How do you save a sinking ship?

Throw command-and-control leadership overboard—help employees become better people instead.

New sections to guide you through the article:
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Imagine demoralized employees cheering derisively as their departing CEO leaves the company. That’s what happened when the USS Benfold’s unhappy crew bid their captain farewell in 1997.

What could this scene possibly teach business people about leadership? The Benfold crew’s disgust was a symptom of the Navy’s retention problem: 40% of new recruits leave before their tour ends. Your company likely struggles just as hard to keep talented employees.

To retain top performers, you need leaders like Mike Abrashoff—the Benfold’s new captain. He replaced traditional command-and-control with quieter, more respectful, and engaging leadership.

How? He provided vision and values—then guided, coached, and even followed his people. He redeemed individual crew members—helping them become better people and better sailors. Under his leadership, his vessel set performance and retention records. Other ships’ sailors clamored to join his crew.

Want to turn your own ship around? Take a page from this captain’s log:

Reject command-and-control . . . In today’s complex, technology-driven companies, no single person can manage all information and split-second decisions. Nor does one individual embody a company’s total skills and brainpower. Effective leaders provide a compelling vision and clear values—then guide their people to success.

. . . and learn how to listen. Treat each encounter with every individual as the most important thing in the world at that moment. Get to know your “crew” as individuals; you may discover brilliant ideas.

Example:
When Abrashoff asked a seaman what he would change on the Benfold, the man suggested replacing her fittings with nonferrous metals that don’t rust quickly. The money saved by repainting the ship once—instead of six times—a year funded college courses for sailors. The fittings are now a navy standard.

Differentiate freedom from lack of discipline . . . Set limits and define unbreakable rules—e.g., the Benfold crew couldn’t waste taxpayers’ money or endanger their own or shipmates’ lives. Let people criticize and question each other—and you—as long as they do it with respect and support for your firm’s mission.

. . . then hand out trust and responsibility. If you’ve led well, now delegate.

Example:
Engineering inspections are a ship’s central peacetime performance test. A botched test can ruin an officer’s career. Abrashoff demonstrated trust in his crew by delegating the riskiest inspection activity: casting off and heading seaward. The ship passed flawlessly.

Redeem employees during their toughest times. When people are at their worst, take your scariest chances.

Example:
When three Benfold sailors had an ugly racial brawl, Abrashoff could have ejected them from the navy. Instead, he saved them. He tore them down during hours-long disciplinary proceedings, restricted them to the ship for 45 days, and docked their pay. Then he rebuilt them—showing them and crewmates their positive sides by, among other things, playing cards with them. One became a mentor to younger sailors; another went on to college; the third re-enlisted.
Retention Through Redemption

Once, sailors couldn’t leave the USS Benfold fast enough. Today, the vessel is the pride of the Pacific fleet, and sailors from other ships are clamoring to join its crew. How did the captain of the ship, Mike Abrashoff, get the Benfold back on course? By breaking bad habits and jettisoning old attitudes—starting with his own.

by D. Michael Abrashoff

If employee retention is a headache for business, it’s a migraine for the U.S. Navy. Forty percent of the navy’s new recruits will wash out of the service before their four-year tours are up. That’s not just bad for the military’s effectiveness; it’s expensive: it costs taxpayers about $35,000 to recruit one sailor and send him through nine weeks of boot camp. Of those who make it through their first hitch, only 30% sign on for a second term.

When I took command of the destroyer USS Benfold in June 1997, the navy’s retention problem, which I had observed all through my 16 years in the service, became mine to endure or to solve. Although the Benfold is a technological wonder—for instance, its radar system can track a bird-sized object from 50 miles away—virtually all its 310 sailors were deeply demoralized. In fact, they were so unhappy with their lives on board, they literally cheered when my predecessor left the ship for the last time. Watching that scene in shock, I vowed that would never happen to me. I wanted sailors so engaged with their work, they would perform better than ever, willingly stick around for their entire tours, and possibly even respect me in the process. The only problem: I had no idea how to make that dream come true.
Over the next 21 months, I found out. Retaining people sometimes requires redeeming them—changing their lives. But first, I had to redeem myself. I had to become an entirely different type of leader. A different type of person, really. Only then was I able to redeem my sailors, one at a time. Together we learned a different way to think and act. All in all, it was an enormous undertaking; I ran the risk of never getting promoted again. But I realized that the only way to achieve my goals—combat readiness, retention, and trust—was to make my people grow. It worked. The Benfold has set all-time records for performance and retention, and the waiting list of officers and enlisted personnel who want to transfer to the Benfold is pages long. It’s a long wait because very few ever aboard the Benfold want to leave.

