

By *Bill Guertin*

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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“The New Owners”: A Fable

“You’re fired,” he said to the group, matter-of-factly. “All of you are without employment as of right now.”

The stunned group of managers and supervisors looked at their new boss in shock. Surely they knew the new owners would make changes. Certainly some things needed changing. But fire all the managers? It couldn’t be.

“I’m also here to tell you that you’ll each be asked if you’d like to re-apply for your old jobs again.”

That did it. The group began talking and raising their voices to each other. One stood up and yelled, “Why would I do that? I wouldn’t work for you for all the tea in China!” Others chimed in with similar jabs of their own. The room had quickly spun into a dangerous place for the new boss to be.

His hands went up in the air to silence the crowd, and a strange smile crossed his face.

“Before you get out of hand,” he shouted, “you had better hear the whole story.”

It was a good 60 seconds before the room had calmed down enough for him to continue.

“Please forgive me for doing that. I can now tell you the truth. The truth is, nobody’s being fired. You all are still gainfully employed by the new company.”

Now the group was really angry. “Why are you pulling our chain?” “What kind of a sick joke is this?” You could cut the tension with a knife.

“I can assure you this is not a joke,” he said calmly but firmly. “This was a necessary part of our orientation. Please take a deep breath and calm down.”

The room slowly came back to order, and he began to explain.

“There’s a reason I had to begin our meeting in this way. I had to measure your gut feeling, and the only way to do that was to simulate an actual firing. I do deeply apologize, but now I need to ask you a few very important questions.

“When I announced that all of you would no longer work here, there were some of you in the room who were relieved. A weight had been lifted. You’ve been here far longer than you wanted to be, and this was now your opportunity to move on.

“If that was you, I am officially giving you permission to go and do whatever it is that you really want to do with your career. No grudges. No hard feelings. It’s time. Go.

“Likewise, when I asked how many of you wanted to re-apply for your old jobs, there was another percentage of you who were thinking that there was no way you wanted that job back. I’m giving you the same permission I gave the other group to pursue your dream. If it’s not here, I want you to find it. And I wish you well.

“Now, for the group that remains, I’d like to encourage you to apply and interview for your same jobs. But the actual interviewing and hiring will be done not by our Human Resources people, but by the current team of employees that you supervise.”

You could have heard a pin drop.

“And furthermore, here’s a sampling of the questions they’ll be asking you:

- What’s your philosophy of a successful department?
- What do you think motivates employees to work hard for their supervisor?
- How would you answer a customer if you knew their account was affected by a computer problem?

“Would your own team of employees hire you back?”

The question hung silently in the room.

Having made his point, the executive began speaking slowly and carefully:

“You see, as the new owners, we expect our managers to treat our front-line employees as if they were their best customers. Our philosophy is not to yell at anyone that works for us. On the contrary, we cater to them. We do all we can to make sure they’re taken care of.

“In our company, managers and supervisors help our front-line staff to get the tools and support they need to succeed. Managers are there to help remove anything that’s standing in the way of their employees’ success. They are there as someone they can come to for help, not run from because of fear of reprimand.

“As a result, our customer service scores are the envy of the industry. Our team members are happy, motivated, and willing to go the extra mile for our customers, because they know that their supervisor is going the extra mile for them. We have higher employee loyalty, lower turnover, and a work atmosphere that people enjoy.

“That’s the way we’ll be doing things from now on. If you can understand that and get behind it, welcome to the company of your future.”

The moral of the story? If you’re a manager or supervisor, and barking orders is your idea of leadership, think again. True leaders understand who their real customers are.

How about you?

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