CHAPTER 1

Mike Abrashoff

FORMER COMMANDER, USS *BENFOLD* (RETIRED U.S. NAVY)

It's Your Navy:
On Clarity, Metrics, Communications

The idea that companies can benefit from the management expertise of the military has been in practice for more than 50 years. Corporations, indeed whole industries, owe a debt to the top-down, command-and-control style of people management that is common in the military. But the immediacy of today's communication and information systems has military and private companies scrambling to embrace a new order. Captain Mike Abrashoff has a name for it: Grass Roots Leadership.

During the first Gulf War, Abrashoff took the guided missile destroyer USS *Benfold* from its position as one of the worst-performing ships in the Navy to the top of its class in only a few months' time. The lessons he learned from this experience are explained in his book, *It's Your Ship*. Now retired, Abrashoff helps companies and their executives understand and embrace this new leadership order.

In this interview, Abrashoff advances an approach that can best be described as "reverse logic." Solutions surface from the bottom up, not just the top down, in a world in which executives must earn credibility if they want their directives followed. In Abrashoff's view, "unity"

replaces "diversity," and people must focus on their common purpose, not their differences. In his view, rank must be set aside in favor of aptitude, and companies must compete not as individuals, but as a powerful group. In Abrashoff's view, lessons from his successful turnaround of the USS *Benfold* should be applied to companies without delay.

QUESTION: When you were given command of the USS *Benfold,* it was one of the worst-performing ships in the navy. A few months later, during Operation Desert Shield, it was at the top of its class. Many of the changes you enacted became standard operating procedure throughout the Navy. For that, the Navy awarded you medals and promotions. Yet, you achieved these improvements from your crew in close quarters, under strict Navy rules, and without being able to change any of your sailors or rules. Much of the time you were understaffed, and you were in the midst of a series of conflict situations. What did you do first?

ABRASHOFF: The first 30 days after I took command of the ship were critical because people were just getting to know me and I was asking a lot of stupid questions. So, instead of sitting behind my desk all day long, I went out and about talking to the sailors every day.

From the beginning, I went to every nook and cranny in the ship. In the bowels of the ship there are eight sewage pumps: four aft and four forward. The subcontractor who made them used substandard materials in all the mechanical seals on the pumps. As a result, they were the weakest link on the ship. Not only were they breaking, but because they were breaking on all the other ships too, there weren't any spare parts in the supply system. That's a problem because you're out of business if you can't pump sewage or treat it.

Once a day, I would either go down to the forward pump room or the aft pump room. To do it, I had to climb down an escape trunk on a ladder. I went hand-over-hand four-decks down along this dirty escape trunk. There were cargo nets to catch you at every level in case you fell off the ladder. But I would go down there to talk to the guy who maintained the system to let him know how important he was and that we couldn't operate the ship without him. It was important for everyone on the ship to see I went down there.

QUESTION: Is there a parallel in businesses?

ABRASHOFF: Yes. I see a lot of businesses today where people think that everything revolves around them and they are better than anybody else. In financial services, it's sometimes the people executing trades. And yet, if the people doing the mundane work don't do their jobs—the nuts and bolts work of maintaining computers, paying the bills, and even cleaning the floors—those traders wouldn't be able to do all the great things they do.

So what I tried to do on the ship was to show the crew that no matter how mundane your job appears to be, you were valuable and the ship couldn't operate without you. That's true in the Navy, it's true in business, it's true everywhere.

QUESTION: How many sailors were on the ship?

ABRASHOFF: I had 310 sailors on the ship. There were 256 men and 54 women.

QUESTION: The military, like all but a few companies, runs on hierarchy. And yet, here you are, the person in charge, climbing those ladders. Were you concerned you might destroy your own authority?

ABRASHOFF: Not at all. It was all about showing everybody that, yeah, there are different levels of pay, different levels of rank, different levels of responsibility, but if the ship goes down, we all go down, regardless of our rank.

