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MONDAY MANNA
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ARE YOU LEADING, OR NIPPING AT PEOPLE'S HEELS?

By Robert J. Tamasy

Years ago, I had the privilege of co-authoring a book with a friend, Ken Johnson, based on his experiences of raising sheep near his rural home. The Bible has a lot to say about sheep, so learning from him and writing about the curious behavior that sheep exhibit was both educational and enlightening.

There are dozens of references in the Scriptures about sheep, shepherds, lambs and flocks, and frequently people are compared to sheep. But usually, these comparisons are not complimentary. For instance, sheep are dirty, stupid animals. Left to their own devices, sheep cannot help but get themselves in many kinds of difficulty. So they need a shepherd, someone to keep watch over them, care for and rescue them in times of trouble.

One of the unique traits of sheep is undivided loyalty to the shepherd. My friend demonstrated this when I visited his farm home one day. The sheep were in the pasture, quietly grazing. Ken said, "Call out to the sheep." I did but received no response. "Yell at them, or whistle," he suggested. I did those things too, but no reaction. Had they all suddenly gone deaf? Then Ken called to them in a normal voice tone. Instantly each member of his flock raised its head, attentive to their shepherd's instructions.

I was reminded of this experience recently after hearing a speaker describe a border collie, a breed of dog often used for managing sheep. These dogs don't lead but direct the sheep by barking and nipping at their heels. This is in sharp contrast to the trusted sheep who leads the sheep without coercion. The sheep dog annoys and even frightens, while the shepherd caringly guides the flock.

These two contrasting styles are similar to how many business and professional executives approach leadership. Some lead by showing the way and guiding those who follow; others get their people moving by the equivalent of nipping at their heels. Both approaches can yield results, but there is a preferred way to go about managing and leading people. In one of His best-known messages, Jesus Christ used the shepherd-flock metaphor:

The effective leader is known and trusted. Teaching by using the metaphor of a shepherd and his flock, Jesus observed, *"The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep...the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out...he goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice"* (John 10:2-4).

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The ‘heel-nipper’ does not inspire loyalty. In contrast, the one who leads by coercion or fear is not regarded by staff people as a “shepherd.” They do not accept this person as one to follow out of trust; if they follow orders, it is out of necessity, not inspired loyalty. They do not sense he is a champion for their best interests. *“But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.... The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away...because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep”* (John 10:5,12-13).

The effective leader puts the interests of others first. People will often go far “beyond the call of duty,” doing much more than required because they trust their leader has their best interests at heart – sometimes even putting those ahead of his own. A leader who exhibits a sacrificial spirit is easy to follow. *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... I know my sheep and my sheep know me – and I lay down my life for the sheep”* (John 10:11-15).

© 2021. Robert J. Tamasy has written Marketplace Ambassadors: CBMC’s Continuing Legacy of Evangelism and Discipleship; Business at Its Best: Timeless Wisdom from Proverbs for Today’s Workplace; Pursuing Life With a Shepherd’s Heart, coauthored with Ken Johnson; and The Heart of Mentoring, coauthored with David A. Stoddard. Bob’s biweekly blog is: www.bobtamasy.blogspot.com.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. What do you find to be the most important idea or principle in this discussion of sheep and shepherds as it relates to the business and professional world?
2. If you have leadership or management responsibilities, would you see yourself as a shepherd, or more like the ‘heel-nipper’? Explain your answer.
3. Who have you worked for – or with – that exemplified (or exemplifies) the role of the shepherd in the way he or she interacts with their staff? Describe what this looks like in a practical sense.
4. Do you agree that people are more inclined to work hard, even well beyond what is required, for the leader in whom they have great trust and believe has their best interests in mind? Why or why not?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:

Psalm 119:176; Isaiah 53:6; Jeremiah 50:6; John 1:29-31,35; 1 Peter 2:25, 5:2-6

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