

**Jacob Morgan 00:00**

Usually like you reserved the last, like 15 or 20 minutes or so for more specific action items. Of course, if something comes up before then it's not a big deal, but just know that in the last 1520 minutes, I'll prompt you to, or I'll ask you more specific questions on like, what do we do? You got? All right, well, then all jump right in if that works for you? Certainly. All right. Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of leading the future of work. My guest today is Mike Abertawe, former commander of the USS Benfold, and best selling author of it's your ship management techniques from the best damn ship in the Navy. Mike, thanks for joining me.

**Mike Abrashoff 00:39**

My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

**Jacob Morgan 00:41**

So you're actually a second person from the Navy I've interviewed the first was a few years ago, David, Mark. Hey, do you know David? I've never met him? No. Okay. So he, I think I talked to him a few years ago. And he had some really interesting stories on leadership from his nuclear sub. So I'm really, really excited to speak with you to talk about some of the things they've you learned because it seems like you've had similar similar experiences and learnings I should say.

**Mike Abrashoff 01:11**

Correct? Why don't

**Jacob Morgan 01:13**

we start with just background information about you? So how did you get to become the commander of the USS Benfold? What was your background like that brought you to, you know, commanding this ship, and for people not familiar? What is the USS Benfold?

**Mike Abrashoff 01:30**

It's a guy, early Burke class guided missile destroyer. And I could carry 90 Tomahawk cruise missiles, and cost about \$2 billion to build has a crew of 310 young men and women average ages 23 and a half years old. Wow, super young. And only 10% have college degrees. So can you imagine a crew of 23 year olds running a \$2 billion organization? That's USS Benfold.

**Jacob Morgan 02:02**

Wow, that's crazy. And how did you get to become the commander of this, this ship. So

**Mike Abrashoff 02:06**

in the Navy, you take on successive series of jobs. And if you can, rank, if you do outstanding performance at each job, and demonstrate the ability to lead greater numbers of people, you go before a selection board, and it's a selection board of nine admirals and they choose the top 50% of the people you're up against, to get commander your own ship. And if you don't get command to your own, ship your careers effectively over and you leave the Navy. So it's an operand type deal where if you don't get command, you're, you're asked to go elsewhere.

**Jacob Morgan** 02:47

So you had to be a good leader and performer before you got the opportunity to even get to the Ben Folds. This had to be like a pattern of success of being able to lead others effectively.

**Mike Abrashoff** 03:02

Yes, but as you can imagine the military in the old days command and control my way or the highway type leadership. And that's what was rewarded back then. And so you can get, you can get results with a my way or the highway type leadership style, but you're never going to get outstanding results. Because you're not going to have the people to help you drive performance. And I couldn't do I couldn't run that ship on my own, I needed help. And I needed buy in from 310 young men and women. So when I took command of the ship, it hit me the my way or the highway leadership style no longer works. And that if we're going to become the leader in our industry, I've got to change and become a better leader, where I create a culture where people are treated with respect and dignity, and where they take personal accountability for the results. And at the end of the day, it was 310 people taking personal responsibility collaborating across departmental lines, which made us the leader in our industry.

**Jacob Morgan** 04:15

So it's interesting because, as I'm sure you know, a lot of people oftentimes turn to the Navy, the army to talk about why we have hierarchy inside of organizations, and they say, you know, it all came from the Navy, the army, the military, you know, command and control style. In it did that. I was just gonna say is that is that accurate? Is that? Is that how things were in the Navy, very command and control? Don't question your leaders. Don't admit weakness, ask for help, like, just top down

**Mike Abrashoff** 04:45

in the 50s and 60s when, you know, corporate America was finding their way they look to the military and they adopted that top down Command and Control style. And, you know, our parents generation would Except that, yeah, but young people today don't accept that in people who have ambition and people who are smart. And because of social media, people now know what their friends are getting in different workplaces. And they're demanding the same in their work environment. And so those that use the my way or the highway command and control, your the quality of people that want to come work for you, is going to become less and less quality. And you'll fall by the wayside.

**Jacob Morgan** 05:33

So what kind of a leader were you? You know, when you were in the Navy, would you describe yourself as somebody who was at one point, command and control and I give you an order you do it don't question me kind of person?

**Mike Abrashoff** 05:47

Well, I, to an extent, but not to a great extent. And the problem is, as you climb the ladder, and you gain more experience, you gain more insight. And you then start dictating the solution. Instead of listening to what's going on. And I had somebody very close to me, you know, right, about the time I was getting Commander, the ship tells me that I don't listen anymore, that I tell people what the answer is. And I thought about it for three months, every day. And then it hit me. The person's right, I don't listen anymore. I've become directive in nature. And that I realized it was an irritating habit that I that I just fell

into over the years that I needed to change. So instead of telling people what to do, and how to do it on the ship, I go hmm. If you own this ship, how would you do it? Or what do you think, to me, the four most powerful words in English language are what do you think? So I stopped telling people what the solution was and said, What do you think? And when they when they came up with the solution, then they took ownership of the problem? And that lifted burns off my shoulders? And what do you think became it's your ship? Which is what I would tell my sailors. And that became the title of my book.

**Jacob Morgan 07:13**

Interesting. Yeah, I like that kind of evolution that you've seen over time. So when you took over the USS benfold, so you get there, it's day one. So we'll actually first How did you find out that you were going to be commander.

