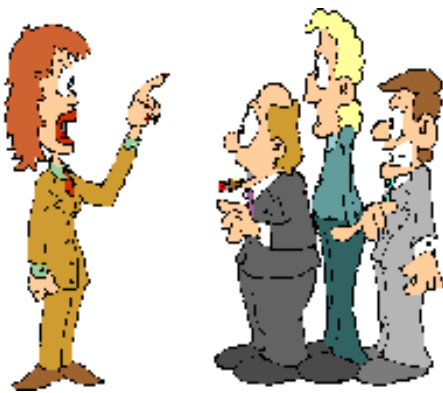


Fear as an Alternative to Leadership

By Brian Canning
"Sapient Ramblings"



You do not have to look any further than your front door to know that there is a challenging economy out there and that there are more people out of work and looking for work than we have seen in a very long time. Unemployment sits at a higher rate than we have seen in over 30 years and even as large sectors of the economy creep toward recovery, we hear that many of the jobs lost over the past year and a half are gone for good and that this will be a "jobless" recovery. Fear in the workplace is tangible and though there are certainly positive aspects in this, with rates of tardiness and absenteeism way down across the country, sooner or later we will actually see and benefit from a deep and broad economic recovery and on the other side of all this we want to be seen as leaders who made the tough decisions and saw us through this and not the ones who took advantage of a tough situation and substituted fear mongering for leadership. Fear is, without a doubt, a huge motivator in that it causes people to move and react, but more to avoid some negative result. I even think it fair to say that fear can be a useful tool for any leader, but ideally we are not going to that well too often and hopefully we are not going there first.

Our role as leaders is both simple and incredibly complex. Simple because at its base it is nothing more than moving our resources toward successful task or mission accomplishment, complicated because those resources are men and women, boys and girls. It is an absolute truth that most of us have no interest in being a leader so it would be easy enough to assume that in this, all non-leaders would be willing followers, but making that assumption would be a huge mistake. People will challenge you, they will resist you and go to great lengths to undermine you, but just as often show great initiative, courage or resourcefulness in doing the things you would ask. Our job as leaders is to deal with the resistance, encourage the resourcefulness and accomplish tasks. We are judged entirely on our ability to successfully accomplish tasks and in the end it doesn't matter if that is through group

hugs and spontaneous cheers, or me being loud, demanding and assertive. It only matters that I got my people to accomplish the task or tasks I laid before them. What moves people is as variable as the number of people you are trying to move and will change from day to day and from week to week. That is the challenge of leadership; getting your people all moving in the same direction, at the same time, accomplishing the same task. The secret here is figuring out what moves the individuals.

Recognition, money, respect, peer pressure, a sense of responsibility or accountability, ambition, team, glory, ego, anger and fear are all motivating factors in our doing things in our daily lives. Our job as leaders is to tap into these motivating factors and get people to do things and to get people to do them right now. We are talking about that quarterly report that is due next week, that physical inventory of our office supplies, or not sending young Marines into a firefight, but the same principles of leadership apply. Our job as leaders is getting our people to do things that they would probably rather not and getting them to do them with a quality and in a timeframe that serves the needs of the company or the organization.

As a twenty year old Spec 4 serving with the 1st Armored Division in Germany, I woke up one morning and found myself a tank commander, suddenly responsible for a half million dollar piece of combat equipment (an M551A1 Sheridan AR/AAV) and more frighteningly, three other human beings. I had absolutely no problem with the machine. I knew that vehicle inside out, but those human beings were another story all together. They were ornery, they argued with me, they seemed not to care about my new responsibility and strongly resisted any attempt I made toward ascending to what I thought we should be as a crew. I do not necessarily remember specific incidents these many years later but I am sure my legendary temper made its appearance with regularity during this period and I do not doubt that I made a lot of bad decisions, said a lot of careless things; but somehow, on the other side of rude awakening to leadership, I emerged capable and even effective at servicing the needs of the organization. In this I also learned two very important lessons: the first was 'Know your people and always look out for their welfare'. This by very strange coincidence is one of the leadership principles I learned as a young NCO in the Army and one that serves me very well toady.

Knowing your people is so important because it allows you to look at them as individuals and know what motivates them and in looking out for their welfare, without opening your mouth or saying a word, you can communicate that they matter. All of us want to know that we are important, that our efforts contribute to our success and in recognizing this, we establish an easy environment toward cooperation. That is not quite leadership, but when it comes time to ask for that additional effort, when it comes time to do that physical inventory, there's a reasonable expectation that people will grab that pencil and move out smartly. When it is time to charge up that hill or you need that annual report, your

people will at least hold firm and wait for you to show them the way. Knowing and caring about your people is where leadership begins.

The second important lesson I learned is that fear was a very important tool in getting people to do the things you needed them to do, but it was one you would want to use with extraordinary discretion and only in the most extreme circumstances. People do not like being scared, do not always act rationally when frightened and they often resent those who scare them, particularly if it is done too often and if it is done unnecessarily. There is no doubt that fear will get people to move and move with great urgency. Using fear and threatening people with their jobs repeatedly and without cause is a great way to destroy morale, team cohesiveness and effectiveness. It is an even better way to undermine leadership and foster resentment. Fear is a very powerful leadership tool, but one that needs to be used sparingly and only as a last resort.

I have often seen leaders who, when lacking in the patience to know their people and to develop a sense of team and a sense of mission among them, will go to the fear factor at every turn and use it to pummel their people into submission and force cooperation at the threat of their people's jobs. I would describe myself as intense as well as demanding as hell. However, I would also describe myself as someone who loves his people and also someone who has succeeded throughout his career by taking the time to know my people, setting very high expectations and someone who celebrates very loudly when my people succeed. Fear is a place I have very rarely had to go.

I admit to always caring about the people who have worked for me over the years, and I say that despite the fact that I have fired and reprimanded dozens and dozens of them over the 35 years I have been managing and leading people. I could probably name nearly all of the people I fired over the years. These people represent my failures as a leader. On the other hand, those who I reprimanded, in many cases, represent my greatest successes. By caring for our people and completing the tasks set in front of us, we as leaders always have to be willing to demand better and occasionally that involves a very deliberate attempt to scare an employee into doing something better. This needs to always come with a clear path towards improvement and demonstrated willingness to accept the offender back into the fold.

I am a strong believer in each of us finding a leadership style that we are comfortable with and one that will allow us to succeed and accomplish the tasks set in front of us. I would always want to create an atmosphere where we encourage growth, promote initiative and where we celebrate accomplishment and promote success. Fear does not encourage any of us to new heights; rather it stifles us and sells us short.

Fear to me is the lazy man's approach to leadership.

Do something different. Know your people, look out for their welfare and succeed through their confidence.

About the author:

Brian Canning is as a leadership and management coach with the Automotive Training Institute (ATI) in Savage MD. After serving as a tank commander with the 1st Armored Division in Europe, he started his career as a Goodyear service manager in suburban Washington, D.C., moving on to oversee several stores and later a sales region. He also has been a retail sales manager for a large auto parts distributor, run a large fleet operation and headed a large multi-state sales territory for an independent manufacturer of automotive parts. His passions are history and leadership.

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