What made me turn to redemption as a means to retain sailors? Believe me, it wasn’t a career move. In fact, it wasn’t even a preconceived plan. Instead, it was a journey that made increasing sense the longer I stayed on it. It began, as I said, that first day aboard the Benfold, as my crew derisively cheered their departing commander. Clearly, his approach to leadership had failed. It was, sadly, an approach that I knew all too well. Command and control to the max. Do exactly what I say, when I say it, no questions, no comments.

My first step, then, was rejecting the 225-year-old U.S. Navy way of running things. That was hard, but I had a strong sense that the time had come. The command-and-control style may have worked when ships and warfare were less complex and technology-intensive. But it wasn’t going to work on an 8,300-ton, 505-foot-long ship like the Benfold. Loaded with state-of-the-art computers and radar gear, it can detect and destroy enemy submarines, surface craft, and airplanes while at the same time launching computer-guided missiles at land-based targets. No single person could hope to manage all the information and make all the split-second decisions that those operations entail.

Besides, I had come to realize over the course of my career that no commanding officer has a monopoly on a ship’s skills and brainpower. There’s an astonishing amount of creativity and know-how below decks, just waiting to be unleashed. To set it loose and make it flourish, a leader should neither command nor control; he should provide vision and values and then guide, coach, and even follow his people.

Bolstering my new perspective was the fact that I had actually seen a different kind of leadership work in the military. For two years in the mid-1990s, I served as military assistant to William J. Perry, who was secretary of defense from 1994 to 1997. Watching him interact with people had been a revelation to me. He never barked orders; he listened. Whether he was talking to the president or a maintenance man in the Pentagon, he gave everyone he encountered his full attention. Perry’s listening encouraged people to do their best for him—and for the military. That’s the kind of impact I wanted to have as the Benfold’s captain.

So there I was. I had made the intellectual leap, I had the role model, and I had plenty of good intentions. But that’s not enough to change someone’s leadership style. Something bigger has to happen. And it did. I don’t like to admit this, but listening doesn’t come naturally to me. My ex-wife told me as much when we were going through our divorce, and after the anger and hurt feelings faded, I came to agree with her. She and Perry opened my eyes to how I often just pretended to hear people. How many times, I asked myself, had I barely glanced up from my work when a subordinate came in my office? I wasn’t listening. I was marking time until it was my turn to give orders.

“Is it no fun, is it?” the sailor asked. “No, it’s not,” I said warily. “What’s your point?”

The point, the sailor explained, was that the Benfold’s bolts and fittings were made of ferrous metals, which quickly oxidized and streaked the ship with rust stains that needed to be painted over every two months. Why didn’t we invest in fittings made of nonferrous metals? I implemented the idea immediately. The ship now gets painted once a year instead of every other month. The money

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talking. It forces you to listen. You can't ignore or shut down people you know and respect.

**Trust and Terror**

My personal redemption didn't happen overnight. I was, after all, learning on the fly to become a different kind of leader. For every rewarding moment, there was a moment when I wished I could just go back to old habits. I didn't slip, but even that wasn't the hardest part. The hardest part was pushing my new self—my redeemed self—to redeem my crew.

I am not saying that my sailors were lost souls, but many of them had never been asked to handle the trust and responsibility that I was starting to place in them. They had no idea how to do it. I kept telling them, “This is your ship,” but those words were empty until my crew believed them and acted on them. My sailors, too, needed to change fundamentally. But how? The method I used was about as subtle and old-fashioned as shoving a kid into the deep end of the pool to teach him to swim. I just started handing over responsibility. I gave them the ship to run, then I got out of the way.

Now, I'm not saying that I abdicated responsibility. There are certain things only a captain can do. One of those things is to set limits and make immutable rules. There were very clear boundaries my crew couldn't cross. They could do nothing that wasted taxpayers' money. Nothing that would endanger their own lives or those of their shipmates. And they could do nothing that would damage any of the very expensive equipment the navy had entrusted to us.

As the leader, I had to draw a clear distinction between freedom and lack of...
discipline. Every member of the crew was free to criticize or question any other, including me, in the reviews we conducted after every naval exercise. But it couldn't turn personal; it had to be done respectfully. And I made it clear I wouldn't tolerate any retribution or snitching. The Benfold had a job to do, and questions were welcome as long as the aim was to improve our ability to fulfill our mission.