**Mike Abrashoff 07:29**

So let me go back to the evolution. We don't mean to become dictatorial, and directive in nature. But it becomes the easiest way when we're under pressure at work. Because it takes work to be a more inclusive leader that listens. And so what I find in business today, and I've been out for 21 years, is nobody wants to be a lousy boss, or you're mean to their people. But they develop bad habits, and they don't have the self awareness to understand how they're being perceived. And to be quite honest, I'll tell you the rest of the story. What gave me the self awareness was the day I took command of the ship. And as my predecessor was leaving the ship for the final time, and as his departure was announced in the public address system, my new crew stood and cheered at the fact that he was leaving. And in my entire career, I'd never heard of or seen such a blatant sign of disrespect. And that caused me to take a step back and evaluate how I was being perceived. And I didn't have good self awareness, and I realized it was something that I needed to improve on.

**Jacob Morgan 08:43**

So I really didn't like this person. Hmm.

**Mike Abrashoff 08:47**

He was a brilliant man, I have nothing against him the credit. Because he didn't have he was very brilliant. But he micromanage the crew to death. And to the point where they stopped doing it, because he would do it. And so and so I couldn't change anybody out when I took command now, and we were near the bottom and performance. And just by getting them to collaborate and work well together, and to take pride in themselves and take pride in their work. 15 months later, we get the trophy for being the best ship in the Pacific Fleet. So the talent was always there. It's just that they were demotivated by the leadership style that was present on the show.

**Jacob Morgan 09:40**

So let's talk a little bit about how you were informed that you were going to be the commander and then we can talk about you know, day one, when you show up and you find out the state that everything is in so we're Where were you when you were notified that you were indeed going to be the commander of the benfold. And did this ship have a reputation as being towards the bottom. As far as performance

**Mike Abrashoff 10:04**

I was prior to getting command, I was the number two Assistant to the Secretary of Defense. Okay, your military assistant. And my job for him was for 27 months, I worked for him personally. And he left office on the 20th of January 1997. And he says, Mike, you can go back to the Navy, then. And so that's when I got assigned to uss benfold. And it was okay, for months of training. You're leaving in January, what ship is opened in May or June of the following, you know, four months down the road? And that's, that was the science behind my assignment.

**Jacob Morgan** 10:44

What's available? Where can we put like,

**Mike Abrashoff** 10:47

right, so that's the way it was for anybody. I mean, I wish I could say there was a lot of planning is easily been assigned to one of the best ships. But I didn't know the extent of the rot on the ship. Retention was awful. We had one of the worst retention rates, we had one of the highest accident rates, some of the poorest performance metrics. And, you know, it's like buying a house, and then you find out that you have termites, and in everything else, that's what I found out once I got there. And so then I realized the enormity of the problem, and then I can fix it on my own, and that I need to engage them that my sailors and

**Jacob Morgan** 11:28

so what are performance metrics? I mean, for an organization? I think a lot of people know performance metrics, right? We look at revenue, we look at profit growth, we look at headcount, you know, we can look at performance stock price performance. For a ship, what are the metrics that you were looking at? That put it so far down the pack? I mean, obviously, you mentioned safety turnover. But what does performance mean for a ship like that, so

**Mike Abrashoff** 11:54

for every so my ship could execute on six mission areas, okay. And one of them is employment of Tomahawk cruise missiles. And so you get evaluated on your ability to launch a certain number of cruise missiles within a certain amount of time, and have it fly 1000 miles and land within, you know, a 25 95% probability within 25 feet of its target. So, so in every missionary, I've got to be able to shoot torpedoes at enemy submarines, I've got to be able to shoot guns both at land targets and other ships. And so we are evaluating on every one of those missions, in addition to engineering and safety and things like that. So every aspect of our performance is evaluated and, and judged against other ships.

**Jacob Morgan** 12:50

Got it? So it seems like those metrics, you guys are near the bottom as far as being able to do those things.

**Mike Abrashoff** 12:57

Well, the big one was the ship flunked their engineering certification prior. That's not good. So that's your right, that's, that was the mother of all inspections that they failed. And so that puts you, you know, near the bottom automatically.

**Jacob Morgan 13:13**

Okay, make sense? So you get there, it's day one. You're the commander of this ship? What what's going on? You show up to the benfold? Do you just see like people throwing stuff at each other? It's just chaos everywhere. nothing's getting done. Like what? What's going on on day one?

**Mike Abrashoff 13:32**

So I see my predecessor getting sheared off the ship. And then it hit me, what do I have to do to keep that from happening to me two years from now when I leave the ship. And so and then it hit me, I may never get promoted. Again, you know, I may not be smart enough to do this job. And I may not be I may never get promoted. But from this day forward, I'm gonna do everything in my power to make sure my sailor stay safe. And that we can safely execute on our missions. Because what drove me, at that point wasn't self promotion. It was never having to write the parents imitating my sailors, telling them that their sons or daughters weren't coming home because we didn't give it our best. So the first thing I did after seeing my predecessor getting teared off the ship, I brought my five department, we have five departments on the ship. And I have got to rank my department heads one through five, and only the top one or two Whoever get command to their own ship. And if you don't get command, as I told you, you don't get promoted. And so that causes the five department heads to be hyper competitive with each other to the point of operating as independent silos. So I hated the system as I went through it. And I decided to change it on that very first day. And I said, from this day forward, that your number one factor in your ranking is going to be how well you collaborate with each other, and how well you drive collaboration. to the lowest levels in your department. And so I changed the factors on how to evaluate the most important people on the ship the department heads. And to their credit, they started collaborating with each other. And they drove it down. And so suddenly, it unleashed all this potential. That was always there, but was never taken advantage of.

