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Turn the Ship Around!: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders

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54 Highlights

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The leader-leader structure is fundamentally different from the leader-follower structure. At its core is the belief that we can all be leaders and, in fact, it's best when we all are leaders. Leadership is not some mystical quality that some possess and others do not. As humans, we all have what it takes, and we all need to use our leadership abilities in every aspect of our work life.

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After this, things got worse. I had wanted to give my team more authority and control, but my heart wasn't in it anymore. I would give decision-making control to my people, but they'd make bad decisions. If I was going to get yelled at, I at least wanted it to be my fault. I went back to leading in the way I'd been taught. I personally briefed every event. I approved all decisions myself. I set up systems where reports came to me all day and all night. I never slept well because messengers were waking me so I could make decisions. I was exhausted and miserable; the men in the department weren't happy either, but they stoically went about their jobs. I prevented any more major problems, but everything hinged on me. Numerous times I found errors. Far from being proud of catching these mistakes, I lamented my indispensability and worried what would happen when I was tired, asleep, or wrong.

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Second, the way I was told to manage others was not the way I wanted to be managed. I felt I was at my best when given specific goals but broad latitude in how to accomplish them. I didn't respond well to executing a bunch of tasks. In fact, being treated that way irritated me and caused me to shut my brain down. That was intellectually wasteful and unfulfilling.

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In the Navy system, captains are graded on how well their ships perform up to the day they depart; not a day longer. After that it becomes someone else's problem. I thought about that. On every submarine and ship, and in every squadron and battalion, hundreds of captains were making thousands of decisions to optimize the performance of their commands for their tour and their tour alone. If they did anything for the long run it was because of an enlightened sense of duty, not because there was anything in the system that rewarded them for it.

We didn't associate an officer's leadership effectiveness with how well his unit performed after he left. We didn't associate an officer's leadership effectiveness with how often his people got promoted two, three, or four years hence. We didn't even track that kind of information. All that mattered was performance in the moment.

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It is precisely the success of the top-down, leader-follower structure that makes it so appealing. As long as you are measuring performance over just the short run, it can be effective. Officers are rewarded for being indispensable, for being missed after they depart. 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.

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My unfamiliarity with the sub's technical details was having an interesting side effect: since I couldn't get involved with the specifics of the gear, I opened up space to focus on the people and their interactions instead, and to rely on the crew more than I normally would have. I decided I'd do physical inspections of the ship and review the records, but only as a guise for understanding the crew. Whereas on Oly I had reviewed some records by myself, I decided that everything I did on Santa Fe would be with an officer, a chief, or a crew member.

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I was uneasy not being the technical expert on each and every piece of equipment on board. The impact of this focus on people was that I was going to have to rely on the crew to provide me with the technical details about how the submarine worked. This went against every grain of my naval leadership and scientific training. But the circumstances demanded a new mode of operation. Doing the same thing as everyone else and hoping for a different outcome didn't make sense. I am not advocating being ignorant about the equipment. For me, however, it was a necessary step to make me truly curious and reliant upon the crew in a way I wouldn't have been without it. Later in my tour I became a technical expert on all aspects of Santa Fe, but the positive patterns had been set and I continued in the same relationship with the crew. If you walk about your organization talking to people, I'd suggest that you be as curious as possible. As with a good dinner table conversationalist, one question should naturally lead to another. The time to be questioning or even critical is after trust has been established.

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According to procedure, I was to spend the next two weeks reviewing everything on the ship, including training records, school records, administrative records, award records, advancement records, records pertaining to the operation and maintenance of the reactor plant, the weapons system, the torpedoes and missiles, schedules, exercises, classified material, and so on. I ignored that. Instead, I spent my time walking around the ship talking to people. I also set up a series of walkabouts during which each chief or officer would walk me around his spaces.

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“Hi, what do you do on board?” By asking open-ended questions like this, I could better gauge what the crew thought their job was. “Whatever they tell me to do,” he immediately replied with unmistakable cynicism. He knew he was a follower, and not happy with it, but he also was not taking responsibility. He was throwing it back in my face that the command was all screwed up. It was a stunningly insulting thing to say, yet a brilliantly clear description of the problem. I should have been irate. Instead I felt strangely detached—like a scientific observer. “Whatever they tell me to do.” That was the attitude all over the ship. I began to see things in a new light.

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Everything we did reinforced the notion that the guys at the top were the leaders and the rest of the crew were the followers. The problem for Santa Fe wasn't an absence of leadership. It was too much leadership of the wrong kind, the leader-follower kind.

