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"Turn the Ship Around!: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders" - David Marquet

Reference

[Turn the Ship Around!: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders](#)

Notes

Highly recommended especially if you want to understand some practical things that you can do to establish an environment where everyone is a leader.

Very useful and practical book aimed at helping managers understand and implement a more "empowered" approach to leading a group of people. Based on the experiences of David Marquet, who inherited the command of the submarine with the worst record in the fleet and, because he was unable to use his traditional approach to managing the ship (leader as an expert - he wasn't the expert as he didn't know the ship) applied ideas that seemed counterintuitive at the time to many. The book captures the approaches that allowed him to change how the management model worked on the submarine and resulted a move to the boat with the best record.

There are a couple of particularly notables aspects of that this book helps you with:

1. It is a practical book. A lot of books talking about how management must change when you go to agile don't really help you understand practically what needs to be done as a manager. We talk about "servant leadership", a bit about "empowerment" and "decentralized decision making" in training sessions, but this really isn't enough. This book, combined with others, fills a lot of this void.
2. Telling people they are "empowered" is inherently contradictory as it presumes you are the one giving them power. It reminds them that they have no power and so reinforces existing mindsets. To quote "Empowerment programs appeared to be a reaction to the fact that we had actively disempowered people."
3. The changes talked about happened (mostly) over a 6 month period. We have this tendency to think that change in culture is hard and going to take a long time. This book shows that you can make a lot of progress in the right direction with some relatively simple practices.
4. The resultant change is sustainable. A lot of agile transformations suffer in that people tend to work in the "new way" while the new approach is the "shiny new object" or while there is support from coaches and the managers that kicked it of. But as soon as the coach or manager leaves, and as soon as something difficult comes up, then the old practices kick in. Pretty soon the agile

implementation is not really agile at old, just the old way dressed up in new terminology. The changes talked about in this book lasted even after Marquet moved on to other boats, and also spread as people who worked in the new way went to other stations. To quote "When the performance of a unit goes down after an officer leaves, it is taken as a sign that he was a good leader, not that he was ineffective in training his people properly."

Marquet provides the following summary of his approach:

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"With competence and clarity you will get / have control"
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And then decides the rest of the book into approaches associated with these categories.

For "control" the approaches are:

- Find the genetic code for control and rewrite it. For example, "Here's an exercise you can do with your senior leadership at your next off-site. Identify in the organization's policy documents where decision-making authority is specified. (You can do this ahead of time if you want.) Identify decisions that are candidates for being pushed to the next lower level in the organization. For the easiest decisions, first draft language that changes the person who will have decision-making authority. In some cases, large decisions may need to be disaggregated. Next, ask each participant in the group to complete the following sentence on the five-by-eight card provided: "When I think about delegating this decision, I worry that . . ." Post those cards on the wall, go on a long break, and let the group mill around the comments posted on the wall. Last, when the group reconvenes, sort and rank the worries and begin to attack them."
- Act your way to new thinking. For example "Starting condition: you've had a discussion with your leadership group and identified some sort of cultural change the group mostly agrees to. What you want to do now is embed it into the organization, independent of personality. Hand out five-by-eight cards. Have people complete the following sentence: "I'd know we achieved [this cultural change] if I saw employees . . ." (The specific wording in this question should move you from general, unmeasurable answers like "Have people be creative" to specific, measurable ones like "Employees submit at least one idea a quarter. The ideas are posted and other employees can comment on them.") Allow five minutes. Then tape the cards on the wall, go on break, and have everyone mill around reading the cards. Based on the discussions and quantity of answers, you may want to give everyone a second shot at filling out the cards. Sort and prioritize the answers. Then discuss how to code the behavior into the company's practices. For example: implementing the three-name rule. The final step is to write the new practices into the appropriate company procedure."
- Short, early conversations make efficient work. Short early discussions as mechanism for people building solution. Make sure we are heading in right direction / avoid "wrong rock." "It is a mechanism for control because the conversations did not consist of me telling them what to do. They were opportunities for the crew to get early feedback on how they were tackling problems. This allowed them to retain control of the solution. These early, quick discussions also provided clarity to the crew about what we wanted to accomplish. Many lasted only thirty seconds, but they saved hours of time."
- Use "I intend to . . ." to turn passive followers into active leaders. One of the fundamental leader-leader changes Marquet instituted was the practice of having subordinates say "I intend to" and then explain the actions they planned to undertake. Marquet stopped giving explicit orders to his