**Jacob Morgan 15:28**

So what you see when you say change the metrics, because that's interesting. And I think a lot of people would be really interested to know, how do you measure collaboration, because it's something a lot of organizations would love to do to get people to work together in teams? So what what were the metrics that your leaders were being evaluated on? And what did you change them to?

**Mike Abrashoff 15:49**

So I, so it's, I can't give you firm metrics, but I can I know it when I see it. And from that day forward, I said, you know, look, you got you may have disagreements, and that's okay. If you can't solve them among yourselves, then bring it to me and I will make the decision. But don't ever come into my office and backstab a fellow department head unless you bring that department head with you. So the days of backstabbing came to an end. And it forced them to work out their differences. And, and there were times when I had to get involved. But it was after honest efforts on everybody's part to do it. And then at the end of the day, I have to make the decision on what's best for the ship. And they salute me, they execute on it.

**Jacob Morgan 16:39**

Yeah, it reminds me of I had one of the executives from Netflix on the show a while ago. And she this was a couple years back. And she was telling me that this one time an employee came to her and then

he was basically trying to backstab one of the other employees that were there, and saying, oh, you know, this person is not doing their job. They're, you know, they're keeping me from doing my job. And she says, Okay, hang on a second, just wait right here. And she goes, she goes out for a couple of minutes. And she brings back the person that he was complaining about, and said, Okay, now tell them to their face directly what you were just telling me. And of course, Netflix is famous for having this very kind of candid culture, very transparent culture, not for everybody, mind you, you know, not everybody can take that kind of feedback. But it sounds like that's what you were trying to institute of like no more backstabbing, be, you know, figure your problems out directly with people, you know, being adult.

**Mike Abrashoff 17:35**

So when I worked in the Secretary of Defense's office, the senior military system was a three star army general. And the Army has a wonderful program that I lifted and took the benfold. It's called the after action review. And after every process we did on the ship, and after every event, everybody involved would gather around my chair in the bridge, and we would critique it in the ground rules, where you would talk about what it was you were trying to do, what the conditions were, what worked, what didn't work, what would we do differently in the future. And the ground rules were you check your ego at the door, there's no retribution for what gets said. And anybody in the group can respectfully challenge anybody else. In an after action review, the lowest ranking seamen involved could challenge me in public, you know, respectfully, of course, but if they didn't understand something I did, they could call me on it. And sometimes, I did things the way I always did it, not having the awareness as to how it was going to impact them and their ability to execute. And when it was pointed out to me, it's like, Gee, I never realized it. So I would change. And sometimes they didn't understand something, maybe the requirements placed on me, it allowed me to have a coachable moment. But action review on benfold, you check your ego at the door, and you can talk about anything, and not get your feelings hurt with an all it is is designed to do better next time and avoid the same mistakes. And so our strength was, you know, we made our share of mistakes. We never made a big one, because of the after action review. We never made the same mistake twice.

**Jacob Morgan 19:16**

It's interesting. You mentioned ego because that's something and as I'm sure you know, from a lot of the work that you do with organizations, the ego can be a big problem inside of a lot of organizations. What did you personally do to make sure that your ego didn't take over? Because I mean, your I mean, your title is literally commander, which is, you know, literally command others. So how did you keep your ego from just taking over?

**Mike Abrashoff 19:46**

I felt that the more command I gave up the greater control I got over the organization. And my influence increased when I gave up power and ultimately the power came back Me. So you know, at this point when you when you're not driven by your next promotion, it frees you up to do the right thing for the right reasons. And so I had given up any thought of ever getting promoted. And ironically, because they got because the crew turned in great performance, I got promoted for years ahead of my classmates to full bird captain. So at a time when I stopped caring about my next promotion, I got it for years ahead of time. Sitting it was because of the performance they turned in. But it I guess it has to come from. So when I worked for the Secretary of Defense yame is number two assistant. And the number the three



star is our most important three star job in the military. Colin Powell had the job as a three star, Admiral McRaven, the guy who planned the raid that capture Bin Laden had the job as a three star. And whenever the three star is off work, for whatever reason, they bring in a visiting three star to do the job because it's so critical. Well, the general son got ill and almost died and was off work for about 45 days. And William Perry said, let Mike do it. I'm 34 years old. And I didn't do it as elegantly as Colin Powell did. I was working 18 hours a day, seven days a week for 45 straight days. And it wasn't always pretty, but I never let one ball drop. And the general son recovers he comes back to work goes into see the secretary for a private conversation. And what they never knew was when they were having a private conversation. I would always stand in the doorway listening to their private conversation. I call this gathering. And the general goes in and says Dr. Perry, how did Mike do in my absence? And William Perry looked up and said, Paul, Mike did great. I consider you and him interchangeable now. What William Perry unwittingly gave me that day was validation. And the validation gave me the confidence to go be a better ship captain, and to not lead by my ego, but by through results. And so when a lot of people that I worked with, when I see the leading through their ego, it's because they never got validation from somebody that they respected and admired. And so they have to be a butthead in order to satisfy an internal driver that they never got from an external source.