What I found out was that the crew didn't resent their officers for having extra perks like private staterooms or private eating quarters or getting paid more. They didn't resent us because they knew we didn't think we were better than them. That's the challenge companies need to come to grips with, especially with regard to CEO pay. If executives start to believe that they are better than everybody else, that's when the true problems are going to come in. So on the ship, what we tried to do was show that we're all in this together.

QUESTION: How else did you demonstrate that you were all in it together?

ABRASHOFF: Well, you can't command a ship by sitting behind your desk. I mean it's awfully inviting to sit there and hide behind your

paperwork and wait for people to come in and tell you stuff. But if you do that, you won't know what's really going on and you especially won't hear the bad stuff.

What I wanted to do was set an example that said, look, I know bad stuff is going to happen. For me, the key was to get people to tell me about the bad stuff right away so I could be part of the solution. That meant communicating that I'm not going to shoot you if you tell me bad news. In two years, I never shot one person on that ship for bringing me bad news.

QUESTION: What's more important, receiving bad news or good news?

ABRASHOFF: Bad news. Absolutely. I don't need to know every good thing that's going on with the ship. But I do need to know the bad news. That's what will hurt us and it's where I can help.

QUESTION: Was bad news ever withheld?

ABRASHOFF: Yes. My biggest disappointment was from my best officer who was just an extraordinary leader. He had personality. His people loved him. He was technically gifted. One day, his sonar broke. We were in port and I didn't know it because we don't use sonar in port. We were getting under way to go out to sea to participate in a major fleet exercise with the aircraft carrier battle group when he came to me and said, "Captain, the sonar's broken."

Now, whenever bad news happened, the first question I asked was, "How long have you known about it?" He said, "Two weeks." In two weeks I could have helped him get it fixed. That's part of my job. I could have picked up the phone and gotten technicians out to help him. His problem was that he took so much pride in his work that he was afraid to ask me for help. There's a lesson here. People need to be on the lookout to make sure that the best people know they're the best, but are not so overconfident that they think they don't need to ask for help.

QUESTION: Could he have been afraid to ask for help?

ABRASHOFF: Yes. But I actually think it was simpler than that. He just thought he could fix it. Period. Now, it wasn't his fault it

broke. Complex machinery breaks. But he thought he and his people could fix it. It turned out they couldn't and so we missed a commitment. We couldn't participate in a major fleet exercise. It was overconfidence and it took away all my options. Confidence is good. But overconfidence is an enemy.

QUESTION: How did you handle the problem?

ABRASHOFF: We were in my cabin and I looked him in the eye and I said, "John, I've never been more disappointed in anybody than I am with you right now." I said, "Two weeks ago, I could have been part of the solution. I could have gotten somebody out here to help. But because you chose not to include me in the solution, we're going to miss a commitment and it's your fault." He was ready to slit his wrists. I could have yelled and screamed and hollered, but the fact that I did it this way just devastated him. And the message got out to the crew that bad news does not improve with age.

QUESTION: If you're seeking out bad news, how do you make certain that people who do good things day in, day out are not overlooked?

ABRASHOFF: You don't seek out only bad news. You need to be on the lookout for people who are responding to breakdowns and you need to be on the lookout for people who never have any breakdowns, since they are doing things right. You need to take both of those into account and then stroke them and communicate with them.

It's like my sewage pump operator. You never think about him when things are working well, and yet his equipment had the greatest propensity for breaking down. That's why I went down to visit him every day. I wanted him to know that I was interested in him and in how I can help. I went down just to make sure everything was working okay. That small act—climbing down four decks through a dirty trunk—showed him that I cared, and I think that means a lot to people. It shows them that their efforts are being recognized and that they know they're critical to the operation. That they are valuable and that you value their problem-solving abilities. Paying someone that kind of attention is a reward in itself.

QUESTION: You raise an interesting point. How do you balance rewarding the individual and rewarding the group?

