



How to Lead When They're Not Following

Bruce E. Roselle

A few years ago, I provided executive coaching to a VP of Sales/Marketing who received 360 degree feedback on the front-end of our engagement. From the ratings and comments on the report, it was clear that his sales team had a very low opinion, even in areas that he thought would come out as strengths. A former career military guy who had held various leadership roles, he concluded, "If my team's not following, then I'm not leading." He decided to resign.

More recently, I worked with the CEO of a medical nonprofit organization who had been in her role for about a year. Having been given a clear message by the Board Chair that the staff and leaders at this organization were headed in a downward spiral, she very quickly began to institute change. The team, however, thought that most aspects of the clinic were just fine. They did not see the need for many of the new changes, and had they had become accustomed to a passive, distant leader over the years. Their reaction to this new leader and her changes, after an initial honeymoon period, was distrustful, resistant, and hostile.

I was brought in to work with the CEO as her coach and it was decided that I should interview a core group of the most critical team members, as well as the other top leaders. This core group of 'deep state' team members had begun to stage a coup, going around the CEO and directly attacking her to the Board, as well as refusing to institute the changes. In my interviews, it was clear that a deep level of distrust had developed. The CEO and I decided to work to turn around the distrust.

How does trust erode? In this case, it was the result of the CEO stepping into a deeply distrustful and fiercely independent environment, and then not spending enough time on the front end of changes to enroll the team. Stephen Covey (7 Habits of Highly Effective People) encouraged leaders to build the emotional bank account of trust in little deposits over time. David Horsager (The Trust Edge) identifies 8 pillars of trust that include communication and consistency—the two aspects over the 3 years I have seen as primary in building and maintaining trust. But it is another of Horsager's pillars that I think mostly undermined this nonprofit CEO—clarity. She did not clearly communicate the need for the changes, nor did she adequately enroll the team in the changes.

Even though it's true that, if they are not following, you are not leading, it is also true that it's never too late to go back and do the right thing. It might mean that several team members resign as a result of their deep hostility, but the remaining team can be nurtured to adapt, become part of, and even embrace the changes.

People adapt to changes in a four-phase process. They often start by **holding on** to the previous way, denying that things will actually change. Next, they start **letting go** of the old structures and procedures, recognizing that the organization will not go back to the way things were. Then, they begin **reaching out** to test the changes and determine how they can be successful within the new system. And, finally, they begin **taking hold** and fully embracing the changes. As happened with this nonprofit, some of the most entrenched resisters will leave and find employment elsewhere, but the remaining group will be committed to moving forward in the new direction.

What can a new leader do to enroll followers? Before new leaders can have impact in the existing organization, they must approach the staff and existing leadership (formal and informal) in a four-phase process:

Investigate

- Learn as much as possible about the situation in advance, before the first day
- Diagnose the challenges, opportunities
- Shed assumptions that might get in the way
- Create an initial strategy for addressing issues

Influence

- Initiate relationships (individual, small groups)
- Test early assumptions, get to know the people, culture
- Learn the job more fully
- Develop productive relationships with key stakeholders
- Identify problems, opportunities
- Establish credibility via early wins

Interconnect

- Deepen relationships with key stakeholders, others
- Build, contribute to a strong team
- Develop influential coalitions, networks
- Create a vision and a plan of action with key stakeholders
- Begin to enroll others in the plan

Impact

- Align strategy, skills of team members, systems
- Enroll, actively involve others
- Listen to others' feedback, insight, perspective
- Hire new people to fill gaps
- Manage successful implementation(s)

Engaging your team in this way will help build trust and enroll them in the changes you intend to make as their leader, whether you are new to the role or taking on broader scope of responsibility.