

The cosmic 2x4 and leadership.

Sam McGhee
Police Lieutenant
Highlands Ranch - CO US



Tell us what you do (or what your team or organization does) and the specific challenge you faced.

Being a police manager in today's law enforcement environment presents more than just a challenge in the fine art of motivating employees to be efficient and productive; it is a test in one's ability to meet head-on, the status-quo mentality which is entrenched in the tradition of the industry. And while public safety is not concerned about making a profit as a bottom line, it is (or should be) concerned about providing quality service to the communities in which they serve. Leading in law enforcement organizations, or any organization, through a fear-based approach is no longer effective; it really never was. My experience and evolution as a leader has proven to be transformational. Because of my willingness to buy-in to an unconscious and unacknowledged cultural belief that a leader one can be aloof, disconnected, and focused solely on results, I set myself up for a meaningful lesson.

What was your moment of truth?

I excelled in everything I aspired to. As soon as I was eligible, I tested for the first level of supervision, Sergeant-then on to Lieutenant. Why not? I had achieved my goals with ease. However, the rites of passage soon revealed themselves like a group of gargoyles poised for attack. The stark reality of my impact as a leader was slowly seeping in despite my best efforts at ignoring it. Comments such as "The Lieutenant doesn't care about us" indicated that not all was well, my influence was not as positive as I believed. In July of 1997, during my time as the Drug Unit Commander, I visited Jerry, one of my officers who was diagnosed with colon cancer two years prior, in a local hospice. As the group prepared to leave, we filed by saying goodbyes for the day. I approached him; I offered my hand to shake his, like "cop supervisors" do. Bedridden, he looked into my eyes with a piercing honesty and asked "So Lieutenant, are you going to give me a hug too or can you do that"? Wham! The cosmic 2x4 smacked me squarely between the eyes. I came face to face with the repulsive truth I was unwilling to accept. I was skilled in getting the measurable results I was responsible for but my ability to inspire and bring out the best in others needed attention.

What were the results?

From that day forward, I have transformed into a leadership zealot. I speak and conduct workshops talking about my experiences. The encounter with Jerry had a profound and life-changing impact on me. The dying man taught me that we are all leaders and it is the formal leader's job to bring those qualities out in others. Now, the feedback comes in the form of cards and letters from employees who express their appreciation for the positive environment we have worked to create together. I have been asked by the Chief of Police to design an employee development program for the entire department of nearly 800 employees.

What's your parting tip?

Listen to feedback. If you're off-track, make adjustments accordingly. Look for limiting beliefs/behaviors in yourself. Be willing to be influenced.

What role did technology play in your success? What revolutionary, business transforming thing has your company's technology made possible?

Comments that readers have made about this submission:

great insight. finally someone who knows the balance of leading.
STEPHEN - DENVER, CO

Having just read *The Cosmic 2x4 and Leadership* by Sam McGhee, I must respond. Perhaps your readers are wondering: Does the author really practice what he preaches? Is he able to successfully combine leadership AND compassion? Motivate employees and create a positive workplace? The answer is a resounding YES. I've been privileged to be his administrative assistant for nearly two years. He's tackled negative attitudes and unbelievable challenges that had gone untouched for years. I can't think of an instance where he hasn't had some type of positive impact or made great strides in adjusting attitudes. I've seen the notes of appreciation for his efforts and witnessed the heartfelt gratitude of his staff - it's an incredible and wonderful transformation! He's also had a profound effect on me personally. As was said in the movies: He makes me want to be a better person. Now THAT'S a leader!
Debra Nichols - Aurora, CO, USA

Great--Nice to know that law enforcement has a heart.
anne - Castle Rock CO US

Very thought provoking! Furthermore, it is a charge for one to accept of not living on the fence of mediocrity. I think that this leadership style and rationality is rare only because it requires those in leadership to live and lead by example. However for one to do this one must take stock of oneself. Thanks for a great entry and parting wisdom
Rozi Horm - Aurora, Colorado

I know Sam McGhee personally, and his influence has made a difference in my life. He does aspire to leadership. He is always trying to better himself and inspire others to bring out their best. Good defining moment story!
Kimberly Curtis - Aurora, Colorado USA

WOW! Not only is this entry well written, it is inspiring to hear real people making such a difference. Being given tools to follow in the footsteps of a person I can relate to is uplifting and empowering.
Lauren McGhee - Highlands Ranch, Colorado, United States

The writer shows one of the most important qualities - the willingness to look at oneself and recognize the need for change, then have the courage to do so. So many stay entrenched and immobilized by the fear of changing. It is an inspiration to hear Lt. McGhee's story.
Laura L. Harris - Parker, CO, USA

