

COMMANDMENTS FOR LEADERS

By Phillip Van Hooser, MBA, CSP, CPAE



Although you and some of your industry colleagues may fill the role of leader now, think back if you will and remember the period shortly after you accepted your first supervisory position. Can you recall any of the "professional enlightenment" you received during that period? Specifically, did anyone offer you the following advice? "Congratulations! I know you have a lot to learn, but I am going to tell you something right now that, if remembered, will save you many headaches. Don't get too close to your people. If you get too close to your people, you won't be able to make objective decisions concerning them."

How many of you have received guidance along these lines? I know I did and I'll bet many of you did, too. The only problem with this recommendation, no matter how sincere it was when offered, is that it is not valid. As relationships and expectations among employees and employers have changed over the years, so have the unwritten and often unquestioned concepts that have governed behavior. It is time to dispel myths, such as this one, once and for all. Consider the following thought, which I believe is much more appropriate for our day.

In my training programs, I remind leaders common sense tells us the better we know our "followers," the more effective our leadership skills become. Now, when I'm talking about getting to know them, I'm not talking about such activities as dating or drinking with them, or going on extended vacations with them. Obvious professional and ethical problems, not to mention perception issues, haunt these situations. I am simply reminding leaders in order to get the best from the followers entrusted to them, they must begin by showing sincere interest in them.

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It would be impossible to share all my thoughts on this topic in the space available here, but maybe I can offer you something to think about on your own. Take a minute to think specifically about the people you lead. Would you say you know them well? Whether your answer is "yes" or "no," test yourself against the following criteria I believe any leader ought to know about their followers. I call these the "Van Hooser Seven."

KNOW THEIR NAME.

As simple as this sounds, in many ways it may be the most important point. People simply will not invest themselves in your leadership if you have not taken the time to get to know who they are. Do not assume for a minute that every leader knows the name of each of their immediate followers. It simply is not true. And contrary to popular opinion, those generic references to "Bud," "Champ," and "Hon" are not considered popular terms of endearment for most employees. Take the time to know your employees--all your employees--and be able to pronounce their name correctly. It is an essential first step.

KNOW THEIR SPOUSE'S NAME.

I fully realize the challenge here. Not only does this mean there are almost twice as many names to learn, but periodically, the spouse's name changes! You know what I mean, don't you? Such are the times in which we live. Nevertheless, we need to know the spouse's name because of the position of importance they hold with your employee.

KNOW THE SPOUSE'S OCCUPATION.

This one gets a little trickier. Should we really get this personal? My answer: only if you want your employees to know they are more than just a pair of hands to you. A large percentage of families are supported by two wage earners. Due to present economic circumstances, two incomes are a necessity for many of us. Knowledge of various scenarios that impact your employee's spouse in their professional pursuits like downsizing, transfers, relocations, etc. make it easier for leaders like you to understand and anticipate your followers' needs. Such information should prove helpful in your future planning and decision-making activities.

LEARN ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN.

I constantly hear supervisors and managers moaning and complaining they have so little in common with their employees that there really is nothing for them to talk about. Try talking about their kids. People love to talk about their children. When most people share about their children or grandchildren, they are sharing from their hearts. Don't miss such an opportunity.

REMEMBER THEIR BIRTHDAY!

Nobody wants to remember the year; everybody wants to remember the day. It is the most significant day of the year for each of us. We may not be the type to announce it to the four winds, but we are certainly pleased and honored that someone else might be willing to. I am not suggesting that you buy gifts and cakes for everyone. But, you might be pleasantly surprised what a genuine happy birthday wish from you might do for the attitude and morale of one of your followers.

KNOW THEIR SERVICE ANNIVERSARY DATE.

This is my personal favorite. It's my favorite because so many supervisors and managers so callously overlook it. However, those of us who understand the importance of calling positive attention to professional accomplishments know that the simple act of thanking an individual for four or eight or thirteen or twenty-three years of conscientious and loyal service to the organization will stay with that individual for years. And the best thing of all--it's totally free! You don't have to budget for it. Try it. Your followers will never forget you for it.

ASK ABOUT HOBBIES, PERSONAL INTERESTS, ETC.

Always keep in mind your followers have a whole other life away from work. I have known employees who spent their personal time on any number of activities including coaching a little league team, gardening, building and racing stock cars, fishing, boating, and many others. Taking time to inquire about these outside activities can propel our professional relationships to a whole new level. Plus you might just learn something.

Well, there they are. How did you do? Five out of seven? Three out of seven? On my scale, do you know your employees as well as you thought you did? If so, congratulations. If not, maybe you should begin working to strengthen those relationships. There is one word of caution, though. Always remember that if you can't do these things sincerely, then you shouldn't do them at all. Your employees will be able to see right through insincere actions. But with sincere commitment, the results of your efforts may prove exhilarating.



About Phillip Van Hooser MBA, CSP, CPAE

For 20 years, Phillip Van Hooser has established a reputation among corporate meeting planners and association executives as a world-class keynote speaker, trainer and prolific author on leadership and customer service issues. Providing major corporations and associations in the U.S. and abroad with relevant solutions that transform the way their people lead employees and serve customers. For more information, please call 270-365-1536, email info@vanhooser.com or visit vanhooser.com.