ABRASHOFF: It is a fine line. One of the things we were lousy at was recognizing people in a timely manner. And in the Navy, if somebody does something great, a month later somebody will decide, hey, the person deserves a medal. Well, those medals are important because sailors gain bonus points in their advancement exams as a result. You see, I can't really promote them, but if they get a medal, they get a bonus point on their standardized exams and they can use those toward getting a promotion.

QUESTION: A captain can't promote people on a ship?

ABRASHOFF: No. But there is an exception. I can recommend them for promotion and that gives them the opportunity to take a standardized advancement exam. The entire promotion process is exam-driven. The exception is a program called Command Advancements. I'm authorized to advance three people a year to the next highest grade for meritorious conduct. But this is really important. If these promotions are not handled properly, they can cause a lot of heartburn among those who don't get it. The problem is that it can appear that you're giving it to a favorite person. When it's viewed that way, it ends up causing more division.

When that happens, a good program ends up causing divisions and even retaliation against the person that gets the advancement. I saw it myself coming up the ranks. So when I took command of the ship, I laid out the criteria and qualifications for Command Advancements. No requirements were listed in the Navy manual. It was up to me. Whomever the captain wants to advance is advanced. So I laid out my qualifications.

QUESTION: What were they?

ABRASHOFF: One of my requirements was how many times a person could take a test and not be promoted. You see, the advancement process throughout the Navy is numbers-driven. It's all about vacancies at the top. Somebody can take a test ten times and pass it every time but that person won't get promoted if there aren't any vacancies at the next level. In some areas, there are very few jobs. In other areas it's

wide open, and if you take the test and get even a minimal rating you get promoted. Numbers drive the promotion process. It's all based on filling empty slots or billets.

QUESTION: Who did you advance?

ABRASHOFF: I'll give you an example. I had a sailor who was a machinery repairman. Each ship gets one machinery repairman. Contrast that with the fact that I would get 40 fire control technicians. As a result, there are only 300 machinery repairmen in the entire Navy—one per shop. So there's not much opportunity for advancement for a machinery repairman. And to top it off, the sailor on my ship was Filipino and English was his second language. As a result, he was stuck. He had been a second class petty officer for ten years. Normally you get promoted after two or three years. And this sailor would help everybody on the ship. He would stay late. If he could fabricate a piece of equipment that wasn't in the supply system to help somebody keep the equipment running, he would do it. So, my criterion was you've got to pass the test. He always passed the test, however, there were never any and there billets or opportunities for advancement. When I made this machinery repairman my first advancement promotion, the entire crew cheered. They cheered because they knew what my criteria were and that he fit it and deserved it.

QUESTION: What about simply recognizing good individual and group performance.

ABRASHOFF: Yes. We did that too. We instituted a program called Top Dog in the League. It recognized the best sailor and I was very careful to rotate it among the departments so that every department was being represented.

QUESTION: There's a lot of literature that says recognizing individuals can result in alienating others. Do you agree with that view?

ABRASHOFF: Well, even with the best of intentions, you can still screw up. We had a surprise dispersing audit. It resulted in 50% of the ship flunking this inspection.

QUESTION: What's a dispersing audit?

ABRASHOFF: It's when they come and audit your pay records to make sure everyone is drawing all the proper allowances and not overdrawing and that the records are being processed in a certain manner. We had a dispersing office and it got the best score in the Pacific Fleet, ever. So I got on the public address system and talked about how great the dispersing office was to have done this and how they're really taking care of the crew. I thought everybody would be happy.

Now the dispersing office works for the supply officer and then we have an admin officer that the personnel office works for. Within 30 seconds, the personnel officer was in my cabin. "Did you know that your personnel men are ready to quit right now?" I said, "What on earth for?" I asked. She said, "Don't you know that they are 50% of the dispersing audit?"

