

Ethical leadership and the art of getting mules to gallop

Although it happened many years ago, I'll never forget the meeting. Three of us sat in a row in front of the broad, polished, mahogany desk of one of the company's senior vice presidents. Both his dimensions and his demeanor were intimidating. He was about 6-foot-2 and 370 pounds. His head was the size of a watermelon. He had a deep Southern drawl and a John Wayne swagger that was not an act.

The mountainous VP leaned toward us, elbows on his desk, sausage-sized fingers slowly folding together into a contemplative clench, and bellowed, "Have you men ever plowed a field behind a mule?"

When we confessed unanimously that we lacked any such experience, the VP said, "Well, I have. Yes, sir. Many times."

He paused briefly in apparent reminiscence of his bygone plowing days and then continued. "Let me tell ya'll somethin' about mules that you may not know. Sometimes they just won't pull. You can say 'pretty please' or give 'em sugar cubes and all that, but they still just stand there lookin' atcha." He let that sink in for a moment and then asked, "Do you know how you get that mule to pull?"

Once more we took turns admitting our complete ignorance of effective mule motivation techniques.

"Well I do," drawled the VP with some conviction. "There's just one way: You go out there into yonder field and you pick yourself up the biggest rock you can carry, and you hit that sumbitch right here," pointing to his forehead with his index finger. He then lifted his arms over his head and brought them down fast, to demonstrate the proper striking motion, making us wince a bit as he hollered "Bam!"

"Yes, sir," he continued, red-faced from exertion. "You let that animal know, right then and there, that he's either gonna pull or you're gonna drop him dead right there in that field. You either kill 'em or cure 'em!"

The senior VP paused to give us a moment to ponder the philosophical implications of this key insight into mule psychology as we stared blankly at him in frank astonishment at his unexpected perfor-



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mance.

Then he leaned his gigantic head even farther in our direction, took off his glasses and squinted for dramatic effect. He said very slowly, in a deep, gravelly voice: "Gentlemen, let me tell you somethin'. We've got a lot of mules in this company that just ain't pullin'."

I am happy to report that none of us was ever fatally struck by this VP. But he did motivate us to avoid giving him any cause to do so.

Regardless of its effect on us, I suppose that many people might regard this VP's leadership technique as a bit over the top. After all, few people would be enthusiastic about working for someone who thought of them as harness animals, let alone threatened them whenever they didn't meet expectations. But as most parents would admit after attempting to get their kids to pitch in around the house, the approach has a certain emotional appeal.

The same is true for leaders in many professional settings. Recently, while watching a Syracuse basketball game at a local watering hole, I struck up a conversation with a man named Tom who told me about his frustrations as the foreman of a crew that did road work. He had a strong "Let's get it done and get it done right" work ethic. Unfortunately for Tom, his attitude was at substantial variance from what his team was accustomed to. His men ultimately expressed their displeasure by making up various allegations of harassment and discrimination that resulted in Tom being assigned to another job.

After describing how difficult working with such lazy people was, Tom admitted that he didn't handle the situation as well as he could have. He explained that the

experience taught him that even though he was right to expect a fair day's work from his crew, his "my way or the highway" approach ultimately failed. I think Tom's experience is not uncommon.

Both as parents and as business leaders, we are called upon to find that "golden mean" between carrot and stick to maximize productivity. This is such an inherently difficult task that thousands of books and articles have been written on the subject. Having read many of them myself, I think the most persuasive advice comes from those authors who are not merely expressing an opinion but citing data from controlled studies. That is what Kim Cameron, professor of management and organizations at the University of Michigan and co-founder of the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship, does in his book "Positive Leadership: Strategies for Extraordinary Performance" (Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc. 2008).

Cameron details four leadership strategies validated by empirical research that lead to what he calls "positively deviant performance":

- Fostering a positive work climate.
- Fostering positive relationships among members.
- Fostering positive communication.
- Associating the work being done with positive meaning.

As sensible and scientifically supported as these leadership strategies may be, implementing them is far easier said than done, and I recommend the book to those interested in learning the nuts and bolts of making it happen in their organization.

Cameron makes a couple of key observations that I'll share with you here. First, he does not remove the "rock" from the leader's arsenal of motivational tools. In fact, he emphasizes the importance of delivering candid negative messages to employees to address problems in the workplace and recommends that employees who refuse to improve their performance be "given a chance to flourish elsewhere."

Second, Cameron essentially confirms Tom's experience with his work crew, ob-

serving that liberal use of the “stick” may get your team to move faster but strategies treating them ethically and with fundamental decency are most effective in getting them to “gallop.”

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