**Jacob Morgan** 22:41

Okay. So what was actually wrong with the benfold? When you took over, like, what, what were the issues and the problems that you saw? I mean, obviously, you talked about the, the performance metrics and why those, you know, those weren't where they needed to be, but why not? What was it, they kept the, you know, the employees, the sailors from achieving the goals that they needed to achieve.

**Mike Abrashoff** 23:10

Because they were treated so poorly, and demeaned and debased from all levels of the chain of command. Okay? Instead of being out front and taking action, and I laid, I didn't realize this till I left the ship, that during that time, sailors had their own hideouts on the ship, where they could go and hide during the work day so that nobody could find them. And so that they couldn't get yelled at. So it was a toxic culture of treating people poorly. And as a result, everybody wanted to leave and nobody wanted to do extra. And so that's what I inherited. And I had never seen it to this extent before in my career. And just piling on and treating them even worse, wasn't gonna get people the results I was looking for. Yeah, to try something new.

**Jacob Morgan** 24:08

So when you say not treated well, what does that mean? Is that like, they were just yelled at. Other people were taking credit for their work. They weren't getting enough sleep, you were, you know, things were being thrown at them cursing at them. What is not being treated? Well mean?

**Mike Abrashoff** 24:28

I don't know that anybody ever threw anything at them, but they were demeaned, yelled at ridiculed. They were sleep deprived. And because it came from the top every echelon of the chain of command, did those same behaviors. So it was survival of the fittest. And

**Jacob Morgan** 24:54

like Lord of the Flies over there, right. Now, that probably creates a pretty tough A tough environment to thrive in,

**Mike Abrashoff** 25:02

when we're talking about young kids and making Yeah. And you know, this could either transform their lives or, you know, delay their development to become productive members of the workforce. And it was a obligation that I took seriously. And and so I wanted to leave the place in better shape than when I found it. And that's what drove me every day was being better than we were the day before.

**Jacob Morgan** 25:32

Okay, so you see, become Commander, you're aware of these issues, you're aware of what's going on your predecessor leaves, and now it's your turn. You're the commander, you need to make change. Where do you start? What What were some of the things that you put into play immediately? And what were some of the things that you know, took a little bit more time for you to implement inside the bend fold,

**Mike Abrashoff** 25:57

I started interviewing sailors every day. Okay, I eventually interviewed all 310 sailors on the show, wow, Sterling, did that take you? Four or five months, okay. I would do four or five sailors a day individually. Okay. And in these interviews, I got to know their names and their spouses name and their children's name and their hometowns, what their goals were in their life. And, and I kept an index card, and every sailor, and I had a photo taken off of my stapled the photo to the index card, and just little facets about their life that when I had a free moment, I would just review my index cards. So then when I saw them in the passage where I'd say, Hey, how's your kid doing in soccer, or, you know,

**Jacob Morgan** 26:40

interesting.

**Mike Abrashoff** 26:42

So just

**Jacob Morgan** 26:45

think the old school. You know, like, way back in the day, when you used to go to a clothing store or bank teller, before we had technology, that's what they would do, right? Is they would keep all your information on an index card. And when you would show up, they would say, Hey, how's your kid going? It's kind of like an old school, getting to know your people as a human being approach, which I love. I mean, we don't have enough of that, in my opinion inside of companies at all.

**Mike Abrashoff** 27:08

So in the interviews, after I got to know them, I'd say, Well, what do you like most about this ship? What do you like least? What would you change if you were the captain, and I had a public address microphone right at my desk. And if I got a great, great idea from a sailor, I hit the button right then in there, and I'd say benfold, this is the captain. This is the idea I just got and this is who I got it from. And



makes sense to me, we're going to implement it right now I want your full support. So I mean, even the officers and chiefs, some of the first time they found out about these ideas this was in when I got on the public address system. And if the military purists would say this isn't the right way to use the chain of command that you should inform them first. But I wanted to shock and all the crew to let them know I'm listening in if your ideas make sense, you're gonna get the credit for it. And so the key was giving them credit publicly on the public address system. This is who gave me the idea. And then that spurred more ideas. And they came armed to these interviews, yeah, is of stuff that was just bugging them that needed to be changed, that nobody would ever listen.

**Jacob Morgan** 28:13

How do you balance that though? Because I know one of the things that a lot of leaders struggle with is not things that you say yes to, but also being able to say no to things. And so you know, 300 plus sailors, if if all of them come to you with a couple ideas, you're now over 1000 ideas. You know, how do you, especially if you're not talking about this with everybody, you're just kind of announcing it right away? How do you know what to implement? What not to implement? Did you ever implement an idea that ended up being bad?

