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Leadership Development Series



Pushing versus Pulling

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

Dwight Eisenhower was the 34th President of the United States from 1953 until 1961. He had previously been a five-star general in the United States Army during World War II and served as Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe; he had responsibility for planning and supervising the invasion of North Africa in Operation Torch in 1942–43 and the successful invasion of France and Germany in 1944–45 from the Western Front.

Eisenhower was a leader who never passed up an opportunity to share his beliefs about setting the example. One of the methods he was said to have used to educate the generals under his command was take a chain and stack it in a pile on a table. He would then ask the generals, “If I push that chain, which way will it go?” Some would size up the chain and give their opinion, but the correct answer to Eisenhower’s question was that you simply do not know. Eisenhower would then grab one end of the chain and ask, “If I take the chain and pulled it as I moved in a specific direction, which way will it go?”

The answer is simple, it will follow you.

That is one of the most simple, yet effective demonstrations of leadership I have ever heard. If you push your people, you simply do not know which direction they are going to go in. To truly lead them, you must show them the way by your example. Teach this concept to your team members. It doesn’t matter if an individual is leading one or one thousand. Unless you are a drill instructor trying to make a hardened soldier, trying to lead through intimidation always seems to end in failure.

Don't misinterpret the message above. When you are developing your team members, you will want to push them beyond what they think they may be capable of so you can help them grow and develop into problem solvers. Most people will never know what they are truly capable of if they don't have an outside force challenging them to improve. A strong leader can become that outside force, but they must be willing to go to the same places they are trying to bring others. This lesson by General Eisenhower is a reminder that most people in leadership positions are like travel agents, trying to get people to a destinations they've never been to themselves. Don't be a travel agent, be a tour guide.

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