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The authorities and responsibilities of the commanding officer, or captain, are specified in U.S. Navy Regulations: The responsibility of the commanding officer for his or her command is absolute . . . While the commanding officer may, at his or her discretion, and when not contrary to law or regulations, delegate authority to subordinates for the execution of details, such delegation of authority shall in no way relieve the commanding officer of continued responsibility for the safety, well-being and efficiency of the entire command (Section 0802).⁶ Delegation is the exception, not the rule. This issue of absolute responsibility has been a fundamental aspect of naval service since the United States Navy was crafted in the image of the Royal Navy. If the ship started to sink right at that moment, I would not be responsible. If it started to sink an hour later, it would be my responsibility, 100 percent. I would be accountable. While that singular point of accountability is attractive in many ways, there is a downside. The previous commanding officer would not be held accountable. Thus, as I pointed out earlier, each CO is encouraged to maximize performance for his tour and his tour alone. There is no incentive or reward for developing mechanisms that enable excellence beyond your immediate tour. Imagine the impact of this on the thousands of decisions made by the commanding officers throughout the Navy.

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For example, in Section 0851 in the Navy Regulations on action with the enemy, the CO is directed to take the following action: Before going into battle or action communicate to the officers of the command, if possible, his or her plans for battle or action and such other information as may be of operational value should any of them succeed to command. It might seem amazing that we feel it necessary to tell commanding officers to communicate the battle plan to their subordinates before going into combat, “if possible.” If the crew doesn't know and understand the battle plan before then, defeat is almost certain. But those Navy regs are describing the top-down, aloof, leader-follower structure that naval officers learn. Leader-follower is the image that comes to mind when we think of the confident, resolute commanding officer boldly leading his crew into battle. We think this is good leadership.

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Many empowerment programs fail because they are just that, “programs” or “initiatives” rather than the central principle—the genetic code, if you will—behind how the organization does business. You can’t “direct” empowerment programs. Directed empowerment programs are flawed because they are predicated on this assumption: I have the authority and ability to empower you (and you don’t). Fundamentally, that’s disempowering. This internal contradiction dooms these initiatives. We say “empowerment” but do it in a way that is disempowering. The practice outweighs the rhetoric.

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Right or wrong, I was committed to doing whatever I thought was best for Santa Fe, the Navy, and the nation without worrying about the repercussions. I called this the paradox of “caring but not caring”—that is, caring intimately about your subordinates and the organization but caring little about the organizational consequences to yourself.

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I decided we would try the route of talking ourselves into a new way of thinking. We called it the “three-name rule” and this is how it worked: When any member of the crew saw a visitor on our boat (and we were specifically thinking about the following week, when Commodore Kenny and his staff were coming down for the inspection), he was to greet the visitor using three names—the visitor’s name, his own name, and the ship’s name. For example, “Good morning, Commodore Kenny, my name is Petty Officer Jones, welcome aboard Santa Fe.” On the pier at quarters the next day, I started explaining the three-name rule to the crew. Almost immediately I stopped; as was normal, the crew stood in formation behind the officers and chiefs and I knew that most of those in the back couldn’t hear what I was saying. I waved my arms and shouted, “Gather round.” It wasn’t in the book of commands, but everyone knew what I wanted. The men moved forward. Now I was in a tight and intimate huddle of a hundred men. It wasn’t something General Patton would have been proud of, but it definitely seemed better. The officers and chiefs were still in front, but because I interacted with that group frequently, I sent them to the back. From that moment on, at quarters the crew would gather around me and the khakis (officers and chiefs) would stand in back. I went on to tell the crew what we wanted going forward. We had seven days to finish putting the boat back together and head to sea. We had torpedoes to prepare, maintenance to complete, repairs to finish, charts to prepare, stores to load, and a number of other things to accomplish. So, I resisted giving a big lecture about the reasons why we wanted to use the three-name rule and about respecting their time and their need to get back to work. Instead, I just explained the rule and acted it out.

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When you’re trying to change employees’ behaviors, you have basically two approaches to choose from: change your own thinking and hope this leads to new behavior, or change your behavior and hope this leads to new thinking. On board Santa Fe, the officers and I did the latter, acting our way to new thinking. We didn’t have time to change thinking and let that percolate and ultimately change people’s actions; we just needed to change the behavior. Frankly, I didn’t care whether people thought differently at some point—and they eventually did—so long as they behaved in certain ways. I think there were likely some sailors who never understood what we were trying to do and resisted the change to leader-leader, but they behaved as if they believed.

