

## How we Made Leader-Leader Work on Santa Fe

by David Adams on OCTOBER 2, 2011 · 2 COMMENTS · in LEADER-LEADER STORIES

What I learned from and with David Marquet, the founder of Leader-Leader, when he was commander of the fast-attack submarine Santa Fe during the late '90s is that developing a bottom-up, Leader-Leader culture produces highly empowered people and highly effective teams. That said, cultivating a Leader-Leader culture is much easier said than done because you must overturn almost everything people grow up thinking and learning about leadership.



2011 USS Santa Fe returns from deployment.

During my command tour in Afghanistan from 2007-2008 and now as commander of Santa Fe, I have learned that the first steps to breaking the leader-follower culture is to truly forsake followership, empower real ownership and cultivate positive backup amongst all the members of your team.

The first step to building leaders at all levels is to completely forsake followership. The old adage that "to be a good leader, you must first be a good follower" actually cultivates leader-follower behaviors that will greatly

limit the effectiveness of your team. Traditional leader-follower organizations are characterized by leaders who rely on contingent reinforcement — promises, praise and reward — to motivate followers. Managers then react to whether their followers carry out goals that have been “transacted.” Failure to achieve the desired results is met with a combination of reworked promises and/or negative feedback, rebukes, threats or disciplinary actions.

This approach not only disempowers followers but also often causes them to emulate ineffective leader-follower techniques when they assume positions of leadership themselves. Most of today’s managers rely on this model because they learned it from their superiors, it fits with hierarchical structures, is easy to emulate and is sometimes effective. At its best, principled leader-follow styles can preserve the status quo while guiding some limited evolutionary change. At its worst, a leader-follower environment breeds managers with a vision limited to their own professional ambition, people who view subordinates as disposable conduits for their own success.

Leader-Leader is different because instead of relying on transactions with consequences as the motivation it demands a culture that brings out the leader in all of us. The productivity and innovation of empowered leaders never compares to that of people required to just follow the direction of others. Leader-Leader trumps a leader-follower transactional style because success depends foremost on transforming lives — inspiring each individual to capitalize on his or her strengths to maximize the team’s productivity and innovation — rather than a transactional “carrot and stick” approach. Leader-Leader organizations embody a confident, intellectually-based approach that encourages every individual to lead and move his or her piece of the organization forward toward new heights. Leader-Leader organizations empower each member to own their piece of the organization.

One practical step we take on Santa Fe, which just recently returned from a successful six-month deployment in the Pacific, is to assign a system owner to every piece of equipment on our highly technical warship. The system owner concept has paid high dividends. Just prior to our deployment to the Western Pacific, for instance, I received a dreaded 2 a.m. phone call from the submarine. Answering the phone, I expected to hear the voice of the duty officer or one of the senior enlisted leaders on the boat that evening. But to my surprise it was one of my more junior servicemen. “Captain,” he said, “my piece, the ship’s refrigeration system, is out of commission and here is my plan to fix it and ensure we get underway on time.”

The young sailor had received a call at home about a problem with his

equipment and had come in to work at 2 a.m., evaluated the problem, including the technical documentation, and developed a solid plan to correct the issue. He even went as far as to discuss his plan with me to ensure he had the proper supervisory backup to ensure the repairs were successful. That is what ownership and Leader-Leader are all about. And I can't tell you how good it feels to have our most junior personnel proudly explain to me on a regular basis how they intend to ensure that their piece is 100 percent ready for our mission.

In a highly technical organization, however, this type of bottom-up, Leader-Leader ownership cannot work if every member of the team does not have a clear understanding of the bounds of their authority while remaining open to positive backup. Since Leader-Leader requires every team member to be an empowered decision-maker, it is important to define clear mechanisms to effectively guide decisions. On Santa Fe, all decisions are bounded by a common operations ethos which outline six deliberate steps we have all agreed are the keys to technically correct decisions and operations. We prepare, execute and assess ourselves constantly against these steps to great effect.

Following this operational ethos while encouraging positive backup empowers every sailor to take responsibility and do his job more effectively. In a Leader-Leader organization, backup is not a challenge to one's professionalism. Rather every member acts to encourage, listen to and learn from one another. So on Santa Fe, just as in the refrigerant system example, backup is always part of the equation. Instead of layer upon layer of micromanagement that we see in so many leader-follower organizations, on Santa Fe we require one level of effective mutual backup. Our Chief in Charge concept, explained by Andy Worshek back in the September 2010 edition of this newsletter, is one effective means of cultivating backup. Another example is that when making tactical orders to maneuver the ship, proceed to periscope depth or submerge on Santa Fe, we require at least one person to concur with that action. Each member of the team is always encouraged to own their responsibilities and speak up to ensure things don't go wrong.

Early in my command tour, we had been working hard to make a particular turn leaving the Pearl Harbor dry dock basin precisely right. Our goal was for every member of the bridge team to know and own his piece so that he could provide sound backup. As a way of encouraging backup, we decided that the officer driving the ship would wait for one other member to mark the turn before giving his order. One day, as we approached that key turn leaving the basin, the officer driving Santa Fe and myself became fixated on one display to perfect the turn. This is never a good idea, but we felt

too comfortable having done the turn several times in the past few days. Unbeknownst to us, the display had malfunctioned and was showing our submarine to the left of our track when we were actually right. So as we began to position further and further right to get on the displayed track, the youngest member of the bridge team, Petty Officer David Outlaw, saved the day by forcefully reminding us all, "Listen, we are definitely not left of track, we are 50 yards right. Recommend coming left now." We all looked up, recognized the error, and took his recommendation to keep our submarine safe. Outlaw received a Navy Achievement Medal for his leadership on the bridge that day and his actions set the example for our entire team for how Leader-Leader really works in practice.

From that point on, positive backup began to really take hold and has become more and more a way of life on Santa Fe. Ownership and backup were the keys to our recent completion of our highly successful deployment to the Western Pacific. We returned home on Aug. 20, and as I shook each sailor's hand and thanked them for the great job on deployment, I could see something new in their eyes. I saw more and more leaders and fewer followers. I saw young professionals who truly owned their piece of our success and took great pride in working together while backing each other up to complete some of the most difficult operations the Navy's submarines are assigned. Since I returned, I have been honored to share the stories of our success together with numerous high ranking military leaders, including members of the House Armed Services Committee, and we are scheduled to brief the Secretary of Defense later this fall.

There is no doubt in my mind that Santa Fe's current success has its roots in the practices and principles of Leader-Leader.