

“From worst to first by giving away control”, from ‘Turn the Ship Around!’ by David Marquet (2013)

Context

In 1999, US Navy officer David Marquet spent a year preparing to command one nuclear submarine, then was abruptly reassigned to another, the USS Santa Fe, weeks before taking charge. A submarine is a tightly packed, highly technical world: around 135 people living and working underwater for months, where everything traditionally runs on the captain's orders and the captain is expected to know every system on board.

Santa Fe was the worst-performing submarine in the fleet, with the lowest morale and the worst retention in the Navy. And Marquet didn't know the ship. He couldn't be the all-knowing, heroic captain he'd been trained to be, even if he'd wanted to. He was dependent on his crew.

Three things came together. He had no choice but to rely on others' expertise. The situation demanded change. And he had long wanted to lead differently and had been waiting for the chance. So he stopped giving orders, started asking questions, and handed responsibility back to the people closest to the work.

Within a year, Santa Fe went from worst to first. Reenlistments rose from 3 to 36, and the ship won the Navy's award for the greatest one-year improvement in performance. A decade later, ten of its officers had gone on to command submarines of their own.

The ship nobody wanted

"When I got the news that I would be taking command of Santa Fe, it was a shock... Santa Fe was the ship we all joked about... It was used as a training example of how not to be. And Santa Fe had the worst retention in the submarine force: in 1998, for example, it reenlisted only three crew members. I approached Santa Fe with a mix of curiosity and anxiety."

from 'Turn the Ship Around!' by David Marquet (cont.)

Authentically curious

With no time to learn the submarine in depth, Marquet did something captains rarely do. He relied on the crew's expertise, and asked them to teach him.

"Walking the ship I would ask the crew questions about their equipment and what they were working on. They were sceptical about these questions initially. That's because normally I would have been asking questions to make sure they knew the equipment. Now I was genuinely curious."

"My unfamiliarity with the [submarine's] technical details was having an interesting side effect: since I couldn't get involved with the specifics of the gear, I opened up space to focus on the people and their interactions instead, to rely on the crew more than I normally would have."

"Whatever they tell me to do"

One brief exchange with a crew member, asked simply out of curiosity, revealed the real problem.

"Hi, what do you do on board?"

'Whatever they tell me to do.'

'Whatever they tell me to do' pointed to the reality that the fundamental structure of the leader-follower was the problem on board the ship. Everyone below the captain and the department heads had their brain shut off...

"We had 135 men on board and only five of them fully engaged their capacity to observe, analyse and problem-solve."

Once I understood the pervasive influence that our structure of leader-follower had on our way of doing business, I saw examples of it everywhere I looked... I could also see the costs of leader-follower in the passivity of the sailors..., in the lack of initiative, in the waiting for others, in the department heads' paralysis without the [captain present]...

With

from 'Turn the Ship Around!'

by David Marquet (cont.)

The problem for Santa Fe wasn't an absence of leadership. It was too much leadership of the wrong kind, the leader-follower kind."

"Because you told me to"

Another telling moment came during a routine drill. Still unfamiliar with this particular submarine, Marquet gave an order that was impossible to carry out: to reach a speed its backup engine didn't have. Nobody questioned it. The officer simply relayed it. When Marquet asked why, the answer was: "Because you told me to."

"In a top-down culture, when the leader is wrong, everyone goes over the cliff. I vowed henceforth never to give an order, any order."

"I intend to..."

In place of orders, Marquet introduced a simple change of language. Officers would no longer ask permission. They would state their intention.

"Although it might seem like a minor trick of language, we found that it profoundly shifted ownership of the plan to the officers..."

'Captain, I intend to submerge the ship. We are in water we own, water depth has been checked and is four hundred feet, all men are below, the ship is rigged for dive, and I've certified my watch team.'

'Very well.'

Thinking like the captain

At first, Marquet still found himself firing back questions to check the officers' plans. Then he caught himself, and asked a different kind of question. The Officer of the Deck is the officer running the ship on the captain's behalf.

"Instead of asking the questions I had in mind, I asked the [Officer of the Deck] what he thought I was thinking about his 'I intend to submerge.'

'Well, Captain, I think you are wondering if it's safe and appropriate to submerge.'

With

from 'Turn the Ship Around!' by David Marquet (cont.)

'Correct. So why don't you just tell me why you think it is safe and appropriate to submerge. All I'll need to say is "Very well."'

Thereafter, the goal for the officers would be to give me a sufficiently complete report so that all I had to say was a simple approval.

The benefit was that it caused them to think at the next higher level... By articulating their intentions the officers and crew were acting their way into the next higher level of command. We had no need of leadership development programmes. The way we ran the ship was the leadership development programme."

135 leaders

"Eventually we turned everything upside down. Instead of one captain giving orders to 134 men, we would have 135 independent, energetic, emotionally committed and engaged men thinking about what we needed to do and ways to do it right. This process turned them into active leaders as opposed to passive followers."

What made the difference

Marquet didn't introduce a new programme or restructure the crew. He changed the questions he asked: from checking to curious, from "do you know?" to "what do you think?" Each question handed a little more thinking, and a little more ownership, back to the people closest to the work.

For purpose-driven leaders, the lesson is uncomfortable and freeing at once. The more you know, the more tempting it is to tell. Sometimes the most powerful thing a leader can do is ask, and then wait.