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SHORT, EARLY CONVERSATIONS is a mechanism for CONTROL. It is a mechanism for control because the conversations did not consist of me telling them what to do. They were opportunities for the crew to get early feedback on how they were tackling problems. This allowed them to retain control of the solution. These early, quick discussions also provided clarity to the crew about what we wanted to accomplish. Many lasted only thirty seconds, but they saved hours of time. A commanding officer's attention is no doubt highly valuable time for the organization, and the hierarchy was supposed to protect that time. Inefficiencies in my time were highly visible, especially to me. Less visible, however, were the inefficiencies of all the people throughout the organization. In my organization, even accounting for the difference in the value of our time, those inefficiencies overwhelmingly outweighed whatever efficiency I was getting with my time as captain.

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What can you do in your organization to add "a little rudder far from the rocks" to prevent needing "a lot of rudder next to the rocks"?

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On Santa Fe, doing well on inspections was going to be the natural outcome of being excellent, not the goal. Operational and tactical excellence and preparedness for service to the country were what mattered. If we were excellent and prepared, the drills and inspections would take care of themselves.

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This incident brought to mind being chided as an OOD on my first submarine, the USS Sunfish, when I asked the captain for permission. "Just tell me what you are going to do!" he exclaimed. Thereafter, I started saying, "Captain, I intend to . . ." and he encouraged it. That's what we decided to do on Santa Fe. It wasn't just when you were on watch, and it wasn't just for officers. It started filtering through the crew and permeating the way we did business. For my part, I would avoid giving orders. Officers would state their intentions with "I intend to . . ." and I would say, "Very well." Then each man would execute his plan. Mechanism: Use "I Intend to . . ." to Turn Passive Followers into Active Leaders "I INTEND TO . . ." was an incredibly powerful mechanism for CONTROL. Although it may seem like a minor trick of language, we found that it profoundly shifted ownership of the plan to the officers. "I intend to . . ." didn't take long to catch on. The officers and crew loved it. I was the one who had a problem with it, ironically. I was worried that someone would say "I intend to . . ." when I was sleeping, and I would not be fully informed or understand what was happening. So, we made a rule that "I intend to . . ." only applied when I was awake. Other than that, it applied to everything.

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The Power of Words The key to your team becoming more proactive rests in the language subordinates and superiors use. Here is a short list of "disempowered phrases" that passive followers use: Request permission to . . . I would like to . . . What should I do about . . . Do you think we should . . . Could we . . . Here is a short list of "empowered phrases" that active doers use: I intend to . . . I plan on . . . I will . . . We will . . . Interested

readers will want to check out Stephen Covey's *The 8th Habit* for more ideas about the value of empowering language. Then we extended the concept. Frequently, I wouldn't just say, "Very well." There would be too many unanswered questions about the safety and appropriateness of the proposed event, so I found myself asking a bunch of questions. One day I caught myself, and instead of asking the questions I had in mind, I asked the OOD what he thought I was thinking about his "I intend to submerge." "Well, Captain, I think you are wondering if it's safe and appropriate to submerge." "Correct. So why don't you just tell me why you think it is safe and appropriate to submerge. All I'll need to say is 'Very well.'" Thereafter, the goal for the officers would be to give me a sufficiently complete report so that all I had to say was a simple approval. Initially, they would provide some information, but not all. Most of the time, however, they had the answers; they just hadn't vocalized them. Eventually, the officers outlined their complete thought processes and rationale for what they were about to do. The benefit from this simple extension was that it caused them to think at the next higher level. The OODs needed to think like the captain, and so on down the chain of command. In effect, by articulating their intentions, the officers and crew were acting their way into the next higher level of command. We had no need of leadership development programs; the way we ran the ship was the leadership development program. One of the mechanisms I credit for the significantly disproportionate number of promotions that have been issued among Santa Fe's officers and crew in the past decade was our "I intend to . . ." procedure.

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Emergency situations required snap decision making and clear orders. There's no time for a big discussion. Yet, the vast majority of situations do not require immediate decisions. You have time to let the team chew on it, but we still apply the crisis model of issuing rapid-fire orders. RESIST THE URGE TO PROVIDE SOLUTIONS is a mechanism for CONTROL. When you follow the leader-leader model, you must take time to let others react to the situation as well. You have to create a space for open decision by the entire team, even if that space is only a few minutes, or a few seconds, long. This is harder than in the leader-follower approach because it requires you to anticipate decisions and alert your team to the need for an upcoming one. In a top-down hierarchy, subordinates don't need to be thinking ahead because the boss will make a decision when needed.

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ELIMINATING TOP-DOWN MONITORING SYSTEMS is a mechanism for CONTROL. Sure, I was worried that a lot of stuff would slip through the cracks and Santa Fe would get a reputation for not getting the work done, but that didn't happen. I won't say that we never again received a message zinging us for not reporting something, but they were easily remedied and not that important. What was incredibly powerful was the idea that everyone was responsible for their own performance and the performance of their departments; that we weren't going to spend a lot of effort telling them what to do.