Though my response may be slightly biased (Sam McGhee is my oldest son), I can attest to his transformation five years ago. It affected not only his job but his relationships within the family. I agree with his parting tip: listen! not just to feedback. Listen to yourself. Give your SELF a voice in your inner development. And then, as Sam has, you can initiate change around you.
Sue McGhee - Monument, CO

Congratulations to Sam for recognizing a limitation and being aware enough to grow personally. This shift has enabled Sam to make an impact on many lives. Thanks for sharing and caring enough to share.
Doug - Englewood, Colorado

This is something we can all grow with in all facets of our lives. I have assisted with Mr. McGhee at several Personal Growth Seminars and seen him practice what he writes. Many Kudos to him for his willingness to change.
Pat Brown - Santa Fe, New Mexico

Wow, what an outstanding piece of work! I am impressed not only by the excellent writing skills but more importantly of the personal challenge and success of Sam. It takes a lot for one to recognize their own weakness, change it and then in return talk about it to others. Sam's positive impact on lives is what makes him stand out among a crowd. It is by far an inspiration! You are a true leader, Sam!
Stephanie Minix - Owensboro, Kentucky

Wow! GREAT piece of writing! I am impressed by Sam's wisdom, and ability to recognize what it takes to bring himself intellectually to the next level. This essay illustrates perfectly the difference between management and leadership that is so often missing in today's world.
Philip Atkinson - Westminster, Colorado

There are many "buzz-words" used to describe the leadership traits which Lt. McGhee is demonstrating every day. Whether you call it "level 5 leadership" or one of the other flavors of the week. The difference appears to be that he is actually working in a highly specific field and using these techniques every day. I am happy to hear that he shares this knowledge with others. How can I learn more?
Jeff Baker - Arapahoe County, Colorado

Working in law enforcement is a real challenge, we need more leaders like Sam, who has vision and the willingness to change through positive growth. Great job Sam.
Carole - Castle Rock CO USA

Sam, Very interesting and enlightening. Unfortunately and usually as adults, it takes an internalized, catastrophic event like the death of a friend or loved one to turn on the light of leadership and greatness that we all have within. We express that light more intently when we realize there is only now; we cannot do a thing about the past, and the future is still a mystery--there is only now and we have to make the most of that moment. Thanks for your article.
W. Williams - Highlands Ranch Co US

Successful people are "Learners." They are smart enough to realize that no matter how good they are, "No Body is Perfect." Smart people not only learn from positive events, but more importantly learn from negative occurrences and mistakes. Courageous people are not afraid to accept changes and only then can they grow. Sam McGhee is all that. I am inspired and can see more clearly that "Empathy" can be learned.
Sao Rojas - Castle Pines North, CO, USA

Lt. McGhee's writing is inspirational! I know first-hand about Sam's commitment to leadership and his ability to motivate others. Sam's ability to listen and "hear" feedback and act accordingly is what sets him apart as a leader. We can all learn a great deal from Lt. McGhee.
Jana Shaw, Raytheon Company - Aurora, CO USA

In this honest self-revealing article, Sam illustrates that if we listen and are willing to be self-reflective our lives can be changed in an instant by those actions of others who speak to us from their hearts. Not only has Sam learned this lesson for himself, but has made it his life's work to teach others the power of choosing to live from their hearts instead of their fear. Well done.
Colleen A. Miller - Louisville, Colorado

What a profound experience and insight...We all can learn from this and hopefully practice it from this day forward. Thanks Sam for sharing this from your heart! You've touched more lives than you know.
Annie Ayers - Aurora, Colorado. USA

Lt. McGhee is to be commended for airing his problem and improving himself so greatly. He is very inspiring and I'd love to read more.
Gloria - The Pinery, CO, USA

I would like to work for Sam. I have been an engineer for 30 years, working as a manager and a corporate executive. I have seen too many "leaders" with all the right words and none of the actions. When an individual can speak AND do the right thing, others will follow. As leaders, we must remember that authority comes from BELOW...if our people will not follow, we cannot lead. I'm glad Sam is on our side!
RKN - Longview, TX

This story brought tears to my eyes. I pray daily that a department can be successful with positive attitudes such as Lt. McGhee's. I spoke to Lt. McGhee, (yes, I know him and what a such honor) several months and he always tells me how Jerry was a great inspiration to him. When we see each other, I believe he is sincere in what he says or do. This story tells it all. If we had more upper management staff with a willingness to change see a change and put the change into prespective all departments would have a great working environment and leadership like Lt. McGhee. Kudos to this story and I will let the family of Jerry know about this well deserved article. Thank you Lt. McGhee for seeing beyond the hand shake into the eyes of success. God Bless You.

