

Your Leadership Traits:

An Interview with Mike Abrashoff

By Suzanne Healy

APPA 2009: Focusing on the Critical Few has been designed to offer perspectives on leadership and management from many experts in various walks of life. During the program one such individual speaking to us in Vancouver is Captain Mike Abrashoff, former Commander of the USS *Benfold* and author of *It's Your Ship: The No-Nonsense Guide to Leadership*. Captain Abrashoff is a native Pennsylvanian and a Naval Academy alumnus of the Class of 1982.

His most recent book, *It's Your Ship*, explores changing the culture or beliefs systems within an organization, from obedience to performance, and shows how managers will be rewarded as will the organization with marked improvement of productivity. In a difficult economic time, coupled with our need to reinforce the message that our staffs are our greatest resources, *It's Your Ship* shows how leaders who are good listeners incorporate the ideas from their employees to make procedural improvements that are team created and accepted.



Recently we had the pleasure of sitting down with Captain Abrashoff to talk about what drives him, who has influenced him, and where he sees future challenges for today's leaders.

1. What influence has most affected your leadership style?

Everyone learns differently – some learn via text, some learn experientially, and others still have another way of gaining knowledge. My learning style is experiential. When you have an outstanding role model you can work to generate the type of results that you desire. It is important to remember that role models may come into your life later as did mine. I learned that blending leadership with technical expertise is the best balance. Always remember to treat people with respect and this will ensure the understanding that each person has just as much stake in the matter at hand.

2. Who has inspired you? Why?

My number one role model was [former Secretary of Defense] William Perry. I saw him as a great leader who was able to balance strong leadership traits and strong technical competency. I learned from him to lead with humility. He would treat everyone he came in contact with, from the custodian to the top level of the Naval Academy, with the same level of respect. Instilling that everyone has value. I learned from him that one should lead with excellence without arrogance. It is these styles of leadership that I aspired to when I was on the ship and now in my everyday life and business.

3. What challenges do you see future leaders being faced with in the next five years?

The biggest challenge I see for future leaders is to ensure that they stay safe. When I was on the ship I heard that the crew didn't feel safe. As our mission was to protect others, we had to instill in the crew that they in fact were safe too – again making sure that they had a stake in the task at hand.

In today's global economy, with transition always occurring, change is happening with much more frequency and with greater violence. Leaders need to foster the climate of safety within their organizations. Work to develop an attitude of embracing the challenges that are coming and work to solve them so they are in your favor. Ready yourself to anticipate the change required and develop the essence of managing and leading in anticipation of what the future holds. Don't just let it happen to you.


4. What advice do you have for brand new leaders and managers that can get them started off on the right foot?

Before you can lead you must ensure that your level of technical expertise is to the level of competency of those that you will be managing or leading. You have to be able to prove that your level of technical knowledge is high in order to earn the respect of your people. With their earned respect and an understanding that you are technically competent, then you can lead toward a great outcome in any situation.

The challenge will always be how to earn the respect of many different individuals at all levels as you grow. Learn to develop the concept that everyone needs to respect the team effort, as it will be this that leads to victory. Remember that balance between technical abilities and strong leadership qualities and behaviors – it's all about balance.

5. What's the best advice you have ever been given?

The best advice I was given was to remember to do your job, do your boss' job, make your boss look good as you support their work, and everyone will be successful.

The message is clear – empowerment of staff is critical for the successful advancement of any organization. However, the critical lesson to be learned is to lead with a balanced approach of humility and respect – it will take you a long way in your leadership career. 

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