

Tender or Tough?

We've probably all been given advice over the years about the most effective style of leadership. I've been told by some I need to be tougher. I've been told by others to be softer and give more grace.

I remember my first year of teaching at a Christian university. I crashed head-on into a grace crisis. I had taught at other universities and developed a very strong stance on late work, late to class and late thinking. I knew I was to help prepare young adults for a successful career in business. So, I guess I was tough.

I remained tough on expectations at the Christian business college. How should a leader handle requests such as:

"Professor, I need a little grace on the deadline for my paper. My grandmother needed me to cut her grass yesterday, and I couldn't finish the paper."

"My roommate broke up with her boyfriend, and she needed me to be with her last night. Can I turn my paper in next week?"

"I know the paper is due today but we've been in revival at church, and I play drums for our services. I just haven't had time to work on my paper. You understand right?"

In each of the true scenarios, I had to make a choice between tough or tender.

I visited with other professors who had similar issues to handle. Everyone seemed to define grace differently. A couple of the professors were extremely tough on performance criteria, but others seemed to be more graceful. I think both options are useful in teaching. But I chose to remain strict on deadlines and tried to demonstrate care for the student in other ways.

I've been teaching and hopefully modeling "tough on standards ... tender with people" for most of my leadership career.

Decision points occur throughout every day. Standards are the essence of any business system. Check the box. This is how we do things here.

Every day, someone wants NOT to check the box. Or, someone forgets to check the box. Or someone creates a new box to check. Or, someone's dog had puppies, and the someone couldn't come to work to check any boxes.

How leaders respond to daily "people challenges" will determine the success of a project and perhaps even the organization. We must believe that little things matter. Small stuff DOES matter.

- Coach and remind teams about standards.
- The essence of standards is consistency.
- When standards are not met, coach with tenderness.
- Tough coaching rarely improves performance in the long run. It just increases turnover.
- Be a systems coach and a lover of people.

"Well, student, I cannot accept your paper. Work is due on the date assigned without exception. What I will do for you is pray for your grandmother and allow you to read an additional book and write a paper about it."

Tenderly tough seems to be a good leadership style.

"He (Jesus) said to another man, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But you go and preach the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:59-60).

PLATFORM TIP No. 4

Don't add more than one platform at a time.

For example, if you just added Instagram to your platform, master it before adding a Twitter account. Every medium is different and takes time to learn.

Quality over quantity applies here.

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