Parthenia Jones - Aurora, CO

Sam is a great Leader and a caring Supervisor. I know by the comments I hear first hand from people who work with him. He is always pushing himself to be a better Leader. I have learned a lot from him. The main reason he is such a good leader is because he is such a caring person, he also takes the time to listen.

Karen McGhee - Highlands Ranch, Colorado

Sam said it like it is. It has been a long standing tradition to be "apart" from your group as a police manager, when we should all realize that we are "part of." Thanks Sam, for breaking the ice and starting a trend on what should catch on to other progressive leaders!

Dana Hansen - Denver, CO

Sam, Very good article. I like the the fact that it is "to the point" (you didn't dwell on how you got to where you are). Additionally, I like the fact that you took action when you were made aware of your behavior. Many work superiors get feedback, and don't take action... you clearly did. Great job.

Nathan Paul Womack - Newport, RI - USA

I was very moved by Lt. McGhee's succinct and deeply-felt description of his transformation into a non-traditional, human-centered leader. Most of us feel that bringing our full humanity to the workplace is a waste of energy, but the lieutenant's story illustrates that the workplace not only makes room for but welcomes our best, if we but have the courage to offer it. Leaders typically are measured by their results, but good leaders, like Sam, seem to have found that results are a by-product of bringing out the best in those around them and treating them with warmth, understanding, and kind-hearted attention.

Christopher Hayes - El Paso, TX

Sam, Thanks for sharing your ideas and experiences. Since the time I really learned about leadership, I realized that it's not about what we say, it's about what we do. It wasn't about you getting promoted, rising rank, or even influencing your department; it was about how Jerry looked at you as a fellow person...another human being in a lineup of very important people. Thanks for reinforcing the importance of providing a service to the community. It's people like you, people who sit up and do what they do, that make the biggest difference. I hope more people will read what you wrote and turn their experiences into an educational opportunity for their communities!

Jason Womack - Ojai, CA USA

Sam has chosen to lead from his heart, the most powerful form of leadership around. This heart centered leadership is reflected in all that he does and has a powerful impact on those who know him. He had, and has, the courage to listen to feedback and alter his course whenever necessary, all the while keeping his eye on his vision of bringing this heart centered leadership to the world.

Lisa Miterko - Lakewood, CO

I have worked with Sam since he became an Aurora Police officer and know the things he says to be true. Early in his carreer his reputation was one of a ladder climber with little concern for those that he worked with. I retired from the Police Department in 1999 and then returned as a civilian employee, with Sam as my supervisor for the past 1 1/2 years. He is one of the most positive supervisors that I have ever worked with, always available with support and he has never given the attitude that he is superior to his subordinates. Thank You Sam

Dean Axtell -

This article was very insightful to the eyes of law enforcement. This article made me ponder of all the stories and life altering experiences that we all have and never grow and learn from. Sam has done

something here that everyone of us can learn from in any aspect of our lives. Thank you Sam for opening my eyes to something that may not be important at the time but comes a HUGE part of our lives. Thank you for sharing.
Rebekah - Littleton, CO

It is refreshing to see a supervisor that can change after so many years in Supervision. I have been in Law Enforcement for 30 years and know of only two high ranking supervisors (one retired, one active)who did not forget that were once Deputy Sheriff's. They still ask the working person his opinion and follow through with the opinion, with successful results. Although I have remained a Deputy/Detective my whole career, it was by choice. I strongly believe in training and have allowed my trainees to express their opinions on a subject, without prejudice. A great article and I forsee a chance for Lt. McGhee to continue as a motivational speaker. Maybe his department would let him teach a class at Law Enforcement Academy's.
William Kilpatrick - El Cajon, CA. U.S.A.

Can the new message survive the status-quo's influence?? It can be a bit lonely out there when trying to go against the grain.

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Sam is such a wonderful and thoughtful human being who truly aspires to bring out the best in all the people he serves. One look into his eyes and you can feel the compassion that envelops him. Thank you Sam for writing a very open and inspiring article about your leadership transformation. It is such a blessing to have a law enforcement leader and advocate protecting and serving with your frame of mind and heart!
Michele LeClaire - Denver, CO

What a great article!!!!!!!!!!!!!!


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Great article in a time when leadership in organizations is suspect from the get-go. When will people understand that the truly important things in life come from inspiration; where "spirit" comes from? The greatest gift a leader can give is to inspire one to improve.

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