It turned out the personnel office processed the personnel forms before the dispersing clerks got them. I never knew that. I said, "Oh my God." I turned what should have been great celebration for everybody into one where 50% of the people were angry. So recognition has both upsides and downsides and you have to plan out very carefully how you recognize people and teams. You can make some awful mistakes. You also have to think carefully about what types of behavior you are rewarding. If you don't do it right, the downsides can outweigh the upsides.

QUESTION: As you settled into your command, the culture of the ship changed. Many companies want to change their cultures to enhance performance and increase employee retention rates and satisfaction, among other things. How did you change your ship's culture?

ABRASHOFF: It happened because of a lot of little things. There is no big silver bullet to changing culture. And I'm not here to badmouth my predecessor on the ship. But he sat in his cabin all day long with the door locked. It wasn't just shut; it was locked. If the major change agent is the person at the top—and I believe that's the case—then it's a pretty bad idea for that person to keep the door closed and locked. With my predecessor, the only people who could see him were the second-in-command and the five department heads. Nobody else ever saw him. So, just opening my door changed things.

Another tactic I used was to interview every crew member on the ship. I did it in my cabin one-on-one. When I did the interviews, I used something I learned from Defense Secretary William Perry, whom I worked for at the Pentagon. At the Pentagon, whenever a foreign minister or defense minister came by, the first thing Perry did was to take pains to put the visitor feel at ease. He would walk the person around his office—and it was a huge office—and he would show the visitor all of his pictures on the wall and explain their significance. For example, he had a series of pictures of nuclear tipped missiles that were taken as the former Soviet Union was breaking up. He would talk about them and their significance. That technique put everybody at ease.

I also had pictures on my wall and when sailors would come into my cabin, I'd walk them around the room and show them all these pictures of things from my career. Then I'd ask them to take a seat. You should have seen the looks on sailors' faces when they would come in and sit down in the chair across from me in the Captain's Room. The expression was like, "I've never known what was in here." These sailors didn't begrudge me for having beautiful quarters—my predecessor spent a lot of money outfitting the cabin—even though they lived in berthing apartments that could house 106 sailors in one space, sleeping in bunk beds triple deep. But despite the disparity in quarters, the sailors were happy to be in my cabin, sitting with me and having a conversation. Becoming accessible and demystifying the office resulted in having the sailors respect me but not fear me.

QUESTION: What else did you do to change the culture?

ABRASHOFF: Communicating is essential. Technology can be a curse because if you send an e-mail, you expect everybody picks up the same message. I found that was not true. If I sent an e-mail it would be interpreted differently by every person on the ship. So the challenge was to make sure the message was not being misinterpreted as it makes its way down the chain of command. The only way I could do that was to walk around and talk to the sailors and ask them about their priorities for the day. If they knew their priorities, great. If they didn't, I knew who was in their chain of command and who was falling down and blocking the flow of information.

I also had a tool called my "Command Master Chief." He's my senior enlisted advisor. He's kind of like the shop steward. He represents the enlisted people on this ship. He would be out there walking around as well. He had his own little network. They were people he could rely on to see if the message was getting through. He knew as well as I did that it was our ability to get the message out and have everybody playing and driving towards the same thing that improved our performance.

QUESTION: Did you use other tools?

ABRASHOFF: Yes. You can't smoke inside the skin of the ship anymore. There's a designated smoking area outside the skin of the ship. For us it was on the fantail, way back at the stern of the ship. Smokers know everything that goes on in an organization. It's because there's no rank structure involved in smoking. You're all up there, you're all equals, you can't smoke inside the building, so you have to go stand out in the cold.

Well, at night there were no lights on the fantail. I'd go out and just stand there on the deck and nobody would know I was there, and I would listen to the smokers. For reasons I said, smokers talk about everything that's going on in the ship and about everyone. I could just sit there picking up intelligence.

The challenge for leaders is to figure out where there are pulse points in their organization and then to figure out a way to tap into them, whether overt or covert. If you understand what people are talking and thinking about, you'll get a pretty good understanding of what you have to do.

