Leadership & Loyalty

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For those of you not familiar with the two characters from *Band of Brothers* depicted above, they are polar opposites in terms of their approach to leadership. Captain Sobie (left) represents a leader in rank only, whose efforts to intimidate his men are a classic example of fear-based leadership. Shown at right is Lt. Winters, who leads by example and inspires the loyalty of his men by demonstrating he is worthy of their trust in even the most difficult of situations. In today’s post I’ll examine the value of loyalty as it relates to leadership.

Is it just me, or has loyalty become rather scarce these days? Anyone who’s been in leadership for any length of time has likely pulled more than a few knives out of their back. Bottom line – there seems to be way too much focus on “me” and not enough focus on “we” these days. There have always been those who have fostered trust and earned loyalty, as well as those who have abused both for personal gain. But in this “what have you done lately for me” society where relationships have degenerated into little more than stepping stones, loyalty seems to be elusive as best. One of a leader’s most important functions is to create an environment where trust and loyalty are the rule and not the exception.
If relationships are the currency of leadership, it is important for leaders to note that loyalty serves as the cornerstone of any healthy relationship. Leadership and loyalty go hand-in-hand. In fact, so much so that leaders who fail to understand this simply won't endure the test of time. While successful leaders share many common traits, all great leaders have one thing in common – they are not only adept at earning the loyalty of those they lead, but they also recognize that loyalty is a two-way street. When it comes to loyalty, the simple rule is that you will not receive what you will not give.

I think it's important for leaders to do a gut check and take note of the difference between fear based loyalty and trust based loyalty. As a leader, do you command the loyalty of those around you because of your title, or have you earned it by gaining their trust and respect? Loyalty commanded is fleeting, loyalty earned is enduring. Hint...being feared as a leader is not a badge of honor to be sought after. It's one thing for employees to have a healthy respect for you, but quite another to be in fear of you. Remember that respect is earned, and fear is imposed. Fear based motivations don't instill loyalty, create trust, build morale, inspire creativity, attract talent, or drive innovation. The truth is fear stifles, and if left unchecked, eventually kills all of the aforementioned attributes.

If you're a leader who has created a fear based culture I can guarantee you two things: 1.) your employees won't give you their best, and; 2.) when things get tough, or other opportunities present themselves, your employees will cut-and-run at the first option that comes their way because you have failed to earn their loyalty. As a leader, if you believe that instilling fear in your employees is a good thing, you may be a tyrannical bully, but you are certainly not an effective leader.

Remember that great CEOs see themselves not as masters of the universe, but as inspirational servants, catalysts, teachers, and team builders...Again, I would strongly encourage you to think “leader” and not “dictator.” Reflect back to your time as a student...which educators brought out the best in you? My guess is that it was not the know it all professors who lived to put you in your place and show you how much they knew and you didn’t. My suspicion is your best memories are of those teachers who inspired you, encouraged you, brought out your passion, and challenged you in a positive fashion. I would also suspect you produced your best work for the latter and not the former.

So, how do you tell if your employees respect you or fear you? After reading the above comments it should already be obvious, but just in case, review the 5 items below:

1. **A Team of Yes-men**: Feared leaders either surround themselves with like-minded people, or train people to share their views in a vacuum. Either way they lose. Great leaders value the opinions of their team whether or not said views happen to be in concurrence with their own beliefs. The best leaders not only subject their ideas to scrutiny – they openly encourage
2. **Lack of Interaction**: Along the lines of number one above, if executives, management, and staff don’t proactively seek your advice and input then you have a respect problem. They either don’t value your contributions, or they know from experience that you’ll treat their inquiry in a belittling fashion. Over time, many fear-based leaders unknowingly train their team to think: “Why even try if there is no upside? The boss will never go for that.”

3. **Lack of Feedback**: if as a leader you don’t subject yourself to a 360 review process, then you are not earnestly looking for personal growth and development opportunities. Here’s an ego check – if you do utilize a 360 review, and all the responses are positive, evaluate whether this has occurred because you are feared and are thus the recipient of insincere flattery, or because you have the loyalty and respect of those you lead.

4. **Revolving Door**: if you either can’t attract or retain tier-one talent, you are not an effective leader who has earned the respect and loyalty of your team... In fact, upon closer examination, you’ll find that you probably don’t have a team. Sad but true... real talent won’t be attracted to, or remain engaged with leaders who operate on fear-based tactics.

5. **Poor Performance**: Leaders who have the respect of their team will outperform those that don’t. Leaders who attempt to use command and control tactics without the necessary underpinnings of real leadership principles will simply not do well. If your organization is not thriving and growing, then the first thing that should occur is a long look in the mirror... Begin your triage by first evaluating your leadership qualities or the lack thereof.

Ask yourself the following question: If your employees held an election today, would you be re-elected as CEO by a landslide, or would you be voted out? Bottom line... what is rightfully earned and freely given (loyalty, trust, and respect) will always outlast what is imprudently acquired for the wrong reasons (the bully tactics of fear-based control). For me it’s an easy call – you stand by those whom you trust and respect, and you don’t abandon them because it’s popular or convenient. Loyalty matters...

What say you – Captain Sobel or Lt. Winters?

Image credit: US Department of Defense