

## **My Little Pony as a Lesson in Leadership**

By Doug Crawford, PhD

Many of my lessons in leadership were learned on the farm. Growing up in Ohio, I spent a lot of time on my grandpa's farm. On one visit, my brother Scott and I were intrigued by a new addition to the animal menagerie. Our grandpa chuckled as he told us that my uncle had won a carnival pony in a poker game the night before and we were welcome to take it for a ride in the pasture.

We ran out to the barn in delight. Both of us had ridden horses before, but grandpa had never had one on his farm. Scott and I shared a vision of a summer afternoon complete with high-speed adventure. I grabbed the tack while Scott led the pony outside the barn.

After saddling the pony, Scott graciously suggested that I take the first ride. So I swung myself up into the saddle and began to gently kick the steed. That pony just stood there with a look of indignation on his face. We were puzzled; the pony seemed to be so obedient when it was led out of the barn. Scott suggested that he run beside me and hold onto the bridle until the pony got up to speed. I always yielded to my older brother's wisdom, so off we went down the old cow path. From a gentle cantor to a full gallop, the pony sprinted down the path as I sat tall in the saddle and my brother ran alongside.

As my brother could no longer keep up, I took full control of the reins. I had a spark of confidence that we had overcome the obstacle and the pony finally understood what we were trying to accomplish. Within seconds of me taking control of the pony, he no longer ran straight; rather, he started to run around the pasture in tight circles. Next, he reared up, threw me to the ground, and proceeded to trample me. Scott came to my rescue by calming the pony down. We went our separate ways as Scott led the pony to the barn, and I limped back to the farmhouse not realizing that I had learned a valuable lesson that would come to my aid 15 years later.

Fast forward to an executive meeting in one of the largest manufacturing facilities in the United States. The Director of Assembly Operations was skeptical about the latest initiative to move to self-directed work teams throughout the plant. I was responsible for implementing the initiative, and despite some healthy skepticism from our corporate leadership team, I had full support to see the project through to completion. The Division VP had staked his career on the idea that all workers would be part of a defined work team. He claimed decisions would no longer be driven top-down; rather, there would be a higher level of participation and bottom-up input into how the plant would run. His advocacy for teams was not driven by altruistic thoughts. He believed that higher levels of participation would result in greater efficiencies and higher productivity.

Self-directed work teams are not new. In the coalfields of Wales after World War II, Eric Trist introduced the concept of self-directed teams with great success. Russell Ackoff (1994) claims that in a rapidly changing environment, organizations must move from a command and control model to a team-based model in order to have the agility in

response to changes. Rather than having an appointed leader, leaders would emerge from the group, or leadership could be equally shared or rotated.

As we sat around the meeting table, the executive team was puzzled why the people throughout the plant were heavily resisting the team initiative. After all, who wouldn't want to have greater say in the workplace? When we announced to the plant workers that people were going to be part of a work team, they just grouched. Then an accusatory finger was pointed right at me, and I was asked, "What have YOU done wrong? Why isn't this working? What are YOU going to do to fix it?"

Suddenly, the light bulb came on. I told the executive team about my pony experience years ago. This was a pony that had been in a carnival most of its life. It went to work everyday and went around and around in a circle with little children riding on its back. This humble beast didn't need to think or be concerned about much as it lived a very structured life. I had assumed that a pony would want to run free and sprint across the pasture. Yet, this pony did not appreciate that freedom. As a result, the pony only knew how to be led by the bridle. When there was someone in the saddle, he was supposed to go in circles. His first taste of freedom was confusing because he had never run in a straight line with a rider on his back. In fact, the experience in the pasture was so disconcerting that the pony violently tried to destroy the agent of change that was sitting in the saddle and kicking him. Simply declaring to the plant that we were now working in teams was akin to directing the pony, which previously ran in circles, to run in a straight path; now our workers wanted to kill us.

I am not trying to assert that the factory workers were beasts of burden, rather, like the pony, we all become comfortable with our routine and have difficulty adapting to change. Often, our routine is all we know and it is difficult to see ourselves performing in other organizational roles. And with life's surprises, it is nice to have some consistency in one's life. It is no wonder people resist. This resistance to change can even manifest itself in destructive behavior.

As leaders, we need to be careful as we project our values and new ideas on the greater organization. Change occurs at different speeds within organizations. Frequently, the leadership team works for months on new ideas requiring them to sort through the impact of the change. Thus, by the time the leadership team is ready to launch a new idea on the organization, the decision makers have already come to terms with the change. When the new idea is presented to the other organizational members, it is a fresh idea. Unlike the leadership team, others haven't had the opportunity to work through the emotional and intellectual impact that it has on them.

The lesson from the pony taught me that leaders should be patient in times of change and empathize to what others are feeling. As leaders, we have a bias for action and often want to grab people by the bridle and lead them down the path. Rather, we should involve people early in the change. Let them know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what it means to them. Ask for input, and listen. Provide a vision of the future. Remember, you may be asking someone to do something she has never done before and

doesn't even know what success looks like. How are the future roles different than the past roles? What is changing? Also, let people know what isn't changing. In times of change, people look for something they can cling to as an anchor. If people understand that some specific things will remain the same (certain policies, procedures, relationships, etc.), it minimizes anxiety and the feeling of chaos. This is an ongoing process requiring a high level of engagement and advocacy by the leadership team.

As a leader, I have learned that people want to be valued in the workplace and can adapt to change if the leader is willing to invest the time as an advocate for the change. Eventually, we were able to move the entire plant into a team-based operations model. Work teams brought numerous successes with reduced inventories, greater efficiencies, and higher productivity, coupled with a high level of employee satisfaction. As for the pony, my uncle traded it for car parts shortly after our incident.

#### Checklist:

- ✓ You know the impact of the change on the organization and individuals
- ✓ You are able to list what is changing and what is not.
- ✓ You have created a short list of talking points that explain the reason for change and the direction the organization is headed, and why.
- ✓ You are able to tell people what's in it for them.
- ✓ You have identified the new skills required for individuals & have training resources in place.
- ✓ You have identified communication venues for delivering information and gathering feedback.
- ✓ All your leaders are on board and are actively advocating the change with their departments.

#### Reference:

Ackoff, Russell L. (1994) *The democratic corporation: A radical prescription for recreating corporate America and rediscovering success*. New York: Oxford Press.