

Leadership in Cinema



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

NORMA RAE

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Studio: 20th Century Fox Released: 1979
Genre: Drama Audience Rating: PG
Runtime: 118 minutes

Materials

VCR or DVD (preferred), television or projection system, Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles handouts (single-sided), notepads, writing utensils

Objective

Students will identify Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles illustrated within Norma Rae and discuss leadership lessons learned with group members or mentors.

Basic Plot

Set in the industrial South and based on a true story, Martin Ritt's Norma Rae is a moving portrait of a woman's fight to improve both her own life and the deplorable conditions that exist in the mill where she works. Norma Rae (Sally Field) has worked at the textile mill for years, but when a union organizer from New York comes to town, Norma takes on the hostility of the mill's management and the apathy of her coworkers to try to unionize the mill. Field plays Norma Rae as a passionate woman who realizes her own potential and her need to rebel against the status quo. She is also infuriated by the conditions at the mill. When Norma, uneducated and poor, finally expresses her disgust with life at the mill, it is an electrifying moment, and Field radiates this energy for the rest of the film, providing an emotional core and drive that gives the picture its power. (Synopsis from rottentomatoes.com)

Cast of Main Characters

Sally Field	Norma Rae
Ron Liebman	Reuben Warshawsky
Beau Bridges	Sonny Webster

Facilitation Options

Norma Rae is an excellent film to show the relationship between mentor and protégé. While presenting this relationship, students can identify the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles that are illustrated in the film. Students should be less concerned with how many principles they view within the film and more concerned with how the principles they do recognize can be used in their self development as a leader.

Clemens and Wolff's *Movies To Manage By* devotes Chapter 5, Mentors and Protégés, to Norma Rae. Additional discussion points can be obtained in this reference.

The film can be viewed in its entirety or by clip selection, depending on facilitator intent and time schedules. Another method is to have the employee(s) view the film on his/her own and then hold the discussion session.

The DVD version of the film includes a 20-minute section called "Backstory: Norma Rae." This documentary concerning the real-life character, Crystal Lee Jordan, and the making of the film illustrate as much about leadership as the film itself. The mentoring behind the scenes between Director Martin Ritt and Sally Field parallels that shown in the film. Sally Field presents her personal challenge regarding her innocent reputation as an actress in *The Flying Nun*. Sally's fight to show her worth as an actress in the film industry after her portrayal of Sybil is compelling.

Full-film Facilitation Suggestion

When opting for the full-film method, the facilitator should determine a good breaking point near the middle of the film.

1. Review the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles with students.
2. Advise students to document instances within the film that illustrate/violate the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles on the handout provided.
3. Break students into small discussion groups.
4. Show students Norma Rae.
5. Break. (Suggestion: After Norma Rae joins the union)
6. Begin the guided discussion.
7. Provide a short synopsis with some "ticklers" to pay attention before beginning the rest of the film.

8. Resume the film.
9. Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that have difficulty.
10. Wrap up the session and encourage students to apply leadership lessons learned in their personal and work lives.

Clip Facilitation Suggestion

1. Review the Wildland Fire Leadership Value or Principle targeted for discussion. (May be given or ask students to identify the value or principle being illustrated after viewing the clip.)
2. Show the clip.
3. Facilitate discussion regarding the selected clip and corresponding value and/or principle.
4. Break students into small discussion groups.
5. Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that may have difficulty.
6. Wrap up the session and encourage students to apply leadership lessons learned in their personal and work lives.

Mentor Suggestion

Use either method presented above. The mentor should be available to the student to discuss lessons learned from the film as well as incorporating them to the student's leadership self-development plan.

Encouraging individuals to keep a leadership journal is an excellent way to document leadership values and principles that are practiced.

Review the book clip with the student and work with him/her to select books from the [Professional Reading Program](#) as part of his/her self-development.

Norma Rae

The following clips illustrate the Wildland Leadership Values and Principles (a support or violation of). These are only guidelines and may be interpreted differently by other views; they are presented as a guide for facilitation.

Duty

- Norma Rae notices that her mother cannot hear during lunch. (Maintain situation awareness in order to anticipate needed actions.)

- Rueben always shows the mill workers the utmost in professional courtesy—“Good morning.” (Adhere to professional standard operating procedures.)
- Rueben identifies Norma Rae as the person he needs to bring the union into the mill. (Develop your subordinates for the future.)
- Norma Rae takes charge when Rueben feels that his point is not getting across. (Develop a plan to accomplish given objectives.)
- Norma Rae stands up to management when they want her removed for copying the letter. She becomes a leader and must think on her feet. (Improvise within the commander’s intent to handle a rapidly changing environment.)