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Supervisors frequently bemoan the "lack of ownership" in their employees. When I observe what they do and what practices they have in their organization, I can see how they defeat any attempt to build ownership. Worse, if they've voiced their frustrations out loud, their employees perceive them as hypocritical and they lose credibility. Don't preach and hope for ownership; implement mechanisms that actually give ownership. Eliminating the tickler did that for us. Eliminating top-down monitoring systems will do it for you. I'm not

talking about eliminating data collection and measuring processes that simply report conditions without judgment. Those are important as they “make the invisible visible.” What you want to avoid are the systems whereby senior personnel are determining what junior personnel should be doing.

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We also discussed what had happened on the bridge as we approached Pearl Harbor. Here’s what I wish Dave had been saying: “Captain, the navigator has been marking the turns early. I am planning on waiting five seconds, then ordering the turn,” or “I’m seeing the current running past this buoy pretty strongly and I’m going to turn early because of it.” Now the captain can let the scene play out. The OOD retains control of his job, his initiative; he learns more and becomes a more effective officer. He’s driving the submarine! He loves his job and stays in the Navy. We called this “thinking out loud.” We worked hard on this issue of communication. It was for everyone. I would think out loud when I’d say, in general, here’s where we need to be, and here’s why. They would think out loud with worries, concerns, and thoughts. It’s not what we picture when we think of the movie image of the charismatic and confident leader, but it creates a much more resilient system. Later, even though Santa Fe was performing at the top of the fleet, officers steeped in the leader-follower mind-set would criticize what they viewed as the informal communications on Santa Fe. If you limit all discussion to crisp orders and eliminate all contextual discussion, you get a pretty quiet control room. That was viewed as good. We cultivated the opposite approach and encouraged a constant buzz of discussions among the watch officers and crew. By monitoring that level of buzz, more than the actual content, I got a good gauge of how well the ship was running and whether everyone was sharing information.

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THINK OUT LOUD is a mechanism for CONTROL because when I heard what my watch officers were thinking, it made it much easier for me to keep my mouth shut and let them execute their plans. It was generally when they were quiet and I didn’t know what they would do next that I was tempted to step in. Thinking out loud is essential for making the leap from leader-follower to leader-leader. Later, when I was the head of the tactical inspection team for two years, I rode most of the submarines in the Pacific. I can tell you that forward or aft, attack submarine or ballistic missile submarine, there is a tremendous reluctance for the junior officers to tell their superiors anything other than 100 percent certified information. There’s no room in our military language and no pictures in our heads for the kinds of context-rich conversations that are critical to good team performance. We aren’t comfortable talking about hunches or gut feelings or anything with probabilities attached to it. Santa Fe was no exception. There was a strong cultural bias against thinking out loud. In the hierarchical structure I inherited, there wasn’t much need for it, and the language for thinking out loud hadn’t been exercised. We worked hard to ingrain this informal yet informative manner of speaking into the crew, and then along came a new sailor straight from school, and he wouldn’t want to say anything. I often wondered why we aren’t naturally learning the most effective way to communicate as a team. We say submarining is a team sport, but in practice it often amounts to a bunch of individuals, each working in his own shell, rather than a rich collaboration. So, in order to make the fewest mistakes when reporting on things, we say as little as possible. This is a problem throughout the submarine force, and we worked hard to encourage the entire crew to say what they saw, thought, believed, were skeptical about, feared, worried about, and hoped for the future. In other words, all the things that don’t show up in the Interior Communications Manual. We realized we didn’t even have a language with which to express uncertainty and we needed to build that. THINK OUT LOUD also works

as a mechanism for ORGANIZATIONAL CLARITY. If all you need your people to do is follow orders, it isn't important that they understand what you are trying to accomplish. But we operate in a highly complex world, with the vagaries of an ever-changing environment and the opposition of a diligent and patient enemy. It's not enough to put a finger on the chart and hope things come out well. When I, as the captain, would "think out loud," I was in essence imparting important context and experience to my subordinates. I was also modeling that lack of certainty is strength and certainty is arrogance.

