

Getting to Yes: Lessons in Grassroots Leadership

As a bonus preview of the SMPS 2002 National Marketing Conference to be held in Chicago on July 28–31, J. Rossi penned some thoughts she gleaned from a conversation with conference keynote D. Michael Abrashoff, who will speak on Tuesday, July 30, at 8:00 a.m.

What can we in the business world learn from a model of leadership developed by the commander of a naval ship? I asked myself that question before I heard D. Michael Abrashoff, former Commander of the USS Benfold, a \$1 billion warship that is one of the U.S. Navy's most modern, sophisticated, and lethal fighting machines, speak at a recent IDRC Conference in Seattle. I quickly found the answer.

Michael Abrashoff is a charismatic speaker. He is not your ordinary business guru. He has lived what he teaches. I left his session committed to practicing the leadership he espouses and curious about the man behind the ideas. I had the opportunity to speak with Abrashoff recently and ask him a number of questions about his grassroots leadership approach and about himself.

Some background first: D. Michael Abrashoff was commander of the USS Benfold when it was deployed in the Persian Gulf in support of contingency operations with Iraq. Abrashoff's leadership formula produced benefits that were both financial and operational. In 1998, the Benfold returned \$600,000 of its \$2.4 million maintenance budget and \$800,000 of its \$3 million repair budget back to the Navy's top line.

At the same time, the Benfold's performance set new standards. By one measure, the crew completed the Navy's redeployment training cycle in record time. What normally requires 22 days in port and 30 days under way took the Benfold's crew five days in port and 14 days under way to complete—and earned it coveted shore leave. A critical measure of performance for a ship is retention rate. Under Abrashoff's command, the Benfold's rate was off the charts. An average of 54 percent of sailors remained in the navy after their second tour of duty. One hundred percent of the Benfold's career sailors signed on for an additional tour while Abrashoff was in command. Under his command, the ship won the prestigious Spokane Trophy for having the

best combat readiness in the fleet—the first time in over 10 years that a ship of its class received that honor. Among Abrashoff's many awards are the Defense Superior Service Medal and six Battle "E" Awards for shipboard excellence.

When he speaks to us in July, Abrashoff will explain how he was able to defy 225 years of naval tradition in his quest to engage sailors in their work, increase their performance, and keep them around for their entire tours of duty. He will also share his belief that innovative practices combined with true empowerment produce phenomenal results.

Abrashoff's message is not just about the military. It is universal. It crosses gender, race, and organizations. And it can be used personally as well as professionally. Excerpts from our recent conversation follow.

***“Great leaders are made
and not born.”***

J. Rossi (JR): What have you been doing since you left the navy?

D. Michael Abrashoff (DMA): Writing a book. It's entitled *It's Your Ship* and is due to be released May 1. In it, I focus on what I believe to be the key to success in any organization. An organization thrives when an environment is created in which every employee feels like they own the ship. Everyone wants to win. They want to be on the best team. They want to see their organization succeed. I always got the best results when I focused on the people in the organization, when I listened to them, when I created an environment that would permit their talents and creativity to shine. In order to do that, I had to first look inside to determine if I had created an environment where success was possible. Did I allow people to create goals, provide the resources to get the job done, and give the proper training to enable excellent performance?

JR: What about the navy culture inspired you to the leadership style you developed?

DMA: The good thing about the navy culture is 100 percent accountability and responsibility for commanding officers of ships. You can't blame anyone else. The navy instills a strong sense of accountability. And that's missing from society in general. The navy's core values—honor, courage, and commitment—play a significant role in who I am and my thinking. I feel personally that, if you are going to do something, you should do it right. As I stood on the deck of the Benfold, I had a strong sense of Edward Benfold, a Petty Officer 3rd Class, who was killed in action during the Korean War, looking down and approving.

JR: What was the environment like in which you were raised?

DMA: I was number six of seven kids. My mother was a schoolteacher, my father a social worker. We didn't have much money, but we didn't know we were poor. Everyone always got what he/she needed. I was part of a rambunctious household.

JR: What influence most affected your leadership style?

DMA: Three major events shaped me. First, on August 3, 1990, I was on a ship in the Middle East when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. At 4:30 a.m. I was in the ship's combat information center and saw 21 unknown fighter planes approaching on my radar screen. Heart beating fast, my thoughts were that the ship wasn't as ready for an attack as it should be. And that this may be it. We were about to open fire when we discovered the planes belonged to the Kuwaiti Air Force. After my pulse calmed and I had time to think, I realized the ship wasn't as prepared as it should be for an attack.

Second, on June 25, 1996, a terrorist truck bomb exploded outside Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and I saw where 19 airmen were killed. I realized then that the nature of our business was changing and that I had better be able to change with it.

