

Surprising leadership lessons from “Yellowstone”

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<https://youtu.be/DCPLnVNggVk>

Video transcript:

What can you learn about leadership from a ranch in Montana? Quite a bit, if that ranch is the Yellowstone, the setting for the TV show by the same name. *Yellowstone* packs some surprising leadership lessons.

The first surprise is about motivating employees. As a business leader, you might be tempted to think that you have to work hard to motivate your people — especially when you’re asking them to go above and beyond what’s expected of them. But we learn from *Yellowstone* that the most powerful motivation is someone’s own passions and dreams.

When one of the Yellowstone cowboys has to tell his girlfriend that he is leaving and will be gone for a year, he explains his decision by talking about his love for his job. She is a singer, so he explains that cowboying is how he “sings.” The opportunity before him, he says, is like getting to sing at the Grand Ol’ Opry. As he speaks, the passion he feels for his work is palpable — and that’s why he’s willing to make the sacrifice.

Now, it’s true that you, as a leader, need to set the context for people to be able to pursue their dreams, and you need to hire people whose dreams align with your organization’s in the first place. But you can’t motivate people to do something they don’t want to do. You may be able to bribe them with pay and perks for a short period of time, but that’s not a sustainable way to motivate people. If you want to get people’s best performance, [tap into their passion](#).

Another surprising leadership lesson from *Yellowstone* is about securing people's loyalty. Leaders like you need employees and customers to be loyal to you and your company. But you can't secure people's loyalty if you're not loyal to them first.

Rip, one of *Yellowstone*'s main characters, is fiercely loyal to John, the owner of the ranch. Rip does anything and everything for John, often at great cost. As the show conveys the history of the two men's relationship, we learn that John earned Rip's loyalty by providing a safe haven from an abusive situation when he was a child. And later, when Rip gets himself into a difficult situation, John offers to help make the problem go away. In both instances, John first demonstrated loyalty to Rip — which, in turn, inspired Rip's trust and devotion. So, the next time you want to get someone's loyalty, do what John did and be loyal first.

Challenging convention is another leadership lesson from *Yellowstone* that seems counterintuitive. When John runs for the office of Montana's governor, he chooses to position himself as “the opposite of progress.” He goes so far as to tell voters, “If it's progress you want, then don't vote for me.”

It takes courage and clear convictions to stand for something that directly contrasts with the prevailing wisdom, but that's exactly how John wins the election. In the same way, as a leader, you can differentiate yourself and your business from competitors by bucking the trends and offering the exact opposite of what others do. Of course, that offering needs to be authentic to your values and aligned with your capabilities — and if it is, the results just might surprise you.

This is the last in my series of leadership lessons learned from TV shows. We started learning about the importance of using your own product from the show *Succession*. Then from *Ted Lasso*, we learned that leadership involves coaching, changing, and character-building. And now, *Yellowstone* has taught us that leading doesn't always involve what we think it does.

Check out other leadership lessons from TV shows by brand leadership expert, Denise Lee Yohn:

- [Succession](#)
- [Ted Lasso](#)

To book Denise Lee Yohn to share leadership lessons and tips with your organization, see her [website](#) and [YouTube channel](#).

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