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Later on in my command, Santa Fe had a material inspection by a group of officers from the Board of Inspection and Survey (INSURV). Their reports carry significant weight and expose the submarine force to "big Navy" observers. Officers have lost their commands over bad INSURV inspections. When the INSURV team reported to our submarine, I handed them a list of known deficiencies. These were things that were so fundamental to the design or so difficult to repair that we had been unsuccessful. By getting them documented in the INSURV report, we ensured that the Navy would apply resources to fixing the problems, thus making all submarines more effective warships. Embrace the inspectors turned out to be an incredibly powerful vehicle for learning. Whenever an inspection team was on board, I would hear crew members saying things like, "I've been having a problem with this. What have you seen other ships do to solve it?" Most inspection teams found this attitude remarkable. As a result, Santa Fe was getting superior grades on inspections. Over time our sailors learned a lot and became incredibly good at their jobs; they also continued to evince a hunger for learning.

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What is the cost of being open about problems in your organization and what are the benefits?

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The petty officer involved was a well-intentioned sailor who'd never been in trouble. I was sympathetic to the crew, who had worked incredibly hard over the past two weeks to get the ship under way, conduct our training, do the inspection, and accommodate all the changes. This was something I would wrestle with my entire command tour—balancing the courage to hold people accountable for their actions with my compassion for their honest efforts. We would need to understand what had happened, and I didn't want to take the easy way out and blame the petty officer who had moved the tag in error.

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We had been taking actions that pushed authority down the chain of command, that empowered the officers, chiefs, and crew, but the insight that came to me was that as authority is delegated, technical knowledge at all levels takes on a greater importance. There is an extra burden for technical competence. If all you need to do is what you are told, then you don't need to understand your craft. However, as your ability to make decisions increases, then you need intimate technical knowledge on which to base those decisions. The laws of nature govern a submarine, and those laws are uncaring. With physics, you don't have problems; you only have the consequences of your actions. They become problems when we decide that what happened wasn't what we wanted to happen.

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No matter what we were doing, we would figure out how to extract the maximum learning from that event. Our philosophy was that we just didn't have time to add a bunch of lectures, but the submarine gave us hundreds of opportunities a day to learn. Once we started looking for those learning opportunities, we found them everywhere.

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Why would we need to go to combat? We would go to combat if called upon by our country to defend the Constitution of the United States. Why is that important? The personal liberty, well-being, and economic prosperity we enjoy in the United States are unique throughout the history of mankind. Man's life has generally been short, hard, and brutish. The democratic system we have and the importance of individual rights specified by the Constitution are the reasons for our emotional and physical prosperity. It's an important document, worthy of being defended. You are not alone in deciding this, as many have died defending the Constitution before you.

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We decided to do away with briefs. From that point on we would do certifications. A certification is different from a brief in that during a certification, the person in charge of his team asks them questions. This could be the Chief in Charge—as in the case I'm recounting—or a lead surgeon prior to an operation. At the end of the certification, a decision is made whether or not the team is ready to perform the upcoming operation. If the team has not adequately demonstrated the necessary knowledge during the certification, the operation should be postponed.

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Certifications shift the onus of preparation onto the participants. All participants are active. The change from passive briefs to active certification changed the crew's behavior. We found that when people know they will be asked questions they study their responsibilities ahead of time. This increases the intellectual involvement of the crew significantly. People are thinking about what they will be required to do and independently study for it.

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Stop Briefing and Start Certifying in Your Business Whenever you have focused team events, whether they are surgical procedures or sales pitches, think about the preparation. Are people coming to "be briefed" or are they ready to present their portion of the event? In organizations where there are a lot of briefings, it will take extra work initially to shift the mind-set, but you could start with something as simple as read-ahead or think-ahead assignments that people are accountable for accomplishing.

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Certification is also a decision point. It is possible to fail a certification. Individuals can reveal that they aren't prepared to take part in an action because of their lack of knowledge or understanding. Otherwise, it's just a

brief. “Don’t brief, certify” became another example where we basically did the opposite of what we were supposed to. Later on, we had fun when inspectors came to the ship and said they wanted to observe the brief prior to an evolution (like submerging) and I’d tell them we didn’t do any briefings. A briefing was not required. What was required was that we operate the submarine safely and according to the procedures. And our certifications did this better than any briefing. Don’t brief, certify also became quite powerful because instead of one person studying an evolution and briefing it to the watch team, every crew member became responsible for knowing his job. It was a mechanism that forced intellectual engagement at every level in the crew. When you walked around the boat, you’d see guys studying. Studying! On their own! But only if management did their part. Some people call this ownership. A current management term is employee engagement. An effective survey question to ask your employees is how many minutes a week they spend learning on their own, not mandated, not directed. Typically it’s a small number. An organizational measure of improving health would be to increase that number. If you want engaged teams, don’t brief, certify!

