

Lessons in Leadership

Let's Talk Trust

“It's Not Optional”

One of the most rewarding aspects of being a leader is participating in the selection and development of future leaders. Over the course of four decades I have had the incredible opportunity to study inspirational and effective leaders up close and personal. In many cases I have had the opportunity to not only observe effective leaders in action, but to actually be a part of their team. These opportunities were exciting times of immense personal growth and the lessons learned became part of my leadership DNA. Today, I am honored to share with you another key learning from my leadership journey. **Let's talk trust, “it's not optional.”**

Establishing trust is not a science, it's actually a bit of an art. While some aspects of trust originate from one's mental horsepower, the best leaders have equal parts heart and intellect. Just as a picture is worth a 1000 words, sometimes it takes a story to best illustrate a “lesson in leadership.” Please join me in a real life journey in **establishing trust.**

The Overview:

As a result of an acquisition, our company found itself in a crisis situation where we inherited a factory that underperformed in every possible key operating index. Performance, quality, and morale were at absolute rock bottom. My visits to the newly acquired factory were so overwhelmingly fraught with challenges, that simply finding where to start rebuilding was difficult. Needless to say after a few painful trips, it became evident that a change in top leadership was needed to avoid shutting the factory down and putting hundreds of good people out of work.

Now for the good part of the story! While no one on our company's succession plan would entertain taking on this monumental challenge of turning this factory around, enter a gentle giant (Dan) to save the day. While Dan did not ride in on a white horse, he did in fact ride in on a black Harley. Dan was an Operations Manager in one of our sister Divisions. While he had no factory manager experience he had a record of operational success and appeared up the challenge. Dan was truly gifted in having equal parts intellect and heart. Dan was a visionary, with incredible problem solving skills that were accompanied by a magnetic personality and a smile for everyone. He was the son of a Mexican immigrant who could clearly articulate to the workforce in English or Spanish. He was truly a **“gentle giant”** that honed his huge physique through many hours in the weight room. Dan was truly a glass half full person. His entire career was about accepting tough challenges. He was not about to walk away from this one. The story of this factory's incredible turnaround will help us understand more about a cultural transformation built around the **“four C's”** of establishing of trust.

Competence:

Dan grew up in manufacturing. He started his career as an hourly employee and learned operations from the ground up. He knew operations like the back of his hand. He was skilled in the manufacturing methodologies of Lean and TPM. He understood the importance of surrounding himself with incredibly gifted people. He believed in giving people the tools and the decisional latitude to do their jobs well. His quiet confidence and positive outlook left no questions in the minds of the employees that their leader was competent and understood the operational and cultural changes that needed to be made to turn the factory into a winner.

Character:

Dan's character was impeccable. He was confident yet humble, and treated people with the utmost of respect and dignity. He honored his commitments. His words and actions were in perfect harmony. He kept his emotions in check and always spoke the truth. Dan was a disciple of the concept of "servant leadership." He saw his role as one of ensuring each individual's success. He was quick to accept blame and slow to accept praise. Dan saw his role as one of serving his team. He felt the best way for the factory to succeed was for everyone to succeed.

Consistency:

The factory was known for being "consistently inconsistent" in all aspects of conducting day to day business. Favoritism and lack of accountability were evident everywhere. Dan was quick to establish expectations regarding deadlines, adherence to procedures, and respectful treatment of one another. He brought accountability into the workplace. Consistency in adherence to operational excellence began to show the desired results. People were excited to be winning.

Communication:

While effective communications pose difficulty in most factories, it was compounded in this factory because many employees spoke minimal or no English. Dan realized that he and his leadership team needed to meet people where they were to ensure valuable information was flowing effectively. Communications, verbal and written, were given to employees in both English and Spanish. Leaders that were bilingual conducted meetings in both languages. Leaders that were not bilingual had translators assist them in translating the messages. Training materials, postings, and employee handbooks were provided in both languages. Operational scorecards were clearly communicated on a daily basis. People not only knew what needed to be done, but how they were actually doing against their goals.

The Transformation:

I am sure many of you are wondering how the story ends.

The turnaround was an incredible success story built on a cultural foundation of **competence, character, consistency, and communication. All woven into a beautiful tapestry of trust.**

Within two years of his arrival, Dan and his new “servant based” leadership team took the factory from last place to first place within the entire organization (over 30 factories). No factory in the history of the company had accomplished a total transformation of this magnitude within such a short period of time. Ironically, the factory was able to make the turnaround without major expenditures in new equipment or infrastructure. The very employees that were part of the previous failed administration were the same employees that now played for the championship team. As you might expect, Dan attributed all the success to his people. When asked if there was anything he specifically did to turn the factory around, he would point to servant leadership in general, but specifically **establishing trust as the key to the transformation.**

The Ending:

After turning the factory around, Dan received two well deserved promotions. He was promoted to Director of Manufacturing for our Division, and subsequently was promoted to VP of Manufacturing for all of Canada. During his last three years in Executive Leadership Dan was fighting a courageous battle with cancer. Despite his illness Dan continued to successfully lead his factories in a companywide operational and cultural transformation. True to form, Dan never stopped coaching people in the **art of servant leadership.**

Personally, I was fortunate to work shoulder to shoulder with Dan for many years. He taught me a lot about servant leadership and we became good friends.

In September of 2015 we laid Dan to rest in his home town of Visalia Ca. at the age of 55. He is sorely missed, but his legacy of servant leadership lives on in those of us that had the honor to have worked with him.

Dan loved quotes and I am sure he would approve of couple around “trust.” Abraham Lincoln said “The people when rightly and fully trusted will return the trust.” The late Stephen Covey famously stated, “The ability to establish, grow, extend, and restore trust is the key professional and personal competency of our time.”

Good luck on your leadership journey and remember, **‘trust is not optional.’**

By: Bob Lowe – sbHR, Principal Executive Consultant