Once I'd drawn a box around acceptable behavior, I let my crew out to play. One sailor had an idea for improving morale during the long weeks the Benfold spent at sea. It can get wearisome out there, with long spells of relative quiet alternating with intense, high-pressure drills and exercises designed to make the scrimmage tougher than any fight we would ever see. To unwind, this sailor suggested, why don't we gather on the main deck on Thursday evenings and watch the sunset, with jazz playing in the background? The concerts became a Benfold tradition. Another sailor complained that the Benfold's mattresses were uncomfortably thin. We invested in thicker mattresses. Soon after, so did the rest of the navy.

But don't think this redemption process was all about creature comforts or all the little stuff. The last engineering inspection I endured as captain of the Benfold was as big as the ship itself. The engineering inspection is the most important performance test any navy ship faces in peacetime. It's an extremely rigorous examination of nearly every aspect of the ship's operations, conducted by some of the most senior officers in the service. A successful inspection can make an officer's career. A botched inspection can ruin it.

One of the most stressful, high-risk moments in any engineering inspection comes when the ship casts off from the pier and heads out to sea. It's a tricky procedure. Any number of things can go wrong—you can hit the pier, run aground, or even hit another ship. That's why every ship captain personally supervises the process.

Except me. The technical inspection, to my mind, wasn't just a test of the Benfold's operations. It was a test of my belief that if I had done my job right, I wouldn't need to supervise this operation. So while I was in the officer's mess with the senior inspector, reviewing the day's agenda, my most junior lieutenant got the ship under way by himself. I trusted my crew with my ship and my career.

I may have appeared calm, but inside, I was a nervous wreck. The senior inspector and his staff, meanwhile, were incredulous. I could tell they thought I was crazy. I was starting to think they had a point. My mind raced with thoughts of the potential disasters my young officer could trigger with one false move or poorly timed command.

There were no disasters. The Benfold cast off flawlessly from its slip in San Diego harbor and headed out to open ocean. I should have never doubted my crew. By that time, my redemption was authentic, and so was theirs, as was made clear by a conversation my master chief—the ship's senior enlisted man—overheard a few days before the inspection. As he was walking below decks, he heard one sailor say, "I don't know what we're going to do if we don't do well on this inspection."

"I know," his friend said. "We don't want to let the captain down."

Crime and Punishment

The stiffer test of my commitment to retention through redemption didn't come when things were going well and my people were surpassing my expectations. It came when things had gone horribly wrong and the worst aspects of human nature were on display. That's when redeeming people is painful work, and there's no way to do it without taking some pretty scary chances.

The story I am thinking about happened about two months into my command. The Benfold had pulled into Bahrain in the afternoon. That evening, some of the sailors who had shore leave took a bus to the naval base there and headed straight for the bar. Several
hours later, they took a bus back to the ship. There were two black sailors in the back singing a rap song that included the word “nigger.” They were loud and obnoxious, and they were bugging everybody. A white sailor asked them to tone it down. They refused. When they got off the bus, the white sailor swore under his breath, using the racial slur himself. That precipitated an argument that turned into a fight that ran the length of the ship and spilled down into the compartment where 100 sailors lived. It took 13 people to break it up. The black sailors and the white sailor threatened to kill each other.

It was the ugliest racial fight I’d seen in my entire naval career, and it was up to me to sort it all out. As captain, I would have been perfectly within my rights to throw all three combatants out of the navy. That’s what most commanders would have done. Heck, before the Benfold, it’s what I would have done. But I didn’t want to lose these guys, especially the two black sailors. They were both from Detroit and had joined the navy to get away from the gangs and drugs and violence there. One never knew his father. The other’s father was in prison. I thought how tough it must have been for these kids just to get into the navy. I hated the idea of sending them back to the world they were trying to escape, but I didn’t seem to have much choice. All three sailors involved in the fight were lying to me, denying they had used any slurs. There’s no way I can keep anybody when they’re lying to me.

I had two goals when I convened the disciplinary proceeding, known as a captain’s mast, against the three sailors. I wanted to get to the truth, and I wanted to save those kids. For three and a half hours, I stood in a hot, crowded conference room and conducted an interrogation. Everyone was drenched in sweat. “Nobody’s leaving this room,” I said, “until I get the truth.” The white sailor was so arrogant I called him a punk, startling the 60 witnesses who had come to testify. Finally, one of the sailors from Detroit cracked. “Yes,” he admitted, “I said it.” Then his friend confessed, too. Then the white sailor admitted that he, too, had used the racial slur. That gave me the opening I needed. If you find that word offensive, I told the two black sailors, you can’t use it yourself. One of them protested that he could use the term because he was black. “No,” I said. “You can’t. There’s one standard. It’s an offensive word, and I don’t use it. If you find it offensive, you shouldn’t use it either.”