**Mike Abrashoff** 28:44

I'm sure I did. But I bet you 30% of the ideas I couldn't implement, yeah, because of restrictions placed on me budgetary restrictions. And I'd look him in the eye. And I'd say, you know, I appreciate your thought on this. But this is why we can't do it. And what what businesses do is ask for input, and then never give them any feedback. And you know what people are adults, you give the idea. You owe them the courtesy of giving them a yay or nay. And so 30% I could implement right on the spot. 30% I could discard right on the spot. But it was that middle 40% where I would say I understand your frustration with this process. Here are my objections. If you can overcome my objections, come back and talk to me. And the best ideas that we got came when I had an objection and they went back to the drawing board and figured out how to overcome my objection. And in the process, they took ownership of that idea. I love that. And so what a lot of businesses do, give us the ideas and then they take it on their shoulders to implement. Now you give me an idea. You're Gonna be part of the implementation implementation team that gets more responsible ideas, more actionable ideas, when they know that they're going to be part of the implementation.

**Jacob Morgan** 30:11

So what were some of these ideas that you implemented, or some of the ideas that were given to you that that you implemented,

**Mike Abrashoff** 30:17

so we changed the workout is on the ship. And San Diego is a worship with station is a high cost of living area, and I had sailors who couldn't afford to live in San Diego. So I had sailors living in Tijuana, and I had sailors living in San Bernardino, which is a two hour drive. And our work hours were from 730 in the morning till 430. In the afternoon, my sailors are sitting in traffic in the morning, they're sitting in traffic in the evening, spending time away from their families wasting fuel, wasted money. All because 730 to 430 is the way we've always done it. And one sailor in the interview says why don't we move our work hours to six in the morning, work right through to one in the afternoon. And the dirty little secret in

the Navy is no work gets done after lunch. Productivity just plummets. And what the sailor has given me the opportunity to do was to work seven straight hours serve lunch at the end. And I get more productivity, they get to save money, and fuel, they get to spend more time with their families. And it's a win win situation. So that was one that I implemented. I talked to him, I talked to my officers and chiefs to get their buy in. But it's one that we implemented, and we're the only ship where you work from six to one. And then you get a lot of free time off to go do what you need to do. And the other is home, you know, working from home and thing is about right now now is that people, it gives people the freedom to do to take care of the issues that are important to them that they were never able to do. And they were sitting in a cubicle at work. And so I'm, on the one hand, I hear from people that don't want to go back to the office. And then I hear from leaders and say I want them back in the office. We're having this big clash, and you got to meet in the middle. And that's what I did by adjusting work hours was meeting in the middle, I still get the work done, they still come to the ship, but I'm saving them fuel money in the process. And I give them more time in their schedule to.

**Jacob Morgan** 32:27

And can you share maybe one or two more ideas that you implemented?

**Mike Abrashoff** 32:31

So one sailor who was on the deck force that that shipping and painting all day long? asked me if I knew how many times they we painted the ship in the previous 12 months. And I didn't know. And he said six times. Six times in 12 months. Yeah, it takes two months to paint the ship. So they're constantly

**Jacob Morgan** 32:58

non stop painting. Right? Well,

**Mike Abrashoff** 33:01

that's \$5 An hour work. Yeah. And it's demoralizing work. Yeah, and what's your solution. And so what the Navy was doing was putting, we give contracts to the lowest bidding contractor who uses substandard materials to put stuff on the ship in so when they add a new piece of equipment topside to the hull of the ship, they use ferrous metal bolts, washers, screws, fasteners, whatever, that rust and saltwater. And the sailors are spending their days chipping and painting the running rust that's caused from this equipment that the civilian contractors are putting on us. And he says why don't we change the materials that we use that are non corrosive, brilliant idea spent 25,000 bucks changed out everything we could didn't have to paint the ship again for the next 10 months. And and that was implemented on just about every ship in the Navy. And now when they buy something for the ships, they've got to take into account total cost of ownership of how the sailors have to spend their days root maintaining the equipment, because there was there was no talking between the people who procure the equipment and the people who have to operate it. And so they didn't procures never took into account. The hours needed to maintain it, they never took total cost of ownership. And because the sailor came up with that idea, they now have to take into account how the sailors have to spend their time maintaining the equipment that the procures are buying. So it cause a conversation at the highest levels in the shipbuilding community.

**Jacob Morgan** 34:43

Wow. Those are great examples. That you're right. I mean, if you wouldn't have been listening to your sailors, you would have never received this feedback or gotten this information. So I think it's a great lesson for a lot of leaders out there. When you think about your time What was the most impactful moment, during your time as commander? Was there a particular situation or event that you think profoundly impacted who you are as a person or as a leader.

**Mike Abrashoff 35:12**

So I had been in command two months, and it was time for us to leave San Diego and go on our first deployment to the Middle East. And the first seven days of the transit was spent doing a major exercise, designed to increase our ability to defend ourselves. And we're doing this exercise with two other ships USS Harry W. Hill, USS Gary. And the way in the exercise is to be over the following Friday afternoon at 5pm. At which point we'd enter Pearl Harbor and spend the night in Waikiki. And the way we enter port in the Navy is by the date of rank of the senior officer on each ship. The admiral was on Harry W. Hill, they were to go in first, I was the junior Captain by age and by data rank, we would always go in last. And so instead of being over at 5pm, that Friday, the exercise is unexpectedly over at 9am. In the morning, we had achieved all the objectives the admiral declared into success. And we're sitting off the coast of Waikiki steaming in circles, wasting fuel, wasting taxpayers money, waiting for five o'clock, because that's what the plane called for a second, this is stupid. Why aren't we on the beach? So I call the captain of the Harry W. Hill. And I'm calling him on an encrypted satellite voice radio that any sailor in any of the three ships can punch in the button and listen to the conversation. And I said, Why don't you ask the admiral to go in early? He said, I can't. I've got an engineering problem. I can only fix it at sea and call the captain to the next ship USS Gary. He was a fire breather my way or the highway. He excoriated me on the radio yelling at me. I'm sure he was spitting into his microphone when he was Wow. So he went off on you. Hmm. For everybody, for all sailors to hear. Wow. It's like

