



In *Turn the Ship Around!*, retired Navy Captain L. David Marquet chronicles his transformative command of the nuclear-powered attack submarine USS *Santa Fe* (SSN 763). Originally slated to command a different vessel, Marquet was abruptly reassigned to the *Santa Fe*, which at the time was plagued by abysmal morale, poor operational performance, and the worst retention rates in the fleet. Compounding the challenge, Marquet had to assume command of a complex warship with minimal platform-specific training, a scenario that quickly exposed the fatal flaw of the military's traditional, top-down leadership structure: if the leader makes a wrong call because they lack localized technical knowledge, a compliant crew will follow that order into catastrophe. Marquet wrote this book to share the profound insight born of that vulnerability – that the conventional "leader-follower" paradigm is inherently flawed, expensive, and fragile. His intent was to provide a scalable, battle-tested blueprint for an alternative framework: the "leader-leader" model, which dismantles the cult of the omniscient commander and pushes decision-making authority down to where the information actually resides.

The Core Paradigm Shift: From Compliance to Ownership

The structural foundation of *Turn the Ship Around!* rests on the rejection of the traditional leader-follower model. In high-stakes environments, the leader-follower dynamic creates a single point of failure: the person at the top. This top-down hierarchy conditions subordinates to seek permission for every action, fostering passivity, intellectual disengagement, and a culture of compliance rather than commitment. When individuals are treated merely as cogs executing orders, organizational resilience plummets.

Conversely, Marquet's leader-leader model operates on the assumption that every member of an organization has the capacity for leadership, intellectual contribution, and operational ownership. Instead of directing people what to do, the leader's role shifts to establishing the environment where excellence can emerge naturally. This model shifts the psychological contract of work from "tell me what to do" to "here is what I intend to do," transforming passive order-takers into proactive, accountable leaders who own the outcomes of their decisions.

The Three Pillars of the Leader-Leader Framework

To successfully transition an organization from compliance to ownership without inducing structural chaos, Marquet outlines three indispensable, interdependent pillars: **Control**, **Competence**, and **Clarity**.

1. **Control:** Control represents the devolution of decision-making authority. It is the act of giving people the autonomy to direct their own work and make meaningful choices. However, Marquet notes that giving away control in a vacuum is a recipe for disaster. Control cannot stand alone; it must be supported symmetrically by the other two pillars.
2. **Competence:** Competence is the technical ability to make correct decisions. As authority is pushed downward, the leader must ensure that the team possesses the technical proficiency and rigorous training required to exercise that authority safely and effectively. If control is given to a team lacking competence, the result is operational chaos and increased risk.
3. **Clarity:** Clarity involves a deep, shared understanding of the organization's ultimate purpose, mission, and strategic goals. When subordinates possess high technical competence and absolute clarity regarding the mission, they do not need to ask for permission; they already know whether their intended action aligns with the organization's overarching objectives.

The Operational Mechanism: "I Intend To..."

The most practical, actionable tool introduced in the narrative is the shift from asking permission to stating intent. In a standard hierarchy, a subordinate asks, "*Captain, may I submerge the ship?*" The responsibility for the decision rests entirely with the captain.

Under Marquet's framework, this phrase was replaced with, "*Captain, I intend to submerge the ship.*" This simple alteration forces the subordinate to analyze the situation, verify safety parameters, and stand firmly behind their assessment. The leader's role then changes from an order-giver to a validator who asks clarifying questions: "*Do you have the depth? Is the sonar clear?*" Once validated, the leader simply replies, "*Very well.*" This mechanism preserves necessary oversight while driving cognitive engagement, accountability, and professional growth down to the junior levels.

Impact on Modern Organizational and Volunteer Leadership

Marquet's insights carry profound implications for today's organizational landscapes, particularly for middle managers, lateral leaders, and those operating within volunteer-driven or non-profit structures.

In a modern corporate or institutional setting, leaders frequently find themselves "leading from the middle" – charged with driving strategic outcomes but possessing limited formal authority over cross-functional teams or external partners. In these environments, relying on rank or title to force

compliance is a losing strategy. Marquet's model demonstrates that true influence is earned by empowering others, cultivating their competence, and providing absolute clarity of vision. When a leader focuses on building leaders beneath and around them, they build a self-sustaining ecosystem that functions seamlessly even in their absence.

This dynamic becomes even more acute within volunteer organizations, civic groups, and community associations. In the volunteer realm, individuals cannot be motivated by the threat of termination or the promise of a financial bonus; they are driven entirely by intrinsic motivation, shared values, and a sense of purpose. If a volunteer leader attempts to utilize a rigid, command-and-control leader-follower approach, volunteers will simply disengage and walk away.

By applying the leader-leader model to volunteer spaces, leaders can unlock immense untapped potential:

- **By Relinquishing Control**, volunteer leaders show trust, making members feel valued and personally invested in the organization's success rather than feeling like unpaid labor.
- **By Fostering Competence**, the organization provides clear mentoring, standard operating procedures, and structured onboarding, reducing the friction and frustration that often cause volunteer burnout.
- **By Ensuring Clarity**, the leader keeps the core mission at the forefront, aligning every operational task with a meaningful collective purpose.

Ultimately, *Turn the Ship Around!* proves that the most resilient, high-performing organizations are not those led by a single charismatic hero at the top, but those that have successfully embedded leadership capacity into every layer of their culture.

Respectfully submitted,

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You can reach Chris or join the discussion at RestofUsMedia.com.