

INTELLIGENCE ON DEMAND

HOW TO GET PEOPLE TO TAKE THE INITIATIVE

Captain D. Michael Abrashoff

New York Times bestselling author, *It's Your Ship*



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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When I took command of the guided missile destroyer USS *Benfold*, it was a ship driven by the Navy's traditional, never-disobey-an-order style. The crew was dispirited and sullen, and personal initiative was actively discouraged. Anyone who took a risk of any kind was sure to be punished for it. I was eager to give an unmistakable signal that those days were over.

Here's how I did it.

1. Build confidence by giving people an unexpected opportunity to shine.

The opportunity to help my crew take the initiative came just four days into my command. What I did was to thrust a difficult task on one of my junior officers, giving him responsibility for it in a very public way. When you try this, you can't be reckless; you must always be in a position to step in and take control if something goes wrong. But your expectations have to be clear – both to the person assigned to the job and everyone else. And since the last thing you want is a public failure, you also have to be pretty confident that the person selected is up to the task at hand.

We were refueling at sea. The ship has to steam at a steady 15 knots (about 17 miles an hour) alongside an oiler, a Navy tanker

loaded with as much as 8 million gallons of fuel. With only 120 feet of furiously churning water separating the ships, the oiler's crew sends over two cables, each carrying an eight-inch fuel hose. The cables are sprung so they will stay taut if the ships separate or converge a bit, but the margin of error is thin. There is a constant risk that the cables will break if the ships veer too far apart, or dip into the sea and rip away if the helmsmen let the ships get too close.

It's a dangerous job, especially in rough seas. Ships have collided, and fuel has spilled and exploded. The job requires expert ship handling, and officers put their careers on the line every time they do it. My predecessor as skipper of *Benfold* avoided that risk whenever he could. Result: When I came aboard, only one officer, Lieutenant Kevin Hill, had ever done the job. So I scheduled a refueling at sea, with Kevin assigned only to supervise.

The conning officer for the watch was 25-year-old K.C. Marshall, and the other officer of the deck was Jerry Olin, an enlisted man who had risen through the ranks to become an officer. I asked if either of them had ever run a refueling at sea, and each man sheepishly muttered, "No."

"Guess what?" I said, "I've never done it before either. It's time the three of us learned how." White (water) lie: I had done it hundreds of times, though never on *Benfold*.)

Conning the ship alongside the oiler, Marshall was tentative. He kept asking my permission to twitch the rudder half a degree or add half a knot of speed. I finally said, "Hey, K.C., don't ask permission, just do it." That was all he needed to hear. He took control and did a fantastic job.

The story raced through the ship. That was my first chance to change the climate, and it paid off handsomely. K.C.'s success sent a powerful message to his shipmates about the benefits of taking the initiative.

Someone else who knows the power of letting people shine is **Fred Smith**, who learned leadership in the military as a Marine in Vietnam – and use what he gleaned in founding and running giant FedEx. At Smith’s urging, **FedEx** employees constantly look for opportunities to take the initiative, which, in turn, leads FedEx to develop innovative ways to stay ahead of the competition. Smith has said this approach derives from the Marines’ platoon mantra, “Move, communicate, and shoot” – and after you shoot, keep moving.

A prime example of the wisdom of Smith’s policy is Nguyen Duy Binh, who fled Vietnam for Alexandria, Virginia, after the collapse of Saigon in 1975. His first post for FedEx was a counter agent. He had worked his way up to ramp manager, when he took Smith at his word and wrote a bold letter to the CEO. He suggested that Smith open a FedEx operation in Vietnam, and Binh volunteered to run it. Smith asked him to put together a business plan. In 1994, when the United States government put an end to its Vietnam trade embargo, Binh’s initiative was rewarded. Now he is FedEx’s country manager in Vietnam, also running operations in Cambodia and Laos.

2. Encourage people to challenge authority – especially yours.

When I say encourage challenges to established wisdom and authority, I mean even the CEO’s authority, if need be. A leader has to be ready and willing to be confronted by subordinates.

Such challenges can arise in almost everything an organization does. When health insurance costs rise, for instance, the system at nearly every company is depressingly familiar: Raise employees’ premiums, reduce their benefits, or cut family members from the plan – or do all three at once.