

LEAD LIKE A CULT: LOVE BOMB NEW RECRUITS

"As soon as any interest is shown by the recruits, they may be love bombed by the recruiter or other cult members. Love bombing is a coordinated effort, usually under the direction of leadership, that involves long-term members' flooding recruits and newer members with flattery, verbal seduction, affectionate but usually nonsexual touching, and lots of attention to their every remark. Love bombing—or the offer of instant companionship—is a deceptive ploy accounting for many successful recruitment drives." (Margaret Singer, Cults in Our Midst).

From the first encounter, cults practice well-honed techniques designed to entice you to join them. Their members have a laser-like focus in attracting you and making you feel welcome and a part of their "family." It's usually only after you have extricated yourself from their clutches that you recognize how effective cults' techniques can be. And while you may ask yourself, "What can I learn from manipulative people who believe in UFOs?" the truth is, modern leaders can learn a lot from cults.

I read many business and leadership books for both work and leisure. One subject they all have in common is that they write about "good" leaders and companies. They lift up those the reader should emulate, be inspired by, feel good about. But we are kidding ourselves if we think that only moral people make "good leaders." The reality is that many effective leaders are unsavory people. Pirates, dictators, cult leaders: all have effectively led their people while committing despicable, disreputable acts.

For this reason, a few times this year, I will be writing articles to examine what we can learn from "unsavory" people who at the same time were effective leaders. Earlier this year I wrote about how you should Lead Like a Pirate, and be more democratic as a leader. In this sequel, we will explore how cults use a technique called love bombing to effectively recruit and keep members engaged. At a bare minimum, it should be more interesting than reading another article on the creative genius or the business management skills of esteemed individuals. So, I hope you enjoy this "Bad" leadership series.

The Unification Church

The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (otherwise known as the Unification Church) was founded in 1954 in South Korea by Sun Myung Moon. While they call themselves a "new religious movement," everyone else calls them a cult. In fact, they are currently the largest active cult, with somewhere between 1-2 million worldwide followers (colloquially called "Moonies").

The Unification Church checks many of the boxes that describe a cult. The founder, Moon, was considered the messianic successor to Jesus. His job was to unify the different Christian religions under his new "Divine Principles." For example, Moon did not believe in romantic love, and marriages were to be arranged by the church. The 'Moonies' became known for their mass wedding ceremonies: one event in 2009 had 40,000 participants.

In 1970, Steve Hassan was only 19 years old and had a bright future ahead of him. By this age he had skipped the 8th grade, was an advanced honors student, and had cycled across the US when he was 16. But within a few weeks of being approached by some "Moonies," he dropped out of school, donated his savings, and believed his parents were Satan. Almost from one moment to the next, he was completely onboarded into the Unification Church.

How Love Bombing Works

So how did a successful young man suddenly end up a committed follower in a cult? First of all, no one thinks they are joining a cult or even dealing with cult members. Steve wrote about his first meeting with cult members.

"I was 19, and it was the beginning of the spring semester at college when three women, dressed like students, asked if they could sit at my table in the cafeteria. They were kind of flirting with me. I thought I was going to get a date. At some point they said they were part of a student movement, trying to make the world a better place. I said, "Are you part of some sort of religious group?" They said no."

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Steve met with these women who introduced him to more people. Throughout this initial phase, they were incredibly kind and flattering to him, almost seductive in a non-sexual way. This common technique which recruits in cults are exposed to is called “love bombing.” Basically, the cult overwhelms the recruits with positive attention, so they feel that their emotional and social needs will be met by the cult.

Only after the new recruits have adopted a positive association with the cult’s way of thinking do the cult members begin to exert pressure on them to follow extreme beliefs. But by this point, the person already associates the cult with love and acceptance. They see themselves as part of the group, and this feeling of belonging to the group can overpower logic. I think Steve writes it best:

“I hadn't heard of the Moonies and I didn't know about Moon himself until several weeks into my indoctrination. They also didn't say they were celibate and that Reverend Moon was going to match people and tell them when they could have sex. If they had, I would have said: “You're crazy, leave me alone.””

Love Bombing at Work

Love bombing new recruits with acceptance and positive emotions, so they feel connected to the group, is not in itself an evil thing to do. In fact, I think all leaders and companies should do it with their new employees and team members. The main difference between a cult leader and a modern-day business leader love bombing their people is the leader’s mindset.

Cults use these newly established close relationships to manipulate their new recruits and take over and control their lives. Obviously, this is an evil, untrustworthy reason to love bomb someone. But what’s wrong if you want to love bomb a new employee in order for them to feel welcome and excited about joining your company? Or what’s wrong with love bombing a new team member so that they integrate and feel a part of the team even faster?

