

THE BLUE SHIRT – How to Instill a Sense of Belonging

Early in my career, I was honored to become part of The Hershey Company's Sales Development team. The 12-member team comprised top performers from across the country, a bunch of young guns. The purpose of the two-year assignment was to learn about all aspects of the candy business, including brand management, marketing, and production. We also had a chance to engage senior leadership and participate in a mentorship program.

I remember my first few weeks with the team. It was almost like a fraternity, and I felt like a pledge. Before I took the role, I was advised to make every effort to fit in. They told me that I'd be surrounded by a lot of great leaders. At the same time, I was warned not to "shine too brightly," or a few egomaniacs will "try to marginalize you." I realized early on that I'd need to humbly work my way up and do my part to belong.

Early on, I met a team member named Doug. He was from the Midwest, a go-getter, and had a reputation for arrogance. For some reason, Doug didn't like me from the start. When he introduced himself, he went on and on about his success and how he'd become president of the company someday. Before our conversation ended, he told me with an intimidating tone that he'd "be watching me." He continued, "one screw up, and I'll be all over you!"

The next day, the Sales Development team attended a town hall meeting in the magnificent Hershey Theater. We all sat in the same row toward the front to listen to Hershey's president. As we filed into our seats, guess who jumped ahead in line and sat next to me?

Doug. Of all people, Doug.

After a few minutes, he leaned over to me and sternly said, "you really should think more about how you dress. You're wearing a blue dress shirt, and the rest of our team is wearing white. Look down the row for yourself. Not a good move!"

I looked down the row, and he was right; everyone was wearing white. I stuck out like a sore thumb. He smirked and said, "maybe next time, you'll have a white shirt hanging in your closet for times like this."

I felt embarrassed and very out of place. It seemed like a small thing. I didn't give any thought to wearing a blue shirt to work when I dressed in the morning. Doug made it sound like it was a career-limiting move. His comment caused me to worry for the rest of the town hall. I don't think I heard anything the president said; I was so distracted.

Later that afternoon, I approached Mike, my team lead. I told him what happened, and he laughed out loud. He said, "are you kidding me? Doug's a workplace bully, and he's just trying to intimidate you. Don't worry about it."

He patted me on the back and sent me on my way.

The next day, I went to work and walked into my first meeting. Doug was there, along with the rest of my peers. As I looked around the room, guess what color shirt they were ALL wearing?

Blue.

Doug was the only one wearing a white shirt. I got the biggest smile on my face. When the team saw me light up, they smiled as well.

After the meeting, I asked Mike why everyone was wearing blue. He said, "We wanted to send a message. We're a team, and we

stick together. We also want you to know that you belong here, and you're one of us."

I'll never forget that day. I felt like I belonged, valued, and was one of the team. My confidence grew, and I became a key contributor to the group over time. I also appreciated the team sending a message to Doug that his behavior wouldn't be tolerated. Doug left me alone and never tried to intimidate me or anyone else again.

I learned that great leaders instill a sense of belonging into others. Leaders help team members feel secure like they fit in; they matter and are essential to the group. My challenge to you is to instill a sense of belonging into someone today. If you do, they will feel valued, and their confidence will grow.

Want to learn more about leveling up your leadership skills? Visit my website, prestonpoore.com, today!

Cheers,

Preston