

Leadership in Cinema



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

LEAN ON ME

(Based on a true story)

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Studio: Warner Brothers Released: 1989
Producer: Norman Twain Director: John G. Avildsen
Genre: Drama Audience Rating: PG 13
Runtime: 109 minutes

Materials

Lean on Me DVD, *Leading Change* by John P. Kotter (one copy per student), Crew Cohesion Assessment Tool (one copy per student), *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service* (one copy per student), notepads, and writing utensils

Objective

The objective of this lesson is for students to watch the *Lean on Me* video and participate in group discussion revolving around team cohesion and leading for change.

Basic Plot

“An arrogant and unorthodox teacher returns as principal to the idyllic high school from which he had earlier been fired to find it a den of drug abuse, gang violence, and urban despair. Eventually his successful but unorthodox methods lead to a clash with city officials that threatens to undo all his efforts.” ([IMDb website](#))

Cast of Main Characters

Morgan Freeman	Principal Joe Clark
Beverly Todd	Ms. Levias
Robert Guillaume.....	Dr. Frank Napier
Alan North.....	Mayor Don Bottman
Lynne Thigpen	Mrs. Leona Barrett
Robin Bartlett.....	Mrs. Elliott
Michael Beach	Mr. Darnell
Ethan Phillips	Mr. Rosenberg
Sandra Reaves-Phillips	Mrs. Powers
Jermaine Hopkins.....	Thomas Sams
Karen Malina White	Kaneesha Carter
John Ring	Fire Chief Gaines

Facilitator Notes

Download and/or print or order one copy of per student:

- Crew Cohesion Assessment Tool. Developed by Mission-Centered Solutions and located in the Toolbox on the [WFLDP website](#).
- "[Leading Change by John P. Kotter](#)." Book review by Pat Naughtin.
- [Leading in the Wildland Fire Service](#). PMS 494-2. Available through the Publication Management System, NFES 2889.

Facilitation Tips

1. Organize a group of students to participate in the Lean on Me discussion.
2. Have students, individually or as a group, watch Lean on Me.
3. Break. (Suggestion: Between Chapters 16 and 17 at about 56:52)
4. Conduct a guided discussion using some or all of the associated resources (handout and possible comments provided). Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that have difficulty.
5. Have students complete the Crew Cohesion Assessment Tool.
6. Facilitators may wish to incorporate the Risk Management Process into discussions.

References

Facilitators are encouraged to review the links below in order to obtain information that may be helpful during group/classroom discussions and for continued leadership development.

- Clark, Joe and Picard, Joe. “Laying Down the Law—Joe Clark’s Strategy
- Kotter International website. “[The 8-Step Process for Leading Change.](#)”
- Miller, Olandha Pinky. “A Phenomenological Case Study of a Principal Leadership: The Influence of Mr. Clark’s Leadership on Students, Teachers and Administrators at Eastside High School.” [Georgia State University Digital Archive.](#)

Leadership Challenges

As part of this lesson, facilitators are encouraged to challenge students to read the following selections:

- Kotter, John P. *A Sense of Urgency*. Harvard Business Press. 2008.
- Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press. 1996. (A selection from the Professional Reading Program.)

If you have access to Netflix, watch *Hard Lessons* (George McKeena Story) and compare and contrast this movie with *Lean on Me*. Discuss as a group the two vastly different leadership approaches to nearly the same set of circumstances.

LEAN ON ME

Guided Discussion with Possible Answers

1. Read “The Authority to Lead versus the Decision to Lead” on pages 5 and 6 of *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*. Why was Mr. Clark reluctant to accept the position? How might the scenario played out had Mr. Clark been told he was being moved into the position versus his “willingness” to lead?
 - Mr. Clark claimed he had been forgotten in the system. He felt that the mayor was trying to save his budget and Dr. Napier was trying to save his career. He wanted no part.
 - The authority to lead does not always mean that an individual has the ability to lead. Had Mr. Clark been commanded to lead without his own decision to lead, there is plenty of reason to believe that there would have been no change at Eastside High, possibly even becoming worse.
2. Describe the operational environment at Eastside High where staff worked and students learned.
 - Students ruled. Nobody took ownership for low student or teacher performance.
 - Eastside High was a high-risk campus—risk to the health and safety of staff and students due to drugs and violence.
 - The fear to safety impeded the learning process and created chaos.
3. Compare and contrast Mr. Clark’s leadership styles with various stakeholders: staff, students, and parents.
 - Staff (13:52-17:55)
 - ❖ Mr. Clark is an authoritative, autocratic, tightly controlled leader. He declares a state of emergency and removes the democracy with his staff.
 - ❖ Mr. Clark gives clear direction: talking during meetings, names of hoodlums on his desk by noon, cages in cafeteria removed, teachers to reclaim the halls with the help of security, staff reassignments, etc.
 - ❖ Mr. Clark places blame of student failure upon the teachers.
 - Students (17:52-25:52)
 - ❖ Mr. Clark uses a softer, more inspirational approach with the students. He has security remove 300+ poor performing students and drug dealers. Mr. Clark immediately shows hope for a safer educational environment and notifies others they could be next.
 - ❖ He challenges the students to lead the resurrection: “Ghosts are spirits that rise from the dead.”