**Jacob Morgan 36:58**

cursing What the eff is wrong with you? Why would you like didn't swear,

**Mike Abrashoff 37:03**

but it was what is wrong with you. You're the junior captain. You're the junior ship, you're going in last. And so I called the admiral who'd been listening to the conversation. And he had a gruff voice. And he said, Why should I grant benfold? Something I'm not granting the other two ships. And I said, Well, sir, the exercise is over early. We're steaming in circles, wasting fuel waiting for five o'clock to roll around. I said, I've got a piece of broken equipment I can only fix in Port. I said, reason number three. I want to put my crew on the beach early in Waikiki that day. And the real reason I wanted to go to the beach. You know, I wanted to go to Waikiki. And so he said permission granted, I was two decks above the operation center for 30 sailors were on watch. When he said permission. Granted, I could hear cheering through two decks of steel. And we have four engines on an hourly Burke class destroyer. And our normal configuration is only to steam on one engine, because it's our most fuel efficient. You can do up to 18 knots on one engine. So everywhere we go, unless it's an emergency, it's 18 knots or less. But you can do 24 knots on two engines and use twice the amount of fuel. You can do 27 knots on three engines and you can do 31 knots on four engines. When the Admiral said permission granted, I put all four engines online, came up to full power. When an early Burke class destroyer is at full power, it kicks

up a rooster tail of water, that's two stories high vibrates from the power it is an amazing display of technology. And we scream into Pearl Harbor tied up at 1015 cruise off the ship at 1045 on their way to the beach. Never did say one drop of fuel that day. And the next day we are underway to continue our transit to the Middle East. And the first sailor comes up for his interview that day. And he said, you know, Captain, it seems to us the crew that you don't care if you ever get promoted again. And I said, talking about and he said what you did for us yesterday, he said you had nothing to game. You did it for us. We want you to know we got your back. And that was the day that the crew for the first time started to trust me. When they realized that what I was doing was for them instead of it was for us instead of just for me. And that was when in and when your people trust you and when your customers trust you. That's the foundation for a strong business relationship. Now from that day forward, the crew trusted me and it was an obligation that I took seriously to never violate that trust. And, you know, I would spell out the direction. They don't get a vote on where we're going. But they get to vote on how we get there.

**Jacob Morgan** 40:01

That is a fantastic story. Yeah, I love that story. Okay, so I know we have around like 1518 minutes left. And I want to use the remainder of our time to talk about some of the action items. You listen aggressively create a climate of trust results, not solutes, calculated risks go beyond the standard practice. So you have a lot of different things that you talked about in the book. So let's jump into some of those things. Because I'm sure a lot of people listening and watching this are thinking, wow, you know, he turned around this ship, what can I do inside of my company? So you talked about some of the things that you did, as far as right away, interviewing a lot of the sailors, you right away changed some of the practices that you use to evaluate some of your leaders. And it seems that I think those were the two major ones that we talked about. And you also like you shared with that beach story, you really made it about your people and not about, not about you. One of the things that I thought was really interesting that you talked about is this idea of trust, and listening. So you said in that moment, that is what kind of created that climate of, of trust for you. So imagine you're inside of an organization and you want to create that climate of trust. If it wasn't sailors, it was, I don't know, IBM or Coca Cola, you know, one of those organizations, how would you create a culture of trust inside of a company like that?

**Mike Abrashoff** 41:28

Well. You would you have to you can't change all of IBM. Yeah. But you can change every unit within IBM. So I, the Navy is 300 ships, I couldn't change 300 ships, but you know what I can make one of them the best and the safest that I possibly can. So if 300, ship captains were to get together and say this is what we're going to do, that's how you can change the trajectory of an organization is at the micro level, as opposed to on high ordering it. So that's where people get wrapped up, they think they have to change. They they get frustrated, because they can't change the whole organization, I would say focus on what you can influence. And if that means you're an individual contributor, and you are on a team, and you can influence your team members. That's leadership in so focus on what you can influence. And don't be distracted by that which you can't

**Jacob Morgan** 42:39

you one of the things that I've learned from my actually quite a few leaders that I've interviewed as they've taken a similar approach when they become new leaders or new CEOs in a role. And I say, you

know, what do you do first, and they say, we listen to our people, we go on big listening tours. And we spend months just going around talking to the employees on the front line and finding out what's going on with them and where their pain points are. It's actually Kubera, Zhu Li, the former CEO of Best Buy was on this show a few times. And he said that that's what he did to turn around the company, right? He talked to his employees, whereas I think a lot of leaders neglect that. So to create that