QUESTION: What metrics did you use to make sure your change efforts were on track?

ABRASHOFF: On a Navy ship, you've got all these inspections you have to pass like the engineering inspection. It inspects thirteen major programs and is the most thorough and intrusive inspection ever known to man. In addition, every other function on the ship gets inspected. It's the way the Navy does things.

I had a post office and the Navy says it's supposed to have so many one-cent stamps and so many forty-one cents, and so on. And once a

year, a Navy postal guy would come and do a surprise audit of our post office to make sure that the books balanced and that we had all the stamps we were supposed to have.

In addition, I've got two corps men on the ship who tend to the health of the crew. We have to have our teeth examined once a year. We would get rated by how many cavities our sailors had. I would always get furious with sailors when they came back with cavities because that meant we couldn't get the best dental rating that we could.

So the bottom line is we inspected and measured everything—laundry, the ship's store, and every financial function on the ship. In addition, how well we employ our weapon systems got measured, our maintenance programs got inspected, and our safety programs got inspected. So we have all the metrics in the world to determine how well a ship is doing.

We have all these metrics but the truth is they don't turn people on. So I started thinking about metrics that make more sense.

QUESTION: What did you come up with?

ABRASHOFF: Retention was one of my metrics. When I took over the ship we were at 71% of our operating strength. That meant that 100% of the work was being done by a crew that was only 71% of its full component. 29% of our billets—jobs—were unfilled. Before me, no one in the Navy really looked at retention.

I also looked at our disciplinary rate and at our Workmen's Compensation Rate. We have a form of Workmen's Compensation in the Navy called Limited Duty. And if you have a headache or a bad back—some malady like that—you get transferred to a hospital. And because the Navy doesn't have enough doctors, you're assigned to the hospital and it might take six months until a doctor can even look at you.

So during that time you're picking up trash in the parking lot of the hospital instead of working on a ship. Nobody ever checks these soft metrics. I never knew to check them either. And I started adding up how many sailors had Workmen's Comp in my predecessor's last year—31 sailors took Workmen's Comp in that previous year—whereas in my last year only two sailors took Workmen's Comp.

The other metrics that turned me on were the disciplinary statistics. Twenty eight sailors in my predecessor's last 12 months got placed on report. And of those 28 sailors, 23 got thrown out of the Navy; and 14 were young African-American males even though they only made up 10% of the workforce. And so you have a subset of the population that's getting placed on report 50% of the time.

What we tried to do on the ship was to get across to sailors that we're all in this together. We developed what we called a unity program instead of a diversity program. I wanted the crew to focus on our common purposes as opposed to our differences.

You can't legislate what people do in their off time, but I sure as heck can legislate what goes on in my workplace. And the crew knew that we weren't going to tolerate sexual harassment or racial prejudice. We had only five disciplinary cases on four sailors in my last 12 months in command—one guy went twice. And I was looking at who they were and they were all white males. And I went back to the last time a black male got placed on a report—it was 17 months prior to that. It was a statistic that I followed after I left the ship and it was ten months after I left the ship till the next black male got placed on report.

So for 27 months, a subset of the population that used to make up 50% of the cases now made up essentially none. And it wasn't because we lowered standards or told people not to put black men on report. It was, hey, we're all in this together—you treat each other with respect and dignity and everybody rises up to perform at a higher level because that's what the expectations were.

So when I left the ship, I sent an e-mail to the Three Star Admiral and I said to him, "Why don't you hold us captains responsible for these metrics?" And the Three Star comes out—he'd been in the Navy for 35 years—and turns to his assistant and asks, "How can we gather these statistics?" And the assistant said we already collect them. He said to the Three Star, "All you do is push this button, and you can get them for every ship." Though we collected the information, nobody had ever used it before. So the Three Star ran the statistics and looked at it and found there was a 100% correlation. Ships that had the highest disciplinary rates and the highest Workmen's Compensation rates had the lowest standings in the Fleet.

