

## Lead, Follow or Find Someone to Blame

By Brian Canning



The automotive industry, without a doubt, is unique. Like any industry and any business, we are driven by a sales and a profit structure that allows us to survive and occasionally prosper, but unlike a lot of industries and a lot of businesses, we suffer significant government regulation and oversight, tough customer perceptions, plus training and production issues that can easily determine our viability. Ours is a decidedly unforgiving environment and one crying out for strong and effective leadership.

The United States Marine Corps defines leadership as “The sum of those qualities of intellect, human understanding and moral character that enables a person to inspire and control a group of people successfully”. Though I am doubtful most of the Marines I have ever known would understand this (I am Army after all), I really like this definition. Leadership is all about moving people successfully and in doing this, using intellect, character and human understanding to get your people to complete a task or mission. Leadership is all about success.

To compare what we do in our shops every day to what that Gunnery Sergeant is facing in combat might seem a stretch, but as he successfully leads his fellow Marines against a determined enemy bent on his destruction, I am wondering why we as an industry have such difficulty in getting our people to do the things we want them to do. Why is he able to get his people to willingly face death and wounding every day, while we have difficulty getting our people to show up for work on time or be consistently productive? Acknowledging that there are issues of training, peer pressure and esprit de corps, leadership is what allows all of us to rise up in any situation and do something above and beyond what we would have any reason to expect. Leadership has the ability to make all of us better. Of course the unfortunate other side of that is that a lack of leadership has the ability to drive down efficiency, drive down sales and literally drive us out of business. My advice is always to lead first, and ask questions later.

It is an absolute truth that most of us would rather not lead. People are fickle, they do the craziest, most unpredictable things and who needs that aggravation. My prototypical shop owner is a technician who somewhere along the way decided he no longer wanted a boss and having someone tell him what to do, so he did something incredibly difficult and courageous and opened his own shop. In this role, as he was starting out, it was only him and his wife or partner and life was good. He could handle the load, had nobody telling him what to do and leadership was the farthest thing from his mind. Unfortunately he did good work and word got out and suddenly there was not enough of him to go around and he was forced to hire somebody. With trial and error he finally found someone whom he could work with and who would do the things he asked but damn-it all, more work, more happy customers and before you knew it we're three techs, a lot boy, a receptionist and a part time bookkeeper. Damn! And now he has to learn to lead. That or possibly go out of business, and I am not going to tell you how many seriously consider the latter as an option and go out of business rather than lead and have to tell someone to do something. That is frightening!

Like this shop owner, many of us are thrust into roles of leadership and though we would much rather not, somehow we have to find a way to get our people doing the things we want and need them to do. Somehow we have to find a way to lead.

I am going to go to a second definition of leadership that will allow me to create what I hope would be a comfortable process for you to take those first steps toward leadership and you becoming a leader. This second definition, provided by the U.S. Army, is the one I learned many years ago in Ansbach, Germany, where I was attending the Primary Non-Commissioned Officers Course (PNOC). The Army describes leadership as "The process of influencing others to accomplish the task or mission by providing purpose, direction and motivation". This is the definition I cut my leadership teeth on and I still like it today because it lets me define the task and relies on me to provide what I see as the appropriate purpose, direction and motivation to assure that the task is completed. If I am not comfortable yelling, I'm not going to yell. If I choose to give an inspiring speech or threaten bodily harm (which I would never do), I have that flexibility. Leaders are judged by their ability to get the job done and deliver the goods and a good leader will use everything at his disposal to accomplish that. Remember, leadership is all about task accomplishment. If we fail, in some kind of way, our approach to leadership has failed. It's as simple as that.

I would stress to anyone interested in taking on a leadership role or interested in improving the results they are seeing that the most difficult part in all of this is that first, determined step. From that moment forward leadership becomes easier, more comfortable. In that same vein, I'll remind you that leadership is an action, not a thought, not a goal and not a philosophy.

I'll describe a life changing event that involved a great Service Manager who I talk to each week. He manages a great shop in Washington State. A year and a half ago I would have described him as a caring, competent manager who was much more comfortable in the role of mentor than driver and a supporter rather than a motivator. On his very worst day he was better than the average manager I talk to but as we moved him toward taking on the leadership role in the shop, I worried about his willingness to be that assertive leader and his willingness to take on those tough interactions that demand strength and conviction. Sometimes people just need a stern, immovable rock and I was not entirely sure this budding leader was a rock and less sure if he was immovable or not. I warned him at the outset of this transition that there were going to be times and situations he would be uncomfortable with, and boy was I right.

Several months into this effort, things were certainly progressing, but one evening a customer who happened to live close to this manager, showed up at his front door with the car that had been worked on that day. To put it mildly, the customer expressed his disappointment with the quality of the work that had been performed and left the car there in the manager's driveway. This manager fixed the items that the customer had noted, returned the car to the customer that night and showed up at work the next morning loaded for bear. He was obviously angry, obviously concerned with the lack of follow through that got him and his crew to this point, and casting off his supportive mentoring persona, he launched into an impassioned indictment of the incident, of the process and unprofessional actions that had gotten his team to this point. He had intense meetings, not only with the unfortunate tech who had worked on the car, but had one on ones with all of the techs and the full team as well. He took the opportunity to review current inspection policy and other factors that might have contributed to this unfortunate incident. By description, he never yelled but he was obviously angry, never acted unprofessionally but he was stern, insistent and definitely immovable. This was a guy who these techs and other staff members had never seen before and not quite knowing how to take him, they fell in line and from that day forward there was no doubt who was in charge and suddenly people were tripping over themselves to do the things they were asked. Suddenly quality mattered, and suddenly leadership was no longer in doubt.

I suspect that there was no one more shocked by these events than the manager himself. He had reacted angrily out of embarrassment and out of concern for his customer, but soon discovered the value of his tirade and the importance of that unsatisfied customer showing up in his driveway. That one event transformed this shop, but more importantly it released the leader within this manager and gave him confidence in his convictions and empowered him to act decisively. Leadership as a rational decision; I like it!

Who have you influenced and inspired toward successful task accomplishment? It is a universal truth that leaders lead and all others walk. Are you leading or walking today?

***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 1<sup>st</sup> 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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