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Again, I resigned myself to the fact that my new approach to leadership wasn’t working. It was too hard, and if the chiefs didn’t get it, how could we be successful? I considered going back to barking orders and demanding rigid compliance. Upon reflection, that wasn’t the leader I wanted to be, and I was convinced that my original course was right: giving people authority, paired with responsibility and the tools to do the job, would pay off in the end. I resisted this urge and decided we had to stay the course.

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The behavior of the chiefs was totally baffling to me. After two months under my command, how could they not get what we were trying to do? I’d given them much greater authority with Chiefs in Charge; they’d helped write the guiding principles; they’d heard me talk a hundred times about how we were going to run things on Santa Fe. It seemed as if there were some evil force that was pushing against us and kept people in the same old way of thinking. What I realized, however, is the need for a relentless, consistent repetition of the message. **CONTINUALLY AND CONSISTENTLY REPEAT THE MESSAGE** is a mechanism for **COMPETENCE**. Repeat the same message day after day, meeting after meeting, event after event. Sounds redundant, repetitive, and boring. But what’s the alternative? Changing the message? That results in confusion and a lack of direction. I didn’t realize the degree to which old habits die hard, even when people are emotionally on board with the change.

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In order to help me remember this and keep my cool, I had a poster made. I got the idea from an article titled “It’s a Dog’s Life,” which I’d read in the November 1995 issue of Fast Company. It profiled VeriFone’s then-CEO Hatim Tyabji. In the poster, I am standing in front of my dog Barclay saying “Sit.” The dog was standing. The first eight frames were identical. “Sit, sit, sit,” etc. No recriminations, no admonishments, just “sit.” In the ninth and last frame, Barclay is sitting and the caption is “Good dog.” I hung this on the back of my stateroom door. Since my door was open most of the time, visitors didn’t see it, but I would.

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This was another example of where the procedure had become the master and not the servant. The motivation had shifted from putting the fire out to following the procedure. As a result, we got the crazy behavior observed on the mess deck of Santa Fe. Yet another problem was underlying and distorting the crew's behavior. There was no incentive for the crew to put the simulated fire out early. Drill guides at the time foretold a prescriptive set of events. They weren't connected in any way to the crew's response. For instance, even if the crew immediately brought a portable extinguisher the fire would grow. Even if the crew arrived with a pressurized fire hose in less than two minutes and applied water to the base of the fire—using appropriate firefighting techniques, wearing the right equipment and hard-soled shoes—the fire would spread more. It would require multiple hoses and a sustained attack to douse the fire. The submarine would fill with smoke and we would need to go to periscope depth and ventilate. It was a one-hour drill. The thinking behind the guides was that the crew needed to be drilled on and prepared for all possible outcomes. We changed all that.

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As more decision-making authority is pushed down the chain of command, it becomes increasingly important that everyone throughout the organization understands what the organization is about. This is called clarity, and it is the second supporting leg—along with competence—that is needed in order to distribute control. Clarity means people at all levels of an organization clearly and completely understand what the organization is about. This is needed because people in the organization make decisions against a set of criteria that includes what the organization is trying to accomplish. If clarity of purpose is misunderstood, then the criteria by which a decision is made will be skewed, and suboptimal decisions will be made.

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I worked hard to overcome my natural intolerance of inadequacies and my blunt speaking, but I didn't always succeed. I found, over time, that when I blurted out criticism people didn't mind. They didn't take it personally because they knew that two weeks previously I had been doing everything possible to get them promoted.

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“Commander Marquet, could you come see me?” I was being summoned for counseling. Command Leadership School had been a welcome two-week sabbatical during the yearlong PCO training. There were readings, discussions, and a couple of exercises. One of the exercises had been for everyone to write the guiding principles for their command to implement upon their arrival. I turned in a blank piece of paper. “Are you aware that you turned in a blank sheet?” “Yes sir, I am.” “Well, don't you think that you as the commander have an obligation to create a vision for your command?” It was more of a statement than a question. “No, I feel that my job as the commander is to tap into the existing energy of the command, discover the strengths, and remove barriers to further progress.” The class supervisor looked at me as if I had three heads, but I knew he wasn't going to fail me.

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On the first night, as we were passing the lights of Singapore to our starboard, I noticed a dim light moving across us. While I was trying to figure out what it meant, Rick Panlilio, the OOD, shouted, “All back emergency, right hard rudder!” Immediately the ship started shuddering as the throttleman back in maneuvering shut the ahead throttles and rapidly opened the astern throttles, reversing the main engines and Santa Fe’s screw. The light was a dimly lit tugboat, and the tug was on one side of our path and its tow on the other. We barely stopped short of the towline between the tug and the barge. I was shaken. I came down off the bridge and went directly to maneuvering to applaud the efforts of the engineering team. The petty officer who had “pushed the red tag” aside in the shore power incident was the throttleman. He had spared us from a collision. It was 0515 and the watch team was about to get relieved. I grabbed YN1 Scott Dillon, who maintained the supply of awards, and asked him to get me a Navy Achievement Medal. With it, I returned to the crew’s mess and pinned it on the throttleman while he and the off-going watch team ate breakfast. I spoke words of appreciation and professionalism. Later, I would formally report his exemplary service, but the immediacy of the recognition was important.