**Mike Abrashoff** 43:12

culture, I would have lunch with my sailors once a week. Maybe the Captain has his own place to eat. Every Wednesday noon, I was known for going down and having picking a group of random sailors sitting at a table and sitting down and having lunch with them and saying what's on your mind? What do I need to know. And that's what a lot of people don't do, you know, I'm not going to single out health care. But CEOs of you know health care organizations, never leave the C suite and don't know what's going on down in the emergency room on the floors of their hospitals, where if they just had lunch down with the nurses, or the orderlies or whatever, that's where you'd learn what's going on, in those informal settings,

**Jacob Morgan** 43:57

such as creating a culture of trust, that sounds like there's a couple of components. Listening to your people, it sounds like is a big one. But perhaps more importantly, because you didn't just listen to your people, but you actually made change based on what your people were telling you. And oftentimes you made that change very quickly. Whereas a lot of organizations, you know, one idea takes months and months to like change one little thing on there. So listening, making change. conveying that it's not about you, but it's about them. I think those are all important points that you brought up. One of the things that you also talk about is looking for results and not salutes which I interpreted as it is better to be trusted than to be liked kind of thing. You know, of course it's great to be both, but to do things not just because you're going to be liked but because they are achieving something

**Mike Abrashoff** 44:48

being liked was not on my list of things I was looking for being respected is what I was looking for. Yeah. And so they had to I wanted them to respect my technical knowledge of how to be a captain, but also to respect the vision that I laid out for them, and why it's in their best interest that they get on board. So being liked was nowhere on my list of things that I worried about. But at the end of the day, these people are still my friends. 21 years later.

**Jacob Morgan** 45:25

Wow, you still keep in touch with them? Hmm. About 200 of

**Mike Abrashoff** 45:29

them of the 310.

**Jacob Morgan** 45:30

That's crazy. That's amazing.

**Mike Abrashoff** 45:34

Looking for job recommendations, but I still hear from them on a regular basis.

**Jacob Morgan 45:39**

So what was results, not salutes? How did that manifest for you? What does that actually mean? And again, assuming you're speaking to leaders inside of organizations, how can they translate that?

**Mike Abrashoff 45:53**

So where I, where I got it from was, you know, when the captain walks into our office or a room on the ship, the crew has to go attention on deck and salute and everything. It's like, don't stop work just because I walk in the room. Because it's incredibly unproductive to stop work to salute the captain, as I'm coming by. Yeah. So that's where I got it from is, you know, I don't want you to stop what you're doing just because I come walking through and, and looking around. And so an enormous amount of resources are wasted, I think. Because people are more interested in how they look than the results they're producing. I'll give you an example. And I'm not going to pick on the former CEO of GE, but is this was reported in Wall Street Journal and in very prominent that the CEO went somewhere and had two jets waiting for him. And the optics of it, where this company is struggling financially, and they're cutting people to have two private planes waiting for you in case one broke. I mean, are you that important that you need a second backup plane? Wherever you go? Yeah. And, and maybe there are other reasons why it was there. But they didn't have the awareness that it have the optics, that when people are suffering, or when people are working hard, and you have two planes waiting for you, you know, so it's just stuff like that, that people don't think through how it's going to be perceived. And so before I did anything, I would always so I had my crew was multigenerational and multiethnic 15% of my sailors English was their second language. And before I made a decision, I would put myself in the shoes of each group and see if it made sense through their eyes. And if it didn't, is there a way I could communicate better so that it would make sense? For example, you know, you don't talk to your parents the same way you talk to a 25 year old, it requires different communication skills, yet we have that gamut of people in our workforce. And you have to get every group to buy into what you're trying to do. And it requires different communication strategies. And that's the stuff that I would think about is my communication strategy as to how to connect with each group to get them to get their buy in?

**Jacob Morgan 48:41**

How do you make sure that people don't take advantage? I mean, we kind of see this in corporations today, right? So you know, there's kind of at the kids fable, if you give a mouse a cookie, he's gonna want some milk. So how do you make sure that if you're, you know, you're listening to your your sailors, you're doing your best to give them that they want what they want. But it doesn't cross the line, because I think in a lot of organizations, leaders are starting to feel that right, like employees are asking for more and more, I don't want to come into the office, I want more money, I want equity in the company, like I want this, I want that. And in a lot of leaders I've interviewed, they feel that it's not very sustainable, to keep giving employees all the things that they're asking for because the requests of you know, they start to balloon. It's like, what do you mean, you don't want to, like we hire you to do a job. Now you're saying you don't even want to be here anymore. Like, you know, we gotta meet somewhere halfway. So did that ever happen for you? Did you ever have to create a boundary or a barrier and at some point, say like, Yeah, I'm gonna do my best. Like, that's it. You know, I can't do that don't cross the line.



