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# Navigating to Greatness: How to Lead Through a Recovery Economy

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The worst economic downturn in many generations appears to be abating and even though there is some encouraging economic data, I think we all realize that it will take some time to return to “normal.” With all of the downsizings, we have all been forced to work just a little bit harder and do more with less. It would be very easy to get discouraged and allow ourselves to become disheartened. As I was coming up through the ranks in the navy, I refused to allow myself to become discouraged and instead tried to use every event or process as a learning experience. I would keep a list of traits I liked and that I vowed would try to replicate and I also kept a list of the things that I despised and would vow never to act that way myself. I would add things to my list; take others off over time and did it all on an old ratty note card that I kept in my wallet. It would eventually come to form what I call Grassroots Leadership: the art of empowering people to lead even when you are not the CEO or the one making all of the decisions. I would eventually distill these traits down to ten:

1. Lead By Example
2. Communicate Purpose and Meaning
3. Create a Climate of Trust
4. Look For Results; Not Salutes

5. Take Calculated Risks
6. Go Beyond Standard Operating Procedures
7. Listen Aggressively
8. Strengthen Others
9. Generate Unity
10. Cultivate Quality of Life

Several years ago, I was fortunate to get command of a guided missile destroyer in the U.S. Navy. It wasn't the worst ship in the Pacific Fleet but we were pretty close to the bottom. What's worse, I couldn't replace any crewmembers and I couldn't pick and choose the missions we were assigned. I even had a crewmember tell me that the crew didn't feel safe. Here was an organization whose mission it was to help the Country safe and yet the crew didn't even feel safe. Talk about discouraging! I thought my career was over.

For the first time in my career, I decided to stop focusing on the things I couldn't influence and focus only on the things I could. I decided that I could directly focus on the engaging the crew using my principles of grassroots leadership and chart a course that would keep us all safe. It would only happen if I could connect with them and get them to realize it was in their own best interest to be passionate and motivated about their work and that we would invest in their education and training and that we would create a work place that treated them with respect and dignity. I wanted to create something I had rarely seen before: a workplace where I would want my own family members to come be a part. It doesn't have to be any more complicated than that. What happened? Without changing one crewmember, within a year, we were named the best ship in the Pacific Fleet. In addition to feeling safe, we now felt like we were in a position to control our own destiny. No matter what was thrown at us. No matter what the challenge, we were going

to not just get by, we were going to prevail convincingly and thereby control our own destiny.

Every crisis, while excruciating for many, also brings opportunity for those bold enough to try new ways of doing business, being innovative and even expanding market share. We can work longer hours of course, but most of use are already mentally and physically drained from the tremendous number of hours we are already working.

My first book, *It's Your Ship*, came out in May 2002. In January 2005, I got an email from the owner of a small professional services firm. His firm was successful. He had 20 employees and made a healthy profit but he told me he worked from four in the morning until ten at night, six days a week. He couldn't understand why his best employees left him every year. His sister gave him a copy of my book and as he was reading it, it struck him how many hours a day he was spending doing what he called ten dollar an hour work; the work his team was supposed to be doing. The reason why he was doing it was not their fault but rather it was his own. He had never forced himself to step up to the plate and leave his comfort zone and become a better leader. He felt he was successful and if he just worked longer, and harder, he would make even more money. But after reading the book, he realized that he should be doing what he calls five hundred or thousand dollar an hour work like spending more time with his high value clients and be visibly seen to them to be helping them get through these tough times, as well.

He told me he went out and bought 20 copies of my book and every weekend; his team would have to read a chapter and the first thing every Monday morning they would get together to discuss what they took away.

The result? Within a year, they had doubled revenue and not one associate left. It's all because he was not content to do things the way he had always done them but constantly challenged himself and his team to become better. I called him in October

2009 to ask him how business was. His reply. "We're up 30% so far this year. We're taking market share." He says the secret is to constantly put themselves in the shoes of the clients. He says they are hurting just like everyone else and they are having to do more with less, as well. He and his team listen aggressively to their clients and try to understand where their pain is and then to be visibly seen to be helping them alleviate that pain. The client then comes to view the owner and his team not as a cost, but as a profit center that helps to keep them safe.

I got the idea to view things not from my eyes, but rather from the eyes of my crew and customers one day when I was walking the ship talking to sailors and trying to figure out what was wrong and how we could fix it. For the first time, I was truly listening to those who were actually doing the work and I tried to put myself in their shoes and try to understand what they were experiencing. I realized that they were honest, hardworking men and woman who wanted to do their best but that we weren't communicating with them properly. That was the day I started viewing everything through their eyes and then communicating to them in their language about where we are going and how it's going to keep us safe.