subordinates. Instead, they would muster the organizational details they were responsible for, say, "I intend to" to him, and then detail their specific plans. At this point, if he agreed with their intentions, Marquet would say, "Very well." With this confirmation, the subordinates could proceed with their work.

- Resist the urge to provide solutions. "What happens 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 would let this be a lesson to myself to keep my mouth shut." "Emergency situations required snap decision making and clear orders. There's no time for a big discussion. Yet, the vast majority of situations do not require immediate decisions. You have time to let the team chew on it, but we still apply the crisis model of issuing rapid-fire orders. RESIST THE URGE TO PROVIDE SOLUTIONS is a mechanism for CONTROL." "Here are a few ways to try to get your team thinking for themselves: If the decision needs to be made urgently, make it, then have the team "red-team" the decision and evaluate it. If the decision needs to be made reasonably soon, ask for team input, even briefly, then make the decision. If the decision can be delayed, then force the team to provide inputs. Do not force the team to come to consensus; that results in whitewashing differences and dissenting votes. Cherish the dissension. If everyone thinks like you, you don't need them."
- Eliminate top-down monitoring systems. Initially, the Santa Fe relied on a "tickler system" that was a check on the status of all tasks. Every week, the Santa Fe's officers would conduct a "tickler meeting" to go over the status of each operation or project, and to categorize what the ship needed to do and what it had not yet done. The tracking system's message to the crew that someone above them was tracking, monitoring and evaluating their performance poached ownership of their jobs. Monitoring suggests that those lower in the hierarchy don't truly own their jobs. Marquet got rid of the tickler system. He put department heads in control of their own departments. This allowed them to own their jobs and focus on the work, not on cataloging and monitoring tasks. Sailors and officers became "responsible for their own performance and the performance of their departments."
- Think out loud (both superiors and subordinates). This is actively encouraging the delivery of information in context among enlisted personnel and officers. This ran counter to the standard system of communication, which is to focus on a "formal atmosphere" that discourages chatting. But an excess of context is far better than too little. Quality decision making involving the team requires context. "How comfortable are you with showing your gut feelings to your staff? We didn't even have the language to express doubt, ambiguity, or uncertainty. …. We called this "thinking out loud." We worked hard on this issue of communication. It was for everyone. I would think out loud when I'd say, in general, here's where we need to be, and here's why. They would think out loud with worries, concerns, and thoughts. It's not what we picture when we think of the movie image of the charismatic and confident leader, but it creates a much more resilient system.
- Embrace the inspectors. "We called this idea of being open and inviting outside criticism "Embrace the inspectors." "Mechanism: Embrace the Inspectors We applied "embrace the inspectors" not only to one-time critiques and problems such as the shore power mishap, but also to entire inspections. We would utilize the inspectors to disseminate our ideas throughout the squadron, to learn from others, and to document issues to improve the ship."

For "competence" the approaches are:

- Take deliberate action. Often people will just say "mistake happen" or look for some root cause way after the fact. Marquet took a different approach aimed at reducing errors before they occur. Before any crew member would take an action, he paused briefly and stated aloud precisely what he intended to do – and then did it. This brief pause and clear statement forces the crew member

to think about what he is getting ready to do. This prevents people from acting on autopilot and making mistakes due to inattention. In addition, others watching can see what is going on and step in if that makes sense. The introduction of deliberate action was "the single most powerful mechanism" for eliminating mistakes and increasing excellence. Side note: this is also why agile ideas like "pair programming" and "test driven development" work - they help make you more deliberate. "Your guys made the same mistakes—no, your guys tried to make the same number of mistakes—as everyone else. But the mistakes never happened because of deliberate action. Either they were corrected by the operator himself or by a teammate." This is how you create a resilient organization.