Then I said, “It’s up to you. I can throw you out, or I can keep you. I want to keep you, but only if you want to stay. What do you want to do?” The three of them just stood there. No one wanted to speak first. Finally, one of the black sailors said he wanted to stay. So did his friend. So did the white sailor. I restricted all three to the ship for 45 days and gave them 45 days extra duty. And I docked them half a month’s pay for two months.

Next came the really hard part—redemption. I had just spent three and a half hours tearing down those three sailors. Now I had to build them back up. I wasn’t so worried about the white sailor. He had messed up badly, but he had friends on the ship who would help keep him on the straight and narrow. I figured he would be okay. But what was I going to do about the other two?

The opportunity came one Friday night when they were still restricted to the ship. I was walking through the mess decks with the master chief, and we came across the two black sailors playing cards. I gave the master chief a nudge and said, “Let’s challenge these two.” I hadn’t checked the history books, but I can guarantee you that no commanding officer and master chief had ever played cards on the mess deck of their ship with two young sailors under restriction. We drew quite a crowd, and there was a fair amount of trash talking going on, especially after the master chief and I won. The game quickly became part of Benfold lore, and the two kids became shipboard heroes because my master chief and I had decided to show everyone that you can come back. But more important, both sailors showed that there was a lot more to them than the hateful side they demonstrated during that brawl. One is now a mentor to other young black sailors on the ship. The other recently left the navy at the end of his tour to go to college. If I’m going to lose a sailor, that’s how I want to lose him. The white sailor asked me a year later to reenlist him. I asked him whether a year ago he could have envisioned re-upping, and he responded, “No way.”

The Benfold is named after Petty Officer Edward Benfold, who was a corpsman in the Korean War. In 1952, during a firefight, Benfold was tending to wounded Marines when several enemy soldiers threw grenades into his foxhole. He picked up the grenades and stormed the oncoming soldiers, blowing up them and himself. He was posthumously awarded the congressional Medal of Honor. The two Marines he saved are still alive. One of them attended the ceremony when I assumed command of the Benfold.

I never said this to my crew, but I wanted to make Petty Officer Benfold proud of his ship. I’d like to think we did. Together we learned how to look out for one another, just as Benfold looked out for his comrades. Like Benfold, we took enormous risks, and we took them willingly. We never had to make the kind of sacrifice he did, but I firmly believe that any one of us would have if the situation demanded. Because that’s what you do when you believe in what you’re doing. It’s what you do when you have been redeemed.
ARTICLES

Whereas Abrashoff advises retention through redemption—helping employees become better people—Butler and Waldroop explore retention through job sculpting. In this model, individuals work with their employers to design jobs that satisfy their deepest interests in life. These authors argue that pay, promotions, and honors don’t motivate employees nearly as much as satisfying, stimulating work does. The authors describe eight core interests—among them Application of Technology, Creative Production, and Counseling and Mentoring. They then show how supervisors and direct reports can work together to identify core interests and create jobs that let employees express them. Result? Good workers stay.

Butler and Waldroop offer another perspective on retention through redemption: helping valuable team members overcome bad habits—behavior patterns that threaten their careers, and possibly your company. The authors introduce six archetypes—including the Hero (drives himself and subordinates too hard), the Pessimist (focuses only on the downside of change), and the Rebel (automatically fights authority and convention). They then point out that employees who exhibit these bad habits are often your brightest, most talented performers. Here’s how to help them overcome their “Achilles’ heels”—and contribute their full potential to your company.

“Choosing the Right Leadership Style: No Single Approach Fits All Situations” (HBR OnPoint Collection, August 2000, Product no. 4479)
This collection of three articles revisits the larger question underlying Abrashoff’s story about the USS Benfold: What style of leadership is most effective? As the articles reveal, there is no one right answer. In fact, exceptional leaders use a variety of styles, choosing the one best suited for each specific challenge. These articles explore the connections between leadership and performance improvement, without settling on a “one-size-fits-all” prescription. In Robert H. Schaffer’s “Demand Better Results—And Get Them,” the author advocates a top-down approach, carving performance problems into manageable and measurable tasks, and then maintaining relentless focus on those tasks. This plan is based on the fundamental commitment to settle for nothing less than big results. Daniel Goleman’s two articles, “What Makes a Leader?” and “Leadership That Gets Results,” lay out the theory that emotional intelligence is the bedrock of successful leadership. Leaders who get the best financial results, Goleman argues, are emotional polymaths, combining their competencies into different leadership styles depending on what’s needed; e.g., authoritative, democratic, affiliative, or coaching.