I got the whole crew together and told them that we were only into results and not salutes. "I don't care what your rank is. I don't care how old you are. I don't care how long you've been in the organization. Come to work every day and challenge every aspect of our operation. There are no sacred cows. We need everyone at their best and to be the best."

That's how USS Benfold became a hotbed of creativity and innovation. That's how we reduced operating expenses. More importantly, that's how we gained control of our own destiny. It's also how people started taking greater accountability for the results. Previously, they were order takers. When things didn't work out, order takers say "it's not

my fault; I was just doing what I was told to do.” Now, they are owners and have a stake in a successful outcome.

I also interviewed every sailor on the ship. Each one, individually. I got to know their name, their spouse’s name. Where they were from. I asked them what their goals were and then tried to be visibly seen by them to be helping them achieve their goals. Only one person in my entire career ever asked me what my goals were. It made me feel great. I figured that if it made me feel great, then my crew would appreciate it, as well. In the interviews, I soon came to realize that not everyone knew HOW to win. They knew they didn’t want to lose but many never had a role model who showed them how to win.

I realize that very few managers have an excess of time today but the more time I could spend mentoring my crew and showing them how to win, the more burdens were lifted off of my shoulders. It’s important to remember how we learned to lead. Someone saw the potential we had then mentored and nurtured us. We had successes. We had some failures, too. But along the way, we learned and we gained confidence. Over time, we became an asset to our leader and our organization and took on greater responsibility. We became more valuable in the process and were integral in training those coming behind us.

While interviewing the sailors, I quickly realized how smart my crew was. I soon added three additional questions: What do you like most about Benfold? What do you like least? What would you change if you were Captain of this ship? I also added- Don’t even think of changing the Captain! Also, I recommended they be responsible in their recommendation. Don’t give me ideas that are going to cost me five million dollars. Don’t try to change the rest of the Navy. Let’s focus only on our own little piece of it.

The ideas started flowing in. One sailor came up with a great idea and I asked him why he never implemented it, he said, “they will not let us do it.” So many times, we

have a “we” versus “them” mentality even within our own organizations. I took these interviews as an opportunity to drive home the point that *we are they!* We need to collaborate better. We need to communicate better and we need to coordinate better.

At another interview, a sailor asked me if I knew how many times we had painted the ship in the last year. “Six times, “ he said, “and every other month we are painting the ship. Have you ever painted your home?” He added, “it sucks doesn’t it?” He then proceeded to tell me all the things we were doing wrong and how I could fix it. I had to admit he had a point. We were spending so much time chipping and painting the ship. Even though we have been doing this for the past 234 years, I had to admit that it was menial work; ten dollar an hour work if you will. I soon realized that if we just didn’t have to paint as often, we could spend the time saved doing hundred dollar an hour work like training our crew to defend ourselves better and to keep the ship safe.

We implemented the sailors’ ideas and did not have to paint the ship again for ten months. The Navy has since implemented this program on every ship saving thousands of dollars and man hours that were put to better use elsewhere.

One of the greatest tools we used to drive performance was one we lifted from the U.S. Army called the After Action Review or AAR. After everything we did on the ship ; after every process, every event, and every mission, everyone involved would gather around my chair on the bridge wing. Everyone stood for this event, including myself, so that it didn’t drag on. Direct and to the point. We reviewed what it was we were trying to do. What the conditions were at the time. What worked? What didn’t work and what would we do differently next time to get an even better result? On USS Benfold, the ground rules were you leave your ego at the door. There would be no retribution for what got said and anyone in the group could respectfully challenge anyone else. The lowest ranking seaman could challenge the Captain. If she thought I was doing something wrong, she could call me on it. If she was right, I would change. If she was wrong, it

meant that there was something about the process she didn't understand and it gave me the opportunity to have a coachable moment about the restrictions I have to live under. We made our share of mistakes on the ship. We just never made the same mistake twice. In the process, we trained the next generation of leaders on how to step up to the plate.

I have had many opportunities to work with the outstanding professionals in the accounting and finance profession since I left the Navy eight years ago. I know the pressure you are under and the long hours you put in. I know that the way to serve your clients is by being technically competent at what you do. I also know that your clients are facing their own challenges, as well. The best way to keep yourself safe is to make sure your clients are kept safe. If you can blend your tremendous technical skills with the great leadership skills, that's how you get the best results in tough times. It's also how you get your clients to become loyal, dedicated, and committed to you. That's how you grow market share. That's how you stay safe. That's how you control your destiny. After all, It's Your Ship!!!!