



mhca's e-Newsletter

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Be the Leader People Fear

A Guest Article from business and leadership expert John Spence

I was talking to one of my coaching clients, and he mentioned something interesting. He said their executive team recently discussed whether it was good for their people to be afraid they might lose their jobs. Their consensus was... Yes! They believe employees work harder if they fear being fired.

I thought about it for a moment and then told him, "I think it's great to be a leader that people fear. Not afraid that you would fire them. Afraid that they would disappoint you."

True leadership isn't about fear of punishment; it's about inspiring a commitment so profound that letting you down feels unthinkable.

The Leaders Who Inspired Me Most

Looking back over my career, I can think of three CEOs I would run through a brick wall for. Why? It wasn't fear or authority that drove my loyalty. It was trust. I believed in them. I knew they always had my best interests at heart. And I knew they would do everything they could to support me and help me

succeed.

Unquestioned Integrity

These leaders always did what they said they would do. They kept promises, no matter how small. Integrity wasn't a company value on a poster; it was a way of life for them. Knowing I could trust their word gave me confidence to trust their vision. When people see that you're reliable, they follow you wholeheartedly.

Genuine Kindness

Kindness is often underestimated in leadership. But I've found that leaders who treat everyone with respect—from executives to janitors—build organizations where people feel valued. When employees see their leader embody kindness, it creates a culture of care and collaboration. People will go the extra mile when they know they're more than a number.

Humility in Action

Each of these leaders ran large companies. They wielded significant power but carried it lightly. They didn't need to prove their authority. Instead, they opened doors for others and shared the spotlight. As Jim Collins says about Level 5 leaders, they “look out the window to give away credit and in the mirror to take accountability.” Humility in leadership isn't weakness—it's strength under control.

Mastery and Curiosity

Competence doesn't mean knowing it all. The best leaders are honest about their shortcomings and willing to learn from mistakes. They perform exceptionally but never stop striving for growth. Their dedication to learning through reading, listening, and feedback inspires their teams to do the same.

Stewardship Beyond Self

Finally, these leaders thought beyond quarterly results. They wanted to leave a lasting legacy. Stewardship is about making decisions that outlive your tenure—building something better for the next generation. Leaders like this instill a sense of purpose in their teams. They inspire people to think, “We're building something that matters.”

Fear—But the Right Kind

When you lead this way, something remarkable happens. Your people fear disappointing you—not because of repercussions, but because they hold you in such high esteem. It's a fear born from respect, admiration, and love for the values you represent.

How to Be That Leader

1. Set High Standards, Then Live Them

People mirror what they see. If you expect integrity, kindness, and humility, embody those traits. Be consistent. Leadership is as much about who you are as what you do.

2. Show That You Care

Take the time to know your people. Acknowledge their hard work. Celebrate their wins. When you care about their success, they care about yours.

3. Communicate with Clarity and Purpose

Be clear about your expectations, and articulate the “why” behind decisions. This fosters alignment and ensures your team understands the bigger picture.

4. Invest in Their Growth

Encourage professional and personal development. Provide opportunities for learning and advancement. When employees see you’re invested in their future, they become more invested in yours.

5. Build a Culture of Accountability

Create an environment where commitments matter. Hold yourself and others accountable—not through fear of punishment, but a shared commitment to excellence.

A Lasting Impact

The best leaders don’t just create followers; they cultivate leaders. They inspire others to rise to their full potential. And when they leave, their impact continues. That’s what it means to be a leader people “fear” in the best way—someone whose legacy is defined by the lives they’ve touched and the organizations they’ve transformed.

Enjoyed the article? Don't miss John's sessions at our upcoming Winter Conference in Clearwater Beach, Florida. [Click here](#) for the full agenda.



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