- ❖ He puts the responsibility for success on the student. Merely passing the test is not enough. Students must learn and work for what they want, not to waste their time and fall into the trap of crime, drugs, and death.
- Parents (25:53-29:22)
 - ❖ He focuses on student safety (war to save 2,700 students by expelling 300) and turns the meeting into a revival of sorts where he is the “chosen one” for change. He tells the parents that he is “no damn good (flashback to Dr. Napier’s comments) unless he does whatever he has to”—even if he isn’t polite. (May want to discuss the Risk Management Process here.)
 - ❖ He suggests his selection as the agent of change as being divinely inspired to reach his audience. Change is bigger than himself.
- 4. Mr. Clark declares a state of emergency and identifies himself as the lone authority. Read pages 9 and 10 of *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*. Is there support in the reading for Mr. Clark’s leading with such authority? Did this approach ultimately hamper his change efforts?
 - “Occasionally, leaders may be required to provide authoritative, autocratic, tightly controlled direction that requires immediate obedience.”
 - Mr. Clark’s leadership may have contributed to Mrs. Levias’s lack of leadership and confrontations with Mr. Darnell. As seen in Mrs. Levias’s confrontation with Mr. Clark (1:17:43 -1:20:20), there were many people who helped promote change—Mr. Clark was not alone.
- 5. Mr. Clark attempts to instill pride in the students. List a few examples the methods he used. What do fire leaders and students of fire do to promote pride?
 - Answers will vary.
 - ❖ Gives them the title of “Ghosts” who will lead the resurrection.
 - ❖ Requires all students and staff to sing the school song on demand.
 - ❖ Removed the “trash,” including low-performers, bad teachers, and graffiti.
 - ❖ Asked that the students lead and effort to build an atrium.
 - Answers will vary.
 - ❖ Promotion of the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles.
 - ❖ Crew/unit insignias.
 - ❖ Clean and properly-maintained equipment.
- 6. How does Mr. Clark’s command philosophy differ from that of the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program (WFLDP)? Refer to “Command Philosophy” on page 15 of *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*.

- Command
 - ❖ Mr. Clark: Maintained sole command.
 - ❖ WFLDP: “Our philosophy of command supports the way we manage incidents. To generate effective decision making and to cope with the unpredictable nature of incidents, fire leaders decentralize command. That is, we empower subordinate leaders to make decision based on their understanding of their leader’s vision for success.”
- Command Based on Intent
 - ❖ Mr. Clark: Doesn’t want anyone to know his vision. (41:55)
 - ❖ WFLDP: “Translating vision into clear leader’s intent is at the heart of our command philosophy.”
- Unity of Effort
 - ❖ Mr. Clark: Seemed to lack the ability to bring unity until Mr. Darnell and Mrs. Levias provide insight. He empowered the students unite against the naysayers in the community but failed to form a powerful guiding coalition of staff members during the early stages of the change effort.
 - ❖ WFLDP: “Our leaders subscribe to unity of effort as a second key component of our command philosophy. In a high-risk environment, mixed messages or countermanding directives add to the potential for friction, danger, and uncertainty...A unified leadership team sends a powerful message: when all leaders follow the same priorities and reinforce leader’s intent through consistent actions and words, our people develop a strong sense of trust for their leaders. It dispels the propensity to second-guess command decisions as subordinates recognize the leadership team moves as one and is solidly in charge.”

“LEADING CHANGE” – A LEAN ON ME REFLECTION

Possible Answers

Using the eight steps from “Leading Change by John P. Kotter”—a book review by Pat Naughtin (handout), list at least one change success and failure example found in the movie. Share your findings with other participants.