It was a direct correlation. A month later, the commanding officers' fitness reports were changed to include these metrics—their retention rates, their disciplinary rates, and their Workmen's Compensation rates. It's now a standard by which captains are getting judged. My point is, like a lot of companies, we collected all the statistics; we were just paying attention to the wrong ones.

QUESTION: Retention, disciplinary, and Workmen's Compensation rates are one thing. But in business, aren't the financial metrics the one's that really matter?

ABRASHOFF: The criticism from people who hear me speak is that, in the Navy, I never had to worry about a top line or a bottom line. And it's true—I didn't. I had a different type of pressure to worry about. What I had to live with was that if I didn't do my job correctly, I would have to write to parents and tell them their sons or daughters weren't coming home. My point is, you need to use metrics that matter in your line of work. Financial metrics are only one type of performance measurement.

QUESTION: You said you were at only 71% of your full component of crew. How did you deal with recruitment and retention issues?

ABRASHOFF: You can't just go out and pick somebody off the street. You have to recruit them, get them through nine weeks of boot camp, and get them through additional training for the job they're going to fill. It takes a minimum of nine months after you lose somebody to get a replacement. And then the replacement that you get is somebody that's eighteen years old and has no experience. So, what we tried to do was to recruit our people every day so that they would stay and allow us to focus our time and get it from the basic level to the intermediate level or even to the advanced level.

QUESTION: What do you mean recruit them every day?

ABRASHOFF: I mean give them recognition, talk with them, listen to them, and, most importantly, get them to engage their brains.

I would always ask sailors why we'd do things a certain way. And they'd always respond, "That's the way we've always done it."

And it got so repetitive I knew that if that was the case, nobody was engaged. They were just going through the steps because somebody was standing over them with a hammer.

So the biggest thing I had to get over with them was that we don't do things because that's the way we've always done them. We do things because we've examined every alternative and this is the best way. And so by changing that mentality, when they had to research things and find out why we had to do things a certain way, they started coming up with ideas of how we could do things better and then got invested in it. They got excited and engaged. I mean, if you develop a new process or procedure, you have a stake in it. It's yours. That's what I mean by recruiting them every day.

Let me give you an example. To shoot Tomahawk cruise missiles is a very laborious procedure where you get the mission via satellite and sometimes you get the missions at the last minute—like when Saddam (Hussein) was still in power. The way it works is you have to program the missile to get to the first land point then the next and so on. This process can take about two hours.

Well, we knew we were going to be targeting Saddam because he had just thrown the weapons' inspectors out back in 1997, and we were being given probable scenarios for launches. Back then, none of the ships could meet the time requirements because we were getting the missions too late and we didn't have enough time to program and execute.

So, my Tomahawk guys got together and researched every step of the launch procedures. And lo and behold, when the Tomahawk was first used in Desert Storm, it used a terrestrial navigation system. But, as the decade wore on, the missile was upgraded to a GPS Navigation system. But Navy had never taken the terrestrial navigation system steps out of the procedures! So when my sailors did their research, they said, "Gee, these procedures no longer apply." We then sent a rapid critique to the powers that be in Honolulu who said, "Hey, you're right—you're authorized to use these new procedures." Letting my guys figure it all out was recruiting them every day. By the way, the processes they developed are now called the Benfold Procedures throughout the Navy. Four enlisted guys who were Tomahawk technicians came up with it. And if we didn't have

a culture that asks, "Where does every step come from and why is it there?" we would have never been able to do that. Letting people think is really important if you want them to stay.

What we tried to do was to constantly challenge every aspect of our job to see if we couldn't do it better and be more efficient or to get something done faster. And we also push responsibility down to the lowest level. That keeps people motivated. And, by the way, if somebody had the aptitude I didn't care what their rank was or how many years they had in the job. If they had the aptitude and wanted to do it, we'd train them for it. That created a lot of commitment.

