Navy leader. He himself took risks, was willing to butt heads with others in defense of common sense ideas and managed the ship by getting to know the sailors (this used to be

called "management by walking around"). He did not just sit in his cabin or on the bridge surrounded by other officers, he went out of his way to eat and spend time with individual sailors and got to know their concerns, hopes and fears. He worked hard to help them succeed, whether through increased professional education, letting their families know what a good job they were doing, making sure they remained "in the loop" when important news occurred and being a "cheerleader" for them.

Here are some of the practical tips that Captain Abrashoff provided both in person and in the book. They are also the titles of chapters in the book:

- Lead by example
- Listen aggressively
- Communicate purpose and meaning
- Create a climate of trust
- Look for results, not salutes
- Take calculated risks
- Go beyond standard procedure
- Build up your people
- Generate unity
- Improve your people's quality of life

I would guess that many CEOs, superintendents and others in management positions would like to emulate Abrashoff's leadership style. He really moved his ship from the tautest of top-down organizations with a tradition of doing things the same way for hundreds of years, to one of practical and effective change in an environment that would tolerate risk and, on occasion, even failure.

Needed: Sincere Buy-in

But, making these changes, thinking "out of the box" and finding new ways to increase achievement is difficult unless the CEO really believes in the new management style and his "bosses", whether a board of education or an individual, support this new way of doing things. I would think that having self-confidence, without arrogance, is also critical, since many of Abrashoff's recommendations are so different than the cultures in which many of us have "grown up".

One last point he made is worth considering: the "greatest satisfaction [as a leader] transcends personal achievement—it comes from helping others reach their potential." That is certainly true, especially at a time when we need mentors and role models among administrators, teachers and yes, board members, who can help others and thereby help their educational systems.

I encourage school board members and superintendents to take a close look at Captain Abrashoff's suggestions. Not every one is applicable to all ships, let alone all school districts. But his tips on changing an organization's environment are well worth considering and tailoring for your district.

I want to thank CAPSS for inviting me and our President to the Spring Conference. We appreciate the invitation and came away with very helpful ideas and information.