- We learn (everywhere, all the time). To delegate you have to have knowledge. We assume technical knowledge for our teams. Is that a good assumption? "We had been taking actions that pushed authority down the chain of command, that empowered the officers, chiefs, and crew, but the insight that came to me was that as authority is delegated, technical knowledge at all levels takes on a greater importance. There is an extra burden for technical competence." "I began to look at our training program in a new light. It wasn't an administrative program, and it wasn't a program to minimize errors. Instead, it was a key enabler that allowed us to pass decision-making authority to lower and lower levels on Santa Fe."
- Don't brief, certify. "That described a phenomenon I'd seen many times. A briefing is a passive activity for everyone except the briefer. Everyone else "is briefed." There is no responsibility for preparation or study. It's easy to just nod and say "ready" without full intellectual engagement." "We decided to do away with briefs. From that point on we would do certifications. A certification is different from a brief in that during a certification, the person in charge of his team asks them questions. This could be the Chief in Charge—as in the case I'm recounting—or a lead surgeon prior to an operation. At the end of the certification, a decision is made whether or not the team is ready to perform the upcoming operation."
- Continually and consistently repeat the message. There is no such thing as over-communication.
- Specify goals, not methods. "This was another example of where the procedure had become the master and not the servant. The motivation had shifted from putting the fire out to following the procedure. As a result, we got the crazy behavior observed on the mess deck of Santa Fe."

And for "clarity" the approaches are:

- Achieve excellence, don't just avoid errors. "It dawned on me the day I assumed command that focusing on avoiding errors is helpful for understanding the mechanics of procedures and detecting impending major problems before they occur, but it is a debilitating approach when adopted as the objective of an organization. You are destined to fail. No matter how good you get at avoiding mistakes, you will always have errors on something as complex as a submarine. You might reduce the number and severity, but there will never be zero. Focusing on avoiding mistakes takes our focus away from becoming truly exceptional. Once a ship has achieved success merely in the form of preventing major errors and is operating in a competent way, mission accomplished, there is no need to strive further."
- Build trust and take care of your people. "What I learned is this: Taking care of your people does not mean protecting them from the consequences of their own behavior. That's the path to irresponsibility. What it does mean is giving them every available tool and advantage to achieve their aims in life, beyond the specifics of the job. In some cases that meant further education; in other cases crewmen's goals were incompatible with Navy life and they separated on good terms."
- Use your legacy for inspiration. Navy has huge legacy and can leverage lessons learned. We should

leverage history of organizations as well to help uncover core stories. "I was worried that the crew would think some of these things tacky, but that wasn't the case. It helped provide organizational clarity into what we were about—the why for our service."

- Use guiding principles for decision criteria. "When thinking about the principles and their utility, I used this question: If I were a crew member and faced with deciding between two different courses of action, would these principles provide me with the right criteria against which to select the appropriate course of action?" Some questions: How can you simplify your guiding principles so that everyone in your organization understands them? How will you communicate your principles to others? Are your guiding principles referenced in evaluations and performance awards? Are your guiding principles useful to employees as decision-making criteria? Do your guiding principles serve as decision-making criteria for your people? Do you know your own guiding principles? Do others know them?

- Use immediate recognition to reinforce desired behaviors. Idea - excessive awards help establish outside world is competition. "Instead, have awards that are abundant, with no limit. They pit your team against the world—either external competitors or nature. I like to call these man-versus-nature as opposed to man-versus-man awards."

- Begin with the end in mind. "… would have an hour-long mentoring session with me. The rule for the mentoring meeting was that we could talk only about long-term issues, and primarily people issues." Also note, that the suggested approach is like a future-spective approach.