For example, here is the onboarding practice at Twitter. *“Before the employee sits down, they have their email address, a T-shirt, and a bottle of wine waiting. New employee desks are strategically located next to key teammates they will be working with. On the first day, new team members have breakfast with the CEO followed by a tour of the company office, before group training on the tools and systems relevant to their role.”*

Twitter creates a feeling of connection and acceptance through gifts, lots of team meetings, and intimate gatherings with their leaders, but their approach is not the only way to love bomb new recruits. Here are some more examples:

- At Eventbrite, their expressed goal is to connect new hires with as many people as possible in the organization. They do this by putting new hires’ profiles around the offices so that everyone can quickly recognize their names and faces.
- Warby Parker (spectacles and sunglass maker) has a “Lunch Roulette” where random employees are teamed up and go to lunch, paid for by the company. This activity is considered a great way to connect new employees and build relationships across departments.

Ideas on How to Love Bomb at Your Company

Here are a few ways to make new people feel welcome and part of your team:

Start building relationships before their first day.

Integrating new people into your team does not have to start on day one. In fact, you can use their online profiles to get to know them, and they can do the same to become acquainted with their new team members. Some people may not feel comfortable sharing their Facebook profiles with new colleagues, but every-

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one should be fine sharing their LinkedIn profiles. Let the decision be up to the new joiners. Once the connections are made, suggest that your team members reach out to the new people. It can be as simple as a brief welcome message to the team. Or it can be showing interest in their past experiences. Similarly to a cult, this is a great opportunity to display a lot of interest and positive emotions to the new joiners, thereby building their excitement for actually joining your team.

Make their first few days feel memorable.

It can be tempting to have new people get down to work and start absorbing the piles of new information, processes, and tools they need to use. But in the first few days, even weeks, the goal of new joiners should be integrating themselves with the rest of the team. Just like how a cult avoids exposing new recruits to a harsh reality, you should also avoid extra boring things like the long process presentations, slide decks, and tutorials for tools they will only use once a month.

We suggest that new joiners spend the first few days meeting with colleagues, learning about them and what they do. Their goal should be about forming relationships and trying to see connections with what they do and what their other team members do. We also recommend preparing a special event with the whole team. This can be as simple as a lunch, but it can also be as big as a team activity. What matters most is that the team is involved, and that new people are made to feel a part of the team.

Save the scary stuff for later.

Like a cult, don't spend the first few days covering all the difficult and challenging things about the role. This could risk tainting their first weeks with a negative mood or increases the risk that they misunderstand key information or processes. Instead, give the new employee space to learn and absorb the flood of new information and new relationships. By going a little bit slower in introducing their responsibilities, this will allow them to have a better onboarding and ultimately reach productivity faster.

The Fate of Steve Hassan and the Unification Church

So, what happened to Steve? Here is his story in his own words.

“Within three months of my first meeting, I was a cult leader. I got very deeply involved, and I got to the point where I was being told to think about what country I wanted to run when we took over the world. I was with the Moonies for two-and-a-half years, and I worked 21 hours a day, seven days a week - in prayer for between one and three hours. Then I would spend the rest of the day doing PR or lectures for the group, recruiting and fundraising.”

One day, after not sleeping for three days, Steve crashed a van into a tractor-trailer. While in the hospital recovering, he reached out to his sister, who informed his entire family. They brought in some former "Moonies" to help deprogram him, and after five days of intense conversations, he decided not to return to the Unification Church. Slowly, Steve started to piece his life back together, and today he is a mental health counselor. He has published many books and is regarded as a leading voice in helping people break free of cult-like thinking.

As for the Unification Church, Sun Myong Moon died in 2012, at the age of 92. The church continues to be run by his children and is still seen as the world's largest active cult.

Being a Positive Cult Leader of Your Team

In many of today's modern workforces, I think there are many positive cult-like tendencies. Each company has its own belief system (their values and principles), corporate lingo, and way of making decisions. There are also dress codes. While it might not be cult-like robes, each company I worked in had a distinct uniform. At Maersk it was blue suits with white button-down shirts. At Unity it is hooded sweatshirts and Unity logo T-shirts.

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Cults attract new recruits from diverse backgrounds and inspire them to adopt specific beliefs and work towards specific goals with effective, well-honed techniques and processes. From my perspective, this is the same thing many companies would like to do. They want to bring in a diverse collection of workers, inspire them to work towards strategic goals, and indoctrinate them into their culture.

We are practically acting like positive versions of cults right now, minus the manipulation, sexual exploitation, extortion and other destructive practices. So why not learn from them? Take the positive lessons from cult leaders. Love bomb your people. Make them feel accepted. Empower them to be part of the greater good. Do these things, and you will start to create the cult of your team.

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