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We had started a new practice. Now, I wanted to build on the success of that practice. I decided that one key supervisor a day, rotating among the XO, COB, Weps, Nav, Eng, and Suppo, would have an hour-long mentoring session with me. The rule for the mentoring meeting was that we could talk only about long-term issues, and primarily people issues. All business concerning a leaking valve or failed circuit card had to occur outside these meetings. During the first set of discussions, we adapted a useful technique for long-term focus and planning. I asked each of them to write their end-of-tour awards. Since these supervisors are assigned to the submarine for three years, this particular exercise made them look that far into the future. If someone was having trouble visualizing that far out I asked him to write his performance evaluation for the next year. Lieutenant Commander Bill Greene would be transferring in a few months, but Lieutenant Commander Tom Stanley, Lieutenant Dave Adams, and Lieutenant Commander Rick Panlilio weren’t leaving for another two years. I wanted this to be a serious exercise; I wouldn’t let them turn in a quick response. I assigned it as homework between two mentoring sessions a week apart. Then we would look at the write-up together.

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Frequently, we would start off by writing about achieving certain levels of qualification, as in “qualify for command,” or having general goals for their team, such as “have my department do better in procedural compliance.” Objectives like these are too vague and hard to quantify, so we would work to write the objective in measurable ways. We’d arrive at the specifics by asking a question such as: “How would you know if procedural compliance was improved?” “We’d have fewer critiques.” “Okay. How many fewer? How many did you have last year?” “Don’t know, didn’t count.” In this way, we generated verifiable measures. And in the process, we often learned that we hadn’t been keeping track of the appropriate data, and we’d have to start doing so.

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Customarily, selection boards read performance evaluations that are filled with phrases like “significantly improved procedural compliance,” which are basically meaningless. The evaluations of the officers on Santa Fe, on the other hand, would report “reduced critiques by 43 percent, reduced percent of the crew smoking by 12 percent, increased on-time performance by 31 percent,” and so on. I believe the ability to specifically quantify accomplishments, in addition to the focus this exercise required of the officers and the overall reputation of the ship, went a long way toward allowing us to boast disproportionately high selection rates. During my last year in command, 2001, we had ten men eligible to be promoted from first class petty officer to chief petty officer. We had an amazing 90 percent selection rate, promoting nine chiefs. In one day the number of chiefs almost doubled (and then they transferred to other boats). It was gratifying to see YN1 Scott Dillon, whom I met as a second class petty officer when I reported on board, make chief. Using hard data was an effective way of proving we had achieved the end we had in mind.

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I entered the control room, where things were strangely calm. Surely my guys knew that if we moved out of position it would make it much harder for us to find the SEALs and for them to find us. The OOD on the bridge had already ordered “Ahead one third.” I looked at the digital chart. A little arrow indicated our direction of motion, and it was pointing slightly toward the beach. I thought, “We don’t want to go ahead, we need to back out.” So I shouted out, “That’s wrong. We need to back.” (This meant order a backing bell.) In the darkness, we recognized each other’s voices. Sled Dog was standing quartermaster. There was a pause and silence for half a second, then he said frankly, “No, Captain, you’re wrong.” It stunned me, and I shut up and just started looking at the indications in the control room, including the compass repeaters showing the heading of the ship. I thought about what it takes for a young sailor to say, “Captain, you’re wrong.” It dawned on me. The bow was pointing away from land and we were being set astern. That was what the arrow on the digital chart was showing. And I remembered that the watch team had planned it this way, with the bow out, in case we needed to make a quick getaway. The small arrow shrank and grew in the direction away from land. The OOD ordered all stop. We’d moved one hundred yards, but that was all it took to reach deeper water. Moments later we saw the Zodiacs. Had the men followed my order, we would have gone in the wrong direction; we might have missed them.