And then, when I took command of the USS Benfold, I saw my predecessor get less than a warm send-off. In fact, the sailors cheered derisively when he left. Those three events caused me to reflect and realize I wasn't as good a leader as I thought I was and I was going to have to continuously change and improve as my business conditions are constantly changing. Either evolve or die.



D. Michael Abrashoff will address the 2002 National Marketing Conference on July 30.

JR: Who has influenced/inspired you?

DMA: Dr. William J. Perry, who was Secretary of Defense. I served as his military assistant. I learned by watching his interactions with others and myself how powerful a shadow a true leader casts and started wondering if I could possibly have that same influence on my crew. To my total astonishment, I did. But they were not responding to charisma, just as I was not responding to his charisma. They were responding to my authenticity of honestly trying to create the best organization and make their interests a priority. That's the other lesson I learned. Great leaders are made and not born.

JR: What do you think American business is going to face in the next five years that it's not ready to face?

DMA: In the wake of Enron, employees are going to be much more demanding of senior management. Senior leadership is going to have to work hard to re-build bonds of trust with their people. The value a company has is going to be measured in human capital as much as equipment and services. It's the people who are going to give companies competitive advantage.

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we're doing around the world are anchored to transportation centers. What better way to cut down on energy dependence on Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing countries than to develop very efficient ways to get people back and forth? I once did a study showing how, if we made the World Trade Center Twin Towers 10-story buildings, they would cover 36 acres. How much driving would we have to do to get from place to place? We would have the most energy-inefficient set of buildings. Plus it would be a very inhuman kind of city.

We can design tall buildings to be safer; we've already made them safer from the more likely threat of car bombings. There are some measures that could help with safety and improving evacuation from towers—reinforced concrete cores, dedicated firemen elevators, fireproofed air and communication systems, as well as refuge areas throughout the building.

In China, every 13th floor is a fireproofed, refuge floor. In other countries, refuge areas are located in the core with fireproofed corridors leading into fire stairs. There are ways we have to re-think fire safety. I'm not saying we do all these things, but we need to consider them all.

What should happen to the Ground Zero site? I realize a lot of people have agendas, protecting their interests, getting their money back, insurance claims. It'll probably take a few years to resolve. I think instead of rushing to re-build, we should be very patient and study it carefully. What was apparent even before Sept 11th and more so since is that financial people are moving out of the World Trade/Wall Street area. They're moving to mid-town, to Connecticut, to Pennsylvania. They were already starting to decentralize. September 11th has made it clear to them they should not be there. I fear lower Manhattan may cease to

"I was the first architect to say selling is okay."

be the home of the financial markets. Over the long term they may be encouraged to go back, but I've talked to various bankers who say no way are they going back there.

So we need time to re-evaluate. First, we've got the memorial issue to resolve. It's a great site, but how do you build on a gravesite? All these things have to be worked out.

I think lower Manhattan has great potential, with its great transportation and access to the waterfront, to be residential. I see great open space. I think it should be mixed-use. I do see offices, residential, retail, entertainment, sports, possibly a baseball stadium or any number of things. But I would change the perception of that area. I wouldn't re-build just offices. And the

best way to pay tribute to all the victims is to re-build something that is better than what was there. A place that brings people together to enjoy each other...a place with a sense of community. If I was God, I would pay everyone off fairly and come up with an entirely new plan and start all over. ■



About the Interviewer **Sally A. Handley, CPSM**, is a founding partner of The Marketing Partnership (www.marketingpartnership.com), a marketing consulting and training firm specializing in the A/E/C industry. Recipient of the SMPS New York

Chapter's Year 2000 Marketing Achievement Award and the 1998 SMPS National Chapter President of the Year Award, Sally is co-author of *Charting Your Career Path: Opportunities for Professional Services Marketers in the 21st Century*. She can be reached at 973-492-0200 or shandley@marketingpartnership.com.

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JR: What is a good lesson you have learned in life?

DMA: It's all about people. Two ships were both being built at the same time. One was hull No. 63 and the other was hull No. 65 (USS Benfold). Both are \$1 billion ships. They both have the same technology, number of personnel, budget, and operating schedule. USS Benfold resides at the top of the list, performance-wise. The other performs at the bottom of the list. Why? On the Benfold, all of the sailors feel like they are the owners. People are the competitive advantage. ■

You can purchase D. Michael Abrashoff's new book on his web site (www.grassrootsleadership.com) at a 30 percent discount.



About the Interviewer **J. Rossi** is vice president of marketing/communications for HLM Design (www.hlmdesign.com), an international architectural and engineering firm headquartered in Charlotte. A previous

contributor to *Marketer*, she can be reached at 610-566-2958 or j.c.rossi@att.net.