

A life coach born of experience

A ONCE-HARDENED COP
"LEARNED HOW TO BE REAL"
AFTER COLLEAGUE'S CANCER
DIAGNOSIS

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By Sheba R. Wheeler
Denver Post Staff Writer

Sam McGhee was a bad boss, and he knew it. McGhee had worked as a cop for 12 years before he nailed his first managerial position, working as a sergeant with the...Police Department in 1992.

But a self-imposed and culturally accepted belief that supervisors must remain distant from employees crippled him.

Members of his team never bought into his initiatives, and enthusiasm was low.

He was clunky, inefficient and ineffective as a leader, unable to inspire trust, much less high performance among his team.

By the time McGhee made lieutenant three years later, he was so removed from the needs of his employees that he offered a colleague dying of cancer a handshake instead of the hug that others willingly offered.

"Jerry said to me, 'Lieutenant are you gonna give me a hug too, or can you do that?'" McGhee remembers his friend saying.

Ten years later, the once hardened cop-turned-life-coach-and-motivational speaker wants to help others.

"It certainly wasn't anything I ever set out to do. It's been more of an evolution in my life than a professional goal," says McGhee, 46, a sector commander...who privately runs Leadership Awakened, an executive coaching and leadership training company.

"That one instant with Jerry sent me on this very focused, deliberate journey to know what an effective leader was."

OFFICER: From a “big jerk” to “best boss ever”

Answering a calling

There's an old saying that once a student is ready, the teacher will appear. McGhee became a consumer of information, and the teacher became hundreds of books, tapes, seminars, training sessions and members of his own family.

McGhee's sister and sister-in-law consult with corporations to teach time management and productivity. And his brother and sometimes seminar co-host Stephen McGhee has been a leadership consultant for 10 years, working with such large companies as Microsoft and Washington Mutual.

Stephen McGhee, 43, says there are a lot of “high school geeks with a microphone” that jump on the speaking circuit, but his big brother Sam talks from experience, a willingness to change, courage and consistency.

“Sammy learned how to be real,” he says. “How do you talk about change if you haven't changed? The environment he worked in was cynical and resigned.

“He was working with the bad guys, and so he was pretty angry and resigned about the world around him.

“It's hard to lead when you are coming from a place like that. There's an assumption that everyone is out to get you. He was really able to change his viewpoint, and once he became more objective, his view of the world became more clear.”

Some of McGhee's more meaningful reads during his years of study included “First, Break All the Rules,” by Marcus Buckingham and

Curt Coffman; “Leadership and Self Deception,” by The Arbinger Institute; and “Fierce Conversations,” by Susan Scott.

Simple truths such as “employees join organizations and quit bosses,” began to make sense to him. He became more accepting of concepts and ideals, discovered theories that resonated with him and discarded others he couldn't apply in his everyday life and interactions with staff.

“I rely heavily on practicing in the workplace and testing for effectiveness,” he says. “Everything I learned and am still learning is what is referred to as universal concepts or universal law that applies to everybody all the time. They are so simple that I'm almost embarrassed to not have known it or learned it on my own.”

Toning down his need to be right all the time. Knowing how to ask questions instead of telling or imposing. Focusing on solutions instead of the mistakes employees make. Confronting issues instead of avoiding them or allowing bad situations (or bad supervisors) to fester.

Those sound like basic management techniques, but ...Lt. Harry Glidden says McGhee couldn't do them 15 years ago.

“Back then, Sam tried to manage people,” says Glidden, who worked with McGhee in the past and has attended some of training seminars. “He had his opinion, and it was the only one that counted. His

management style wasn't inclusive or personable.

"Now, I hear that people love him and think he's the best boss they've ever had. People need to feel valued and important. After his enlightenment, Sam made an effort to let his people know they were important."

McGhee's willingness to get involved in his staff's lives empowered them to participate more at work, which brought better results and overall performance.

"I'm not as much of a big jerk anymore," McGhee says. "I'm much more effective these days than I have ever been as a leader because I'm more willing to just be straight with people and interact with them on an individual basis. I don't have the need for someone else's approval, to look good and avoid looking bad. It's total freedom for me."

McGhee manages to fit in his leadership training on the weekends, after he's already pulled in a 40 to 50-hour work week at the police department.

After an initial meeting, he completes his life coaching mainly by phone and e-mail. His client base usually consists of supervisors and managers who have attended his workshops. He works with only two or three clients at a time, asking for each to give a six-month commitment to the process for a flat fee.

Erika Reuer is coming to the end of her six-month agreement with McGhee. The 36-year-old escrow manager met McGhee and his brother Steven during a weekend retreat as part of the Leadership Aurora class last year. She became McGhee's client in May 2005.

Reuer said she liked McGhee's down-to-earth sincerity.

"When you see a Tony Robbins or a Zig Ziglar, they are so over the top in their motivational presentations that it's difficult for a lay person to relate to them," Reuer says. "What Sam presents to you seems very attainable. He knows you aren't going to become the Dali Lama of leadership and accountability. You are trying to be real."

Reuer describes her training with McGhee as "fine tuning." McGhee's exercises helped her realize that her angry outspokenness masked fears of not measuring up and being vulnerable to manipulation.

Bosses didn't trust her mood swings. Angry telephone conversations would result in endless gripe sessions with office mates while unfinished assignments piled up.

Over the months, she worked with McGhee, learning how to short-circuit her short fuse and re-evaluate conversations or occurrences more objectively. Her attitude adjustment made her a more approachable supervisor and more trustworthy employee.

"Sam helped me break those old behavioral patterns that were unproductive," Reuer says. "When I tell my friends about Sam, they say he won't be able to help them because they aren't in corporate America. I disagree. I don't think any of us, regardless of our position or type of work, have got it so figured out that we couldn't benefit from a little professional sounding board."

Staff writer Sheba R. Wheeler can be reached at 303-820-1283 or swheeler@denverpost.com