**Mike Abrashoff 49:52**

So I didn't necessarily have that problem. The problem I did have is when new sailors reported to the ship, they took it for granted what we had, and they weren't there for the reign of terror. And so the sailors who were there for the reign of terror became embittered that the new people didn't appreciate what they had. So there was there was peer pressure from the old people, to the new people not to take for granted what we had. And so I would what you're talking about, you know, not people not wanting to go back to the office is a very real problem. Yeah. And there is no easy solution. But for me, I think the US economy is heading actually the global economy is heading for some tough times. And you don't wait until you run a ground to change things, change things before you hit rough seas. And so one of the things that I'm big on is controlling your own destiny. Because you're too young to remember Desert Storm. But I was 100 miles south of Kuwait the morning Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait at 430. That morning, we detected 21 Unknown fighters coming directly at our ship. And we found the general quarters alarm and I get to my radar screen, I'm looking at these 21 fighters, and I'm thinking, we'll be able to shoot down many of them. But I gave us only a 50% chance of being able to shoot down all 21. And this wasn't benfold. This was another ship I was on. And the first thought that went through my mind that morning was my life insurance is paid up in my little is up to date. And we tracked these fighters for several tense minutes. And just as we were getting ready to fire the first missile, they hung a right turn into Saudi Arabia. And we later found out it was the Kuwaiti Air Force fleeing Kuwait that morning. But for several tense minutes, we thought we were the ones who were under attack. And when the excitement down, died down, I started thinking, I don't like a 50% chance of survival. Now I wonder what we could have or should have been doing. While we had the chance to put ourselves in a position to control our own destiny. And I thought about the previous year, the year we're supposed to have been spending, preparing to take our ship to the Middle East. In that previous year, we did enough to get by, but not enough to be great. We didn't collaborate across the five departments. Nobody went beyond standard operating procedures, we just did, you know what was expected of us. And it was by luck, that we were that we live to talk about it. And that was the day I made a resolution to myself that if I'm ever given the opportunity to lead people again, I'm not going to squander it. And I'm going to focus on the things that will put us in a position to win and control our own destiny. Well, guess what the US economy has 21 Unknown fighters coming directly at us right now. Now, and companies are cutting back tech companies are, are reducing force and and I think it's up to the CEO or the leadership of every company, to have frank discussions. I mean, I would have frank discussions, tell people the truth and say, Look, tough times are coming. This is what we need to do now to keep from becoming victims. And part of that is I needed in the office three days a week or four days a week. And here's why. Here's why. People need to understand the why that they need to do it. And that's what I tried to do. And everything we every initiative we did was the why and why it's in their own best interest. And that's what's missing today. I think is the why you need to be back in the office. We did fine for the last two years. Well, the why is things are about to change. And it's going to be an all hands on deck moment. And I need everybody in the office, pulling together collaborating and doing above and beyond so that we don't become a victim and whatever happens in the economy.

**Jacob Morgan 54:29**

Yeah, and I think you've talked about the importance of purpose and meaning in the book. So maybe we can just wrap up on that point. You're one of the things a lot of leaders are trying to figure out how to do is to convey and help create that sense of purpose and meaning and I don't think it's just the

responsibility of the leaders. I think employees you know, sailors also play a role in helping define and create their purpose and meaning to it's not just one sided. But if we look at it from a leadership perspective, what are some things that leaders can do? You to help make sure that there is that purpose and meaning, you know, we keep hearing about like quiet quitting now, right? Like that's the new term that everyone's throwing around there, where employees are kind of just, they're not quitting, but they're checking out, right? They're doing the bare minimum, and they don't want to go above and beyond and do anything else. Aside from like, what's just required? How do you create that purpose and meaning?

**Mike Abrashoff 55:25**

First off, I'm dubious of the quiet quitting, I think it's a consultant probably thought up, in some board person in the media ran with it, and now it gets you somebody's

**Jacob Morgan 55:34**

very good, great resignation, quiet, quitting somebody

**Mike Abrashoff 55:39**

envious of the quiet Yeah. And if it is going on, shame on the leadership for putting up with it. You know, at the end of the day, you got to hold people accountable. And people need to be treated like they're adults. And that's what I tried to do with my sailors treat you like adults, and I'm going to treat you well, I'm going to treat you with respect. But at the end of the day, this is what you owe your shipmates in the organization in return, and to connect purpose in meaning. It was helpful for for me to know what drove my people. I knew why every sailor joined the Navy, I knew what their career goals were. And I could use that information from my little index card to communicate purpose in meeting so that it feels so that they feel it personally. And nobody takes the time to connect personally. That purpose and meaning it because it takes effort. And, and that's what I tried to do. And that's how you, that's how you get people to buy in. And like if I just saw them as 310 You know, faceless people, I wouldn't have cared. And I couldn't have community, I couldn't have drafted a communication strategy to connect with them. But when you know them, and you know what their goals are, you can everything you do, you can connect it to their personal goals. And then nobody.

**Jacob Morgan 57:13**

Yeah, I think it makes a lot of sense. And that's one of the things I think we struggle with is not being able to tie with the individual cares about the team or to the company and you know, seeing that relationships. I think that's great advice. This was a fascinating discussion. Mike, where can people go to learn more about you your book, anything that you want to mention for people to check out?

**Mike Abrashoff 57:35**

I've got a website, APG, leadership.com Alpha pod golf leadership.com. It's your ship. I've sold over 1.3 million copies. Oh, my God, social media presence and it was all just hand selling and getting people to buy it. So you know, and I respond to every email that I get. So feel free to reach out.

**Jacob Morgan 57:56**

Very cool. Mike, thank you so much for taking time out of your data. Share your insights. Really, really fascinating experience in journey that you went through and congratulations on the success and everything you've been able to achieve.

**Mike Abrashoff** 58:09

You got it. Thanks, Jacob. Thanks for your time. Of course.

**Jacob Morgan** 58:12

I wait. Don't hang up just yet. Let me push stop recording