



Following an Awful Leader

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Suppose you were just called into the Vice President's office and were told that you are being promoted to be the manager of a department of over 200 people. This is the break you have been working toward your whole career. You are delighted to accept the position. When you are informed which department you will be leading, your heart sinks. Oh no! This is the group that has been reporting to Ralph Clueless. He was just fired for stealing company property and then lying about it.

You have been aware that Ralph was a disaster as a leader. He would abuse people and call them names in front of their peers. He would say whatever lie seemed expedient at the time to get him out of a tight spot. He freely took credit for things that others did, and often blamed the workers for having "bad attitudes." There was one striking female employee whom Ralph favored, and his unwanted advances were obvious and totally out of line. People hated working for Ralph, and until he was removed for cause, they just were putting in their time and not even caring about doing a decent job.

All of a sudden, you are going to be inheriting these jaded workers. You would love to be the manager of a department, but this assignment is going to be a killer. The group is ready to turn any manager into mincemeat. Is the situation hopeless for you? I believe the answer is "no." Reason: My observation is that groups of people can be turned around from a lynch mob into a productive and positive group of workers under the right kind of leader. Is it going to be easy? Heck no! It will be the ultimate challenge to turn the group of angry and skeptical workers into a compliant, enthusiastic and productive workforce.

Here are eight actions you can take to move rapidly toward success?

1. Recognize the opportunity you have - Ralph was such an extreme loser as a manager, you will look good by almost every comparison, once people shed the "I hate all managers" gut reaction.

2. Acknowledge people have been abused - Since Ralph is gone, and you do not need to defend what he has done, you have the opportunity to start by saying "The Ralph Era is over, and we are turning a corner to a whole new culture based on higher trust." Do not expect people to believe you the first time you say that, but as it is repeated and especially reinforced through *your actions*, people will turn quickly in your direction.

3. Get to know people individually - The first few minutes, hours, and days are the most critical for your tenure. Make sure to spend maximum time out on the shop floor shaking hands and asking people about their interests and family. When a new manager takes over a department, it is tempting to spend several days cloistered with the supervisors developing a strategy. Put off the conference room work until later. Put a higher priority on mingling with people in their work space. If they need to vent about the past, let them do so.

4. Avoid a lynch mob opportunity - My style would be to delay having a town meeting format where people can ask questions. Wait until some rapport has been developed. Reason: upon your arrival, people will be out for blood. They will take over the floor and shout out any attempt for you to be sincere and talk about a bright future. Let your actions do the talking, and meet people individually or in small informal groups.

5. Figuratively and literally feed the workers - Make good wholesome food available as a gesture of good will. When people are munching on good food, it goes a long way toward calming them down. For sure, this is something Ralph would never have done. Feed them as well with your vision of what the group can become by working together toward a common goal. Let your values be known, first by words, but more importantly by your deeds.

6. Begin to build a culture of reinforcement - Ask everyone to send you a text or e-mail when they see something done by another person that is helpful. Get back to both the person being praised and the person doing the praising saying that we are working on a new culture where people honestly care about each other. Let the love and feeling evolve naturally. It will do so quickly under the proper leadership.

7. Give rather than take credit - Simply acknowledge every good deed with a sincere "thank you" that is given face to face. Avoid a program where people are given trinkets (buttons, stickers, pencils, etc) or points toward some gift (like a shirt or jacket). Instead, foster the spirit of sincere gratitude. It is OK to give some tangible reinforcement, but make it meaningful and special (rare) rather than trivial and overdone.

8. Build Trust - The most important ingredient to the new culture is trust. Create an environment where people feel it is safe to tell you when something you did or said does

not feel right to them. Reward people openly when they challenge you. They are giving information that took courage to share, and you would not know the information unless they shared it.

I have witnessed and coached several leaders to do the above things in creating a whole new culture. What is so amazing is how quickly people are able to put "The Ralph Era" behind them and rally around the new leader. I have observed this kind of metamorphosis happen in a matter of a few months under a great leader. Just imagine the power of taking a Hell-hole culture and turning it into a brilliant example of empowered and engaged workers. It can be done quickly if you follow the eight steps above.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763**