QUESTION: Are you saying that to get the job done you would ignore rank and seniority?

ABRASHOFF: Yes. Absolutely. When we're at sea, we'd have to stand watch 24 hours a day. And there are many positions on the ship where previously, only officers or chief petty officers would sit in that position. But when I took command of the ship, in six or seven of these critical mission areas, we only had one trained officer or petty officer to do the job. If I lost that one person, I couldn't have gotten the ship underway. That's not good. So, my first job was to train a second backup team to my first string. It worked so well we trained a third string. Eventually, we were three deep in every critical position. It worked so well that I asked the question why we had a rank attached to this position in the first place. Why couldn't we just open it up to anybody who had the aptitude and ambition to do it? The answer was there was no reason. For example, the watch on the bridge is manned by the Officer of the Deck followed by the Junior Officer of the Deck. In the history of the Navy, these positions have always been manned by officers. But I qualified a Chief Petty Officer in the job and I eventually qualified a First Class Signalman to be an Officer of the Deck. He was the Officer of the Deck and he had Lieutenant Junior Grade underneath him as Junior Officer of the Deck. Now that's creative! And that's certainly not the typical Navy hierarchy. And the sailors loved it.

QUESTION: Did you get any pushback from your superiors on that?

ABRASHOFF: One of the lowliest jobs among all the high-level Navy commanders is the interception operations job where we would stop cargo ships going into and out of Iraq and inspect for contraband. It was hot, dirty, grimy work—none of the ships wanted to do it. And there was this squadron commander who was in charge of it. So, I said, "Well, you know, let's make him look good."

So we became the best inspection ship in the Gulf. And he flew over and we would communicate with him through a console on the ship that was traditionally manned by an officer. The day he came onto our ship, he said he wanted to talk to the person he'd been talking to on the radio for this operation. I said "Here he is," and it was a Second Class Petty Officer. He said, "Seriously, where's the officer?" I replied, "Well, I've got him standing the watch." He asked, "You mean that I've been talking to a Second Class Petty Officer for the last three hours?" I said, "Yes, you were."

I thought I was going to get reprimanded but instead he was utterly amazed because he thought the person he was talking to was an officer because of the quality of the work that the guy was providing. So, in my view, if you've got the aptitude, I don't care what your rank is. People feel that. They understand it.

QUESTION: What you have described is really a leadership story. Is that a fair way to characterize your message?

ABRASHOFF: Yes. We are talking about leadership. One critical component of leadership is how effectively the leader communicates with his or her people. Most importantly is what the mission is and whether people understand its importance. The problem is that a lot of people just aren't clear as to what the mission is. That leads to uncertainly and to conflicting priorities. Communicating with the greatest amount of clarity so that everybody understands where you're going, what you're doing, and why it's important, is critical.

The other critical thing is that your people have to respect your technical abilities in order to believe you have sound judgment and can lead them in the right direction. I was at one large aerospace company doing a presentation on the day the CEO got fired. Somebody asked me, "Do you think you could be CEO of the company?" I said, "No, I don't." I said it because I don't know the first

thing about how to make a plane fly. I don't know how to make rockets go through space and I don't have the technical competence to understand how the aerospace industry works. So no matter how great a leader I might be, if I don't have the technical competence, I'll never gain the respect of the people.

When I took command of the ship, the crew thought that their mission was to get their captain promoted. That's wrong. The mission of the ship is to be able to defend itself and the country's interests. I tried to show the crew that I understood this and I gave them reason to be confident in my decision-making ability and my knowledge and understanding of where we needed to go. They "rogered out" and got behind it.

A lot of CEOs forget that their employees want them to be competent in the areas that their company does business, not just in specialized skills, like finance. Leaders have to be technically competent and then they have to be able to engage their people so that they understand where they are being taken and why. The bottom line is, a leader has to convey to the people why it's in their own best interest to support him or her.