



By Rob Campbell

As a military veteran who strives to be apolitical in my leadership writings, I find myself at the precipice of politics. I'll take not another step into the muck. Instead, I'll leverage this moment in our nation for the benefit of leadership.

How do you lead when a large portion of your people dislike you? The changing of leadership is a frequent occurrence in military service and leaders can get it horribly wrong. Often, a wholesale change in leadership across an organization can occur as the services attempt to manage the arrival and departure of commanders and their senior enlisted counterparts. The military honors leadership changes with the passing of flags and reading of official orders. Responsibility passes instantly with the publishing of orders but the loyalty of the rank and file may lag.

The challenge for newly appointed leaders is noteworthy. The early hours and days of a new appointment are critical. Loyalty may have departed with the old regime. Succeeding a beloved leader can be particularly difficult. One might even experience a cold reception from an established and functioning (or dysfunctional) team who grew comfortable under the leadership of another. Additionally, there may be a mess to clean up and or complacency

as people were comfortable under the leadership of your predecessor. Legal authority given with rank and position helps but it is woefully inadequate when it comes to influencing a new group of servicemembers. I followed another leader more than 21 times in my Army career and experienced all of the scenarios I described above. Here is an approach to use when you find yourself in this predicament.

### **Listen, learn, then lead.**

Often, people holding a grievance just want to be heard. Indeed, some are zealots who will hold on tight to their grudge but most understand they may have to compromise. Most will understand you have a job to do and that you are not like the previous leader. Go right to the people you believe are not in your camp and listen. You can ask pointed questions such as: “What do we do well?” “What needs to improve?” and “What do you need from your leadership?” Sit quietly, listen, and take notes when people speak. Then see if there is a ‘carrot’ you can give them to appease their desires while not violating your leadership principles, beliefs, and organizational culture and values. You may find these steps challenging as many of us want to ‘clean house’ and start over. Pump the brakes. Return to these people often in a sensing session to hear them and to learn.

### **Avoid bashing your predecessor.**

There is not much use for this divisive behavior, especially if a good portion of your people held your predecessor in high regard. When new leaders blame previous ones, they accomplish little other than feeding their own egos. On day one, you own the problems of the previous regime and it’s not the time for finger pointing. Look forward, not backward. Be cautious of your reaction to “the way it’s always been done” or “we don’t have a system or process for that.” Receive these comments with emotionless curiosity. Listen, learn, then lead your people toward a shared solution.

### **Lead well.**

Study leadership, bond with your team, be transparent and vulnerable and love your people. Remember, it is you who will be the predecessor one day.

*Colonel Rob Campbell served as a U.S. Army Infantryman for over 27 years. Rob commanded at several levels including brigade command in the 101 st Airborne Division. Following retirement, Rob authored two books, one on leadership, the other on veteran transition. Rob is the founder and CEO of Rob Campbell Leadership.*

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)