

A Real Life Game of *Follow the Leader*

Moultrie General Manager, Kareem Kelly provides calming, reassuring leadership during extreme uncertainty

Throughout the COVID crisis, one thing has been certain - there is no blueprint.

And in the absence of a clear plan for navigating such uncertainty, the invitation was for leadership to fill in the gaps and provide the path forward.

And that's exactly what took place in Moultrie, Georgia with General Manager, Kareem Kelly.

In the midst of paranoia, fear, and panic breaking out across the globe, Kelly took a drastically different approach.

His was one of compassion, empathy, and a calming voice.

Maybe one could think of the way Patrick Mahomes calmly converted a 4th and 15, or the ways a trained soldier learns to focus on her breathing instead of the enemy.



Kareem helps to distribute free lunches, provided once a week to all employees in Moultrie.

"I've been around this business a long time. And while we hadn't experienced this specific circumstance, my intuition was that by staying calm and giving our people the opportunity to be heard, we'd get through it OK," Kelly reflected.

His team of nearly 400 was understandably concerned.

How will you keep us safe?

What about our families?

What if I want to stay home?

The questions, endless. The concerns, normal.

"From the very first day, we started to have small group conversations. We gave each of our team members the chance to be heard, to express their fears, worries, and concerns," Kelly said.

It was in these small meetings where the feelings started to transform, and the calming effect began to sink in.

"It's not about me at all, but our team does look to me for security. So, these meetings were a chance for Jared Long, Assistant General Manager, and I to give them the facts, but more importantly, it was an opportunity for them to be heard. Being heard is such a calming factor, and it is important to employees, even if we don't know the outcomes," Kelly said.



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For three straight weeks, starting first thing in the morning and lasting well into the evening, Kelly's sole job was to sit in these small group sessions. He'd talk, sure. But he listened much more.

"Our goal was to touch every person in the plant and help them feel comfortable. We had people going through some major stuff, anxiety attacks, and concerns for themselves and their families health," said Kelly. "But by showing them some compassion and giving them some empathy, you could visibly see the them begin to calm down. It was the only way people could feel safe and continue to come to work to do their jobs."

In between these small group sessions, the rooms would get sanitized, and leadership would get prepped for the next group. Ongoing, daily, conversation in both shifts.

Not a big rah-rah meeting. Not a fancy PowerPoint presentation.

Just some good old-fashioned relationship advice that Grandma used to share with us:

"God gave you two ears and one mouth, so you can listen twice as much as you speak".

The results spoke for themselves.

Anxiety was eased. Morale increased. Employees continued coming to work. Productivity stayed consistent. Pride welled.

"We've been extremely fortunate. Our team stayed calm and stayed the course. They displayed tremendous confidence in National Beef® to provide a workplace that is safe, a reassuring environment, and the responsibility to keep America's food supplies running smoothly," Kelly added. "And more than that, to take care of each other safely, so we can go home and take care of our real priorities, our families."

In Moultrie, the nearly 400 person team was playing a real life game of *Follow the Leader*. And thankfully, we have good ones. Like Kareem.