

Mahler Book Corner



Turn the Ship Around: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders by L. David Marquet (Captain, USN, Retired), 2012, Penquin Books, Ltd. London.

Order directly from Amazon:

http://www.amazon.com/Turn-Ship-Around-Turning-Followers/dp/1591846404/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1373299229&sr=8-1&keywords=turn+the+ship+around

As you can imagine, we read many business books, from the academic kind reporting the latest thinking to the highly practical stories written by CEO's. Occasionally we find one that does both.

We have come across just such a combination in a very interesting new book written by a CEO. It is not written by your run-of-the-mill corporate titan who had to deal with a terrifying market or stultifying regulations. It is written by L. David Marquet, (Capt., US Navy Retired) who recounts what he learned commanding nuclear submarines. As such, it addresses a range of topics, often in surprisingly subtle ways. In the modern era of all volunteer armies and navies, at least in the US, most of us have no experience with the military. In fact, the stereotype is that military "leadership" runs counter to modern notions of involvement, teams and high performance. This notion stems from the flood of WWII officers who returned and captained large functional hierarchies that lived according to the command and control military leadership model.

But *Turn the Ship Around* is written not as a defense of hierarchy and command and control, but rather to show the steps a savvy leader needs to follow in order to open up a hierarchical organization to ideas that emanate from the bottom, from *gemba* (where the work is done) as the lean manufacturing folks teach us.

As the story unfolds, we hear how Marquet, during his first tour as a junior officer on a Sturgeon class attack sub, *USS Sunfish*, attempted to practice leadership as he was taught at the Naval Academy. He characterizes this as the "Leader-Follower" model that emphasized the

...art, science, or gift by which a person is enabled and privileged to direct the thoughts, plans and actions of others...to obtain and command their obedience, their confidence, their respect and their loyal cooperation.¹

On his first deployments, he served under a variety of leaders from the old school naval academy style of leadership to a new, more inclusive, dare we say, more democratic leadership style. He then went on to graduate school and eventually returned to junior command. On his initial deployment, bristling with new ideas, he tried a few "tricks" he learned and was soon confronted with the enormous cultural challenge of resistance to any new ideas, much less a cultural transformation.

He subsequently took command of the USS Santa Fe, a "boomer" or nuclear missile sub. It was ranked at the bottom of the fleet with high turnover, lack of crew engagement and general cultural malaise. He faced a crew and junior officers who slavishly followed written procedures without any peripheral view of where to innovate and respond to immediate threats.

Thus begins his journey from using a few "tricks" to thinking holistically and strategically about organization transformation. He learned to systematically think through the sequence of change actions he needed to deploy.

This is where the book becomes a universal primer for all of us who are involved in leading any kind of significant cultural change. Each chapter reads like something our clients hear us preach throughout our work with them. From Marquet, we learn the steps he took to change a sick culture. Each section and chapter could be the heading of a change step in a transformation project or be subsumed under one of Kotter's eight steps or Beer and Spector's or anyone's. And what is fun is reading about the context (nuclear subs), the labor force involved (largely blue collar, practical folks) and the culture of the organization involved (230 year old US Navy) and how a simple sub commander acting like a CEO turned the ship around. The book is easy reading, exciting by virtue of its context and has a handy summary of key points at the end of each chapter. This makes it a "cookbook with a story".

We highly recommend you pack this one to the beach this summer. And let us know what you think.

¹ Department of Leadership and Law, U.S. Naval Academy, Karel Montor and Major Anthony J. Ciotti, USMC, eds., *Fundamentals of Naval Leadership* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), p. 1.