Step	Lessons	Success or Failure Example(s)
1	Establish a sense of urgency.	Mr. Clark ensures that all stakeholders understand he has less than a year to raise test scores. Poor performing students are expelled the first day he arrives at Eastside High.
2	Form a powerful guiding coalition team.	Mr. Clark does not do well at forming his guiding coalition team. Mr. Clark insults women on welfare during the parent meeting. Mr. Darnell, Mrs. Levias, and Dr. Napier stand up to Mr. Clark and let him know that there are others with him in the change effort.
3	Create a clear vision expressed simply.	Directly: Dr. Napier and the Mayor want the test scores raised to the 75% mark. Indirectly: Dr. Napier wants to save his job. The Mayor wants re-elected. Directly: Mr. Clark wants a safe learning environment and passing test scores Indirectly: Mr. Clark wants a higher standard of living and recognition for the black race. Directly: Mrs. Barrett wants Clark removed. Indirectly: Mrs. Barrett wants power and a voice.
4	Communicate the vision.	Mr. Clark clearly expresses the vision of a safe environment by expelling 300 students the first day and continues as needed. Mr. Clark tells all stakeholders about the need to raise basic skills test scores to the acceptable range. Mr. Clark tells Mrs. Levias that he does not want anyone to know his vision.

Step	Lessons	Success or Failure Example(s)
		Mrs. Barrett informs the Mayor how she wants things to proceed—appoint her to the school board, she'll get Mr. Clark removed, and then she would endorse him for re-election.
5	Empower others to act on the vision.	Mr. Clark alienates some staff to the point of insubordination and potential suspension. Mr. Clark empowers the students to lead the resurrection—to “rise like ghosts.” Dr. Napier and Mrs. Levias stand up to Mr. Clark and affirm that he is not alone—all stakeholders are a part of the team.
6	Plan for and creating short-term wins.	Mr. Clark cleans up the school campus: expels low-performing students and staff, security moves outside while teachers take control of the halls, custodians remove graffiti and trash, school spirit is raised through singing of the school song on demand and construction of an atrium. Mr. Darnell acts quickly to bar the Fire Chief from inspecting the school. Mr. Clark uses a bat to make the point he cannot enter without a court order.
7	Consolidate improvements and producing still more change.	Mr. Clark reassigns staff to better suit his style and mission. Mr. Clark and teachers implement student/peer mentoring and remedial reading programs when practice test scores come back well below the mark.
8	Institutionalize the new approaches.	Mr. Clark creates a state of emergency and takes authority away from the staff. Mrs. Powers rewrites the school song. Dr. Napier and Mrs. Levias stand up to Mr. Clark and redirect his attention to a team effort.

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2. Describe the operational environment at Eastside High where staff worked and students learned.
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 - Staff
 - Students
 - Parents
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5. Mr. Clark attempts to instill pride in the students. Give examples. What do fire leaders and students of fire do to promote pride?
6. How does Mr. Clark’s command philosophy differ from that of the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program (WFLDP)? Refer to “Command Philosophy” on page 15 of *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service*.
 - Command
 - Command Based on Intent
 - Unity of Effort

DUTY

Be proficient in your job, both technically & as a leader.

- Take charge when in charge.
- Adhere to professional standard operating procedures.
- Develop a plan to accomplish given objectives.

Make sound & timely decisions.

- Maintain situation awareness in order to anticipate needed actions.
- Develop contingencies & consider consequences.
- Improvise within the commander's intent to handle a rapidly changing environment.

Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised, accomplished.

- Issue clear instructions.
- Observe & assess actions in progress without micro-managing.
- Use positive feedback to modify duties, tasks & assignments when appropriate.

Develop your subordinates for the future.

- Clearly state expectations.
- Delegate tasks that you are not required to do personally.
- Consider individual skill levels & developmental needs when assigning tasks.

Know your subordinates and look out for their well-being.

- Put the safety of your subordinates above all other objectives.
- Take care of your subordinate's needs.
- Resolve conflicts between individuals on the team.

Keep your subordinates informed.

- Provide accurate & timely briefings.
- Give the reason (intent) for assignments & tasks.
- Make yourself available to answer questions at appropriate times.

Build the team.

- Conduct frequent debriefings with the team to identify lessons learned.
- Recognize accomplishments & reward them appropriately.
- Apply disciplinary measures equally.

Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.

- Observe human behavior as well as fire behavior.
- Provide early warning to subordinates of tasks they will be responsible for.
- Consider team experience, fatigue & physical limitations when accepting assignments.

Know yourself and seek improvement.

- Know the strengths/weaknesses in your character & skill level.
- Ask questions of peers & supervisors.
- Actively listen to feedback from subordinates.

Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.

- Accept full responsibility for & correct poor team performance.
- Credit subordinates for good performance.
- Keep your superiors informed of your actions.

Set the example.

- Share the hazards & hardships with your subordinates.
- Don't show discouragement when facing setbacks.
- Choose the difficult right over the easy wrong.

RESPECT

INTEGRITY

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