- Encourage a questioning attitude over blind obedience. "How do we create resilient organizations where errors are stopped as opposed to propagating through the system? Will your people follow an order that isn't correct? Do you want obedience or effectiveness? Have you built a culture that embraces a questioning attitude?"

Additional Ideas

- "… my reliance on the crew for the specifics of how the boat operated prevented me from falling into old habits and the trap of leader-follower. I couldn't have operated that way if I'd wanted to. There were many times I had the impulse to give specific direction but I couldn't. Although I cursed my lack of technical knowledge, it prevented me from falling back on bad habits. In the past when I would interview a crew member about how something worked, I only acted curious because, in reality, I knew how it worked. Now, when I talked to the men on the ship, I actually was curious."

- "Don't move information to authority, move authority to the information."

- Leadership attitude "I called this the paradox of "caring but not caring"—that is, caring intimately about your subordinates and the organization but caring little about the organizational consequences to yourself."

- Changing the language to be more empowering. "I INTEND TO …" was an incredibly powerful mechanism for CONTROL. Although it may seem like a minor trick of language, we found that it profoundly shifted ownership of the plan to the officers. "I intend to . . ." didn't take long to catch on. The officers and crew loved. The Power of Words The key to your team becoming more proactive rests in the language subordinates and superiors use. Here is a short list of "disempowered phrases" that passive followers use: Request permission to … I would like to … What should I do about … Do you think we should … Could we … Here is a short list of "empowered phrases" that active doers use: I intend to … I plan on … I will … We will …

- Differentiate "learning" from "training". It seems like a trick; we're still doing the same thing, we're

just calling it something different. Yes and no. Yes, in that we will still keep the boat clean, drill, do maintenance, qualify, and the myriad other tasks that take up our time. No, in that how you look at things makes a difference. Instead of looking at a task as just a chore, look at it as an opportunity to learn more about the associated piece of equipment, the procedure, or if nothing else, about how to delegate or accomplish tasks. Changing to word "learn"is active (not passive "train" which is done to you). Idea is not to just do the work, but to sit back and treat it as a learning opportunity."

- Exercise to tie delegation of control to training required. Also make sure you say something to people about approach - training is to increase local decision making. Get with architects and tech leads as well. "Divest Control, Increase Competence: Here's something to try at your next leadership meeting or corporate off-site. Hand out a bunch of four-by-six cards and markers. Start with this sentence completion: Our company would be more effective if [level] management could make decisions about [subject]. You specify the level of management but ask the group to fill in the subjects. Once you have the set of cards, post them on the wall, and go on break. Let people mill around looking at what they've written. Down-select to a couple subjects. Ask this question: What, technically, do the people at this level of management need to know in order to make that decision? Again, answer on the cards, post them, and go on break."
- Organizational measure of learning: "An effective survey question to ask your employees is how many minutes a week they spend learning on their own, not mandated, not directed. Typically it's a small number. An organizational measure of improving health would be to increase that number."
- Leadership is more responsibility not less, and not a cushy reward.
- "No, I feel that my job as the commander is to tap into the existing energy of the command, discover the strengths, and remove barriers to further progress."
- "… we were practicing a mentor-mentor program." Both sides learn and this is a natural response to a leader-leader approach.
- "Don't Empower, Emancipate. Empowerment is a necessary step because we've been accustomed to disempowerment. Empowerment is needed to undo all those top-down, do-what-you're-told, be-a-team-player messages that result from our leader-follower model. But empowerment isn't enough in a couple of ways. First, empowerment by itself is not a complete leadership structure. Empowerment does not work without the attributes of competence and clarity. Second, empowerment still results from and is a manifestation of a top-down structure. At its core is the belief that the leader "empowers" the followers, that the leader has the power and ability to empower the followers." "What we need is release, or emancipation. Emancipation is fundamentally different from empowerment. With emancipation we are recognizing the inherent genius, energy, and creativity in all people, and allowing those talents to emerge."

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- Submarine Leadership: Animation of speech with a number of the basic ideas.

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