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Why had the retention numbers gone up so much? Well, there were a number of reasons, but one of the key ones was that the junior enlisted men used to look to see what their chiefs did to get a sense of whether they wanted to stick around and have that job. The old-school chiefs didn’t have a particularly hard life, emphasizing the privilege of rank over obligation, but it wasn’t relevant. They weren’t in charge of anything. With the concept of Chiefs in Charge, the chiefs were working twice as hard. They needed to be out and about, being in charge of evolutions and ensuring that things went properly. They were the ones standing in front of the CO explaining why things hadn’t gone as well as they should have. Yet, their jobs now mattered and the decisions they made—they actually had decisions to make—affected the lives of 135 sailors and the combat effectiveness of a \$2 billion warship. This was a job people could sign up for. Two junior officers withdrew their resignation requests. Santa Fe was awarded the Arleigh Burke Fleet Trophy. This award is given to the submarine, ship, or aircraft squadron having achieved the greatest improvement in battle efficiency during the calendar year. I attribute this to the leader-leader structure we developed on board Santa Fe.

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Instead of focusing on intimate review of the work, I focused on intimate review of the people. Instead of requiring more reports and more inspection points, I required fewer. Instead of more “leadership” resulting in more “followership,” I practiced less leadership, resulting in more leadership at every level of the command.

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DON'T DO THIS! DO THIS! Leader-follower Leader-leader Take control Give control Give orders Avoid giving orders When you give orders, be confident, unambiguous, and resolute When you do give orders, leave room for questioning Brief Certify Have meetings Have conversations Have a mentor-mentee program Have a mentor-mentor program Focus on technology Focus on people Think short-term Think long-term Want to be missed after you depart Want not to be missed after you depart Have high-repetition, low-quality training Have low-repetition, high-quality training Limit communications to terse, succinct, formal orders Augment orders with rich, contextual, informal communications Be questioning Be curious Make inefficient processes efficient Eliminate entire steps and processes that don't add value Increase monitoring and inspection points Reduce monitoring and inspection points Protect information Pass information

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Instituting the Leader-Leader Model The core of the leader-leader model is giving employees control over what they work on and how they work. It means letting them make meaningful decisions. The two enabling pillars are competence and clarity.

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Rainier had a schedule to maintain; we couldn't delay long. If we didn't get surfaced in a few minutes, it wouldn't be able to stay around to help us. The crew sprang into action, to which I gave my immediate assent. From the sonar supervisor: “OOD, I intend to retrieve the towed array in preparation for surfacing. The sonar supervisor is the Chief in Charge.” Very well. From the OOD: “Captain, I intend to prepare to surface.” Very well. From the COB: “I intend to muster the small boat handling party in the crew's mess. I intend to break rig for dive, drain, and open the forward escape trunk lower hatch. COB is Chief in Charge.” Very well. From our corpsman, Doc Hill: “I intend to muster selected personnel for dental checkups in the crew's mess, conducting watch reliefs as necessary.” Very well. From YN1 Scott Dillon: “Captain, I intend to canvass the crew for outgoing mail and transfer it to Rainier.” Very well. From the supply officer: “Captain, I intend to transfer the hydraulic oil from Rainier.” Very well. We surfaced for a brief stop for personnel (BSP). Meantime, Rainier lowered a small boat, loaded it, and sent it our way. The small boat they used was called a rigid hull inflatable boat (RHIB). We needed men topside and to open the main deck hatch to bring the supplies on board. Myriad various activities needed to happen quickly and in a synchronized manner. Here's where the training paid off—where everything we'd done paid off. There's no way I would have been able to pull off a plan for conducting this kind of operation and direct it piece by piece. You could call it speed of response, or reducing the sense-act delay inherent in organizations, or adaptability to change. Whatever you call it, the crew's performance allowed us to continue being a submarine in defense of the country rather than limping into port for a fill-up.

Emancipate Empowerment is a necessary step because we've been accustomed to disempowerment. Empowerment is needed to undo all those top-down, do-what-you're-told, be-a-team-player messages that result from our leader-follower model. But empowerment isn't enough in a couple of ways. First, empowerment by itself is not a complete leadership structure. Empowerment does not work without the attributes of competence and clarity. Second, empowerment still results from and is a manifestation of a top-down structure. At its core is the belief that the leader "empowers" the followers, that the leader has the power and ability to empower the followers. We need more than that because empowerment within a leader-follower structure is a modest compensation and a voice lost compared with the overwhelming signal that "you are a follower." It is a confusing signal. What we need is release, or emancipation. Emancipation is fundamentally different from empowerment. With emancipation we are recognizing the inherent genius, energy, and creativity in all people, and allowing those talents to emerge. We realize that we don't have the power to give these talents to others, or "empower" them to use them, only the power to prevent them from coming out. Emancipation results when teams have been given decision-making control and have the additional characteristics of competence and clarity. You know you have an emancipated team when you no longer need to empower them. Indeed, you no longer have the ability to empower them because they are not relying on you as their source of power.

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