



True Leaders in Unexpected Places

Lessons in leadership aren't limited to the wealthy and powerful.

by Joseph VanFleet, Howard & Howard

I have enjoyed the opportunity and privilege of counseling numerous leaders in my 30-plus years as an attorney. The list includes politicians, celebrities, athletes, owners, officers, directors, and a myriad of other wealthy and powerful people. Nevertheless, one of the most appreciable leaders I have encountered isn't on that list. His name was John Stockham, parts manager at the Guenther Construction Company in Galesburg, and his influence spread much deeper than his title suggested.

In the summer of 1980, the company decided that John needed assistance in his inventory room. Somehow fate tipped in my favor, and I got the job. It took less than a week to learn my first lesson from him.

FOLLOW MY LEAD

John's office was the largest at the plant, with a locked steel door and a large picture window overseeing the complex, with blinds that covered glass thick enough to repel bullets. He opened the door, welcomed me in, and I'll never forget his first words:

*"To the left of my office you will see the mechanics. They are a**h****. To the right are the drivers. They are also a**h****. Across the parking lot in the other building are the laborers. They're the biggest a**h**** of all, so don't go over there unless I'm with you. I'm also an a**h****, but you're stuck with me until they find somebody better. Here's a pushbroom. Start on one end of this building and have the entire floor swept before the end of the day."*

At quitting time John emerged from his office and grabbed the broom from my hand. "Is this all you got done?" he asked with a

WHILE HE WAS TELLING ME I WAS DOING FINE, HE WAS ALSO FINGER-THUMPING MY CHEST AND POINTING AT MY FOREHEAD AS IF I WAS IN DEEP TROUBLE.

smile. "I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow and won't be here until after lunch. Finish the floor in the morning, and we will talk when I get back."

When I arrived the next morning, one of the mechanics was waiting for me in the parking lot with a giant weed whacker. This was not a powered whacker, but a long, heavy pole with a sharp half-moon blade on the end—like something the Grim Reaper might carry. "John called this morning and said change of plans," he explained with a wide, toothless smile. "You're supposed to take this and whack out all the weeds in that field." He then pointed to the field between the plant and the highway.

It must have been 50 acres, and the weeds were as tall as me. "Okay," I mumbled reluctantly as I grabbed the scythe and headed toward the field.

"And also," the mechanic said, still smiling, "you should take your shirt off and give it to me. The heat out there will make you sweat through and ruin it." So I gave him my shirt and started whacking the field.

It was over 90 degrees, and the weeding turned into several hours of torture. There were massive spider webs, snake nests, and dens of four-legged creatures that clearly didn't appreciate my presence. The ground was soggy, and my shoes sank a few inches deeper with every step. As if that wasn't enough, the six-foot tall weeds had some type of sharp, prickly edges that felt like a leather whip on my back and arms.

I questioned whether this was the right job for me. I had whacked maybe 20 square feet when I saw John Stockham approaching. He was running, not walking, and he was carrying my shirt. "You're done out here—head into my office and cool off. I'll be there shortly."

John did not follow me into his office. Instead, he walked to the mechanic's area, out of my sight. Fifteen minutes later, I saw the mechanic who handed me the scythe drive away in his car. John returned to the office, closed his blinds and sat down at his desk. "Some of these guys think there needs to be some ritualistic hazing for new employees," he offered. "They aren't supposed to do that anymore. I promise you it won't happen again. It was my fault, and I'm sorry."

John further explained that it was not quite over. He had gotten a bit confrontational with the mechanics, causing the one with the scythe to resign and go home. "Sometime in the next couple of days, that mechanic will be reinstated, and we will be visited by Duke Jenkins, his union rep. When that happens, follow my lead."

A WIN-WIN SCENARIO

Sure enough, two days later Duke Jenkins walked across the parking lot, stopped several feet in front of me, and with a deep, thundering voice asked the mechanics, "Is this the new kid?" I gazed at him and froze. He was seven feet tall and built like a freight train. He pointed at me as if to say, "I'll deal with you next," then slowly turned and walked into John Stockham's office.

Ten minutes later Duke exited the office, and John called me in. He closed the steel door behind me and opened the shades on his window. Mechanics, drivers and laborers alike began to gather behind Duke and peer through the window. They were laughing, nodding and patting Duke on the shoulder.



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"Joe, you didn't do anything wrong," he began. "Duke said to tell you everything is fine. Sorry your first week had to become so dramatic. You going to be okay?"

"Sure," I responded.

He smiled at me reassuringly and added, "You and I are going to get along just fine."

Funny, but as John spoke to me, I noticed his body language suggested a much different tone. His arms flailed back and forth, and his eyes rolled around repeatedly. While he was telling me I was doing fine, he was also finger-thumping my chest and pointing at my forehead as if I was in deep trouble. And then he winked at me and gestured at the men outside the window, who watched but could not hear John speak to me. They were laughing and reveling in the moment, believing I was getting the scolding of a lifetime. And with that, the brilliance of this moment became obvious.

The conflict was solved. Everybody won. Nobody lost. The mechanic was reinstated with back pay. The kid was safe and welcomed aboard. Duke still had the respect of his colleagues. Everyone was going back to work, and life resumed at the Guenther Construction Company, all thanks to John Stockham's leadership. And that was only my first week! ■

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