

Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

A STORY ABOUT LOYALTY



The sentence is uttered so casually during the regular meeting that it only begins to take effect later.

"Florian, we're increasing production by ten percent next week." The plant manager says it as if it were a logical footnote. Q2 outlook, customer order, market. I understand the logic. I'm just caught between two worlds that don't currently mesh.

"Ten percent?" I ask.

He nods. "We have no choice. The customer won't wait. We have to deliver."

I glance briefly at HR. She looks away. I know that looking away. It means: I see the problem too, but I'm not going to say anything right now.

My brain starts calculating: We still have a high rate of sick leave. We have two new colleagues who aren't fully trained yet. We've been operating on the edge for weeks.

I clear my throat. "It's important to me that we remain realistic. If we ramp things up, we either need more people or we risk overload and waste."

The plant manager leans back. "I understand. But we can't get any more people. So we have to manage with the team."

There it is, the typical sandwich position: pressure on top, reality on the bottom, and me in the middle, the hinge meant to hold both sides together.

"Okay," I say slowly. "I'll take it to the team."

He nods in satisfaction. Case closed.
But for me, it's not over. For me, it's just beginning.

On my way back to the hall, I feel my body growing heavier. I know my role. Loyalty to those above, loyalty to those below. But what if those two loyalties are at odds?

A few people are still standing together in the break room after their shift. Sven, Miriam, Tobias. Their bodies are tired, but their eyes are alert. They haven't heard the increase in intensity yet. I can already picture their reaction.

If I simply pass it on, I'll lose them.
If I refuse, I will lose the trust of those at the top.
Both feel like a loss.

I go to the office, sit down, and stare at the shift schedule. In my head, I hear the coach who has been working with us for months. She once told me: "Being in a sandwich role doesn't mean satisfying two sides. It means being a translator of reality."

Translator. Not a buffer. Not a lightning rod. Translator.
What does this mean now?

I'll write down two sentences:

Those at the top need truth, not empty slogans of perseverance.
Down below needs context and protection, not just pressure.

At 12 o'clock I briefly call a team meeting. Not a big meeting, just ten minutes.

"I want to be transparent with you," I begin. "Management has decided that we should increase production by ten percent next week."

A soft murmur in the room. Just as I expected.

"With the current situation?" Sven asks immediately. "We're already on the edge."

"Yes," I say calmly. "That's the reality. And that's precisely why we're not doing it blindly. I want to work with you to see how we can achieve this without ruining you and without compromising quality."

Tobias shakes his head. "Those up there really don't get what's going on here." I let the sentence hang in the air. It's not disrespectful. It's desperate.

"I hear you," I say. "And I will reflect that just as clearly upwards. But I also promise you: I won't simply pass the pressure down. Today we're going to do a friction analysis: Where are we wasting time? Where do we lack support? What's the smallest lever that can bring relief?"

I can see them looking at me. Appraisingly. Not convinced, but willing to listen.

After the round, I bring Marco and Miriam into my office. "We need a concrete assessment," I say. "If we raise the bar by ten percent, where will it break first?"

Marco lists the issues objectively: Station 3 is a bottleneck because the training phase is still underway. Station 2 has too little buffer time for absences. Miriam adds: The evening handover is too short.

We'll list three levers:

Temporarily double staffing station 3.

Do not touch the pause anchor.

Extend the handover time by 10 minutes.

I know that point 3 above won't be popular. More handover means less production time. But less handover means more errors. I intend to make sure I don't sugarcoat that.

In the afternoon, I go to the plant manager again. I lay the plan on his desk. Three levers, briefly explained, with data from the last few weeks.

He looks at it, frowns. "Ten more minutes for handover? That costs us output." "Yes," I say. "And without it, it costs us scrap and sick leave. We can only achieve that ten percent if we ensure stability. Otherwise, we'll win next week and lose the month."

He is silent. I feel my stomach tighten. Here, loyalty to reality clashes with loyalty to pressure.

"Can you guarantee that?" he asks.

"There are no guarantees," I say. "But it's the most responsible way. And I stand by it." He sighs. "Okay. But only for two weeks. We'll reassess then." "Agreed," I say.

When I walk back into the hall, it doesn't feel like a victory. More like a bridge that just barely didn't collapse.

Next Monday we're ramping up service. Ten percent more. The line creaks, but it holds. Station 3 is double-staffed, the handovers are smooth. There are stressful moments, yes. But no panic. And above all: no quiet acts of heroism.

Sven comes to me during the break on Friday. "That was tough," he says, "but fair. Thanks for making it clear up there."

I nod. "Thank you for being honest down there."

The sandwich role is often described as being torn apart.

For me, it feels more like responsibility today: keeping reality up and protecting people down below.

Takeaway inspiration

Loyalty

Loyalty in a middle management role means not passing on pressure, but translating reality and taking responsibility in both directions. It shows when you provide clarity at the top and create protection and context at the bottom.

When you find yourself caught between expectations, formulate two clear sentences for yourself: What truth does the person at the top need? What protection does the person at the bottom need? And then act in such a way that both sides get these two things – even if both are not completely satisfied.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT LOYALTY

1. Where am I currently trying to satisfy two sides instead of translating reality?
2. What truth am I withholding from above – and why?
3. How can I relieve pressure without losing responsibility?



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