Respect

- Norma Rae joins the union to bring about changes in deplorable working conditions. (Put the safety of your subordinates above all other objectives.)
- Rueben and Norma Rae hold union meetings. (Provide accurate and timely briefings.)
- Rueben gives his hotel room number out to the employees. (Make yourself available to answer questions at appropriate times.)
- Rueben mentors Norma Rae regarding her diplomacy with a union volunteer (Peter). (Observe human behavior as well as fire behavior.)
- Management fails to address safety and physical issues within the mill; workers don’t use sick leave for fear of retribution. (Consider team experience, fatigue and physical limitations when accepting assignments.)

Integrity

- Norma Rae asks Reuben what the consequences will be if she joins the union. Rueben tells her what she is allowed to do. (Ask questions of peers and superiors. Provide early warning to subordinates of tasks they will be responsible for.)
- Sonny supports and accepts Norma Rae’s convictions even though he may not agree with them. (Choose the difficult right over the easy wrong.)
- Norma Rae is fired and could raise a commotion in front of the mill workers. Her silent show of defiance is empowering. (Don’t show discouragement when facing setbacks.)
- After he posts bail, Rueben tells Norma Rae about situations other union organizers have experienced. He tells her she just “got her feet wet with this one.” (Share the hazards and hardships with your subordinates.)
- Norma Rae “comes clean” to her children about her past and recent arrest. (Know the strengths/weaknesses in your character and skill level. Accept full responsibility for and correct poor team performance.)

Norma Rae

Guided Discussion – Possible Answer

1. Norma Rae communicates her doubts that Rueben's union flyer will be understood by workers. What is his response or action to the comment?
 - Rueben listens to the advice of the protégé and decreases words used in the flyer to two syllables; Norma Rae wants it reduced to one. Later in the film you see Norma Rae handing out the flyers; did she create these?
2. Why do the bosses in the mill give Norma Rae a promotion? Is this an appropriate and effective technique?
 - They realize her effect on the workers and want her silenced.
 - Answers will vary.
3. Rueben tells a story about his grandfather and unions. What is he saying? How does that relate to the wildland fire community?
 - Rueben is talking about the value of working as a team and how team cohesion creates a family.
 - Answers will vary.
4. Rueben shows up at the factory to inspect the bulletin boards. What does his presence in the factory accomplish?
 - Although Rueben uses the bulletin boards as the premise for his visit, his actions have a larger impact on the mill workers. Before workers saw him as an outsider looking in, his presence inside the mill showed that he possessed authority—added to his credibility. His action after the second bulletin board of standing sided by side with the black mill worker presented a united front and reckoning force to management as well.
5. Rueben makes the following statement, “Somewhere between logic and charity maybe there lies a little shadow.” If you came upon a blind man with a cup selling pencils and you put in a dollar, would you take the pencil? What values and principles relate to this scenario?
 - Answers will vary. This discussion can be used as an ethical springboard.
6. How does Norma Rae deal with rejection from her pastor? Have you dealt with rejection in your job? If so, how did you handle with the situation?
 - Norma Rae seems empowered by the rejection from the pastor. She tells him she will raise her voice up somewhere else. She holds the meeting in her home even when confronted by Sonny that blacks will be in his home.
 - Answers will vary.

7. Do protégés teach mentors lessons? Give an example of where Norma Rae mentors Rueben.
 - A good mentor will learn from their protégés. At some point the mentor/protégé relationship will be replaced by a peer relationship.
 - Commenting that the flyer was too complicated. Taking the reins by going to the mill worker's homes to spread the word with Norma Rae making the first contact.
8. Norma Rae asks Rueben why his lady friend is so smart. What is his response? How important is his response in leadership self-development? What tool exists on the [Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program](#) website to aid the wildland firefighter with this process?
 - Books.
 - Answers will vary.
 - [Professional Reading Program](#).
9. What is the event that begins the workers catalyst for change? Does this type of event happen in the wildland fire community? What can be done to prevent this from occurring?
 - Norma Rae's father dies of a heart attack.
 - Answers will vary
 - Deal with issues of safety. Communicate unsafe working conditions and health problems to supervisors.
10. Norma Rae becomes impassioned after the death of her father and takes her leadership to an explosive level. What does Rueben do when she verbally attacks a union volunteer (Peter)?
 - Rueben tells Norma Rae to leave and allows the volunteer to take over the project she is working on. He then counsels her on being diplomatic.
11. How does Norma Rae's reputation affect her credibility as a leader? What actions create bad images for the wildland firefighter?
 - When union management learns of her indiscretions, they want her removed as the union voice. With power comes exposure of character.
 - Inappropriate behavior, illegal actions, etc.
12. How does management attempt to thwart advancements that Norma Rae has made within the mill? What technique does Rueben use to build Norma Rae to another leadership level? What is the result of her actions?
 - Management posts a letter igniting issues between the black and white workers.
 - Rueben requires that Norma Rae copy the letter. He sends her back when she fails the first time.

- Norma Rae puts her job on the line by standing up to management. She stands up for her convictions.

13. How effective is Norma Rae's last stand in the mill?

- Norma Rae's last stand is powerful. She doesn't lose control but uses the moment to capture the mill workers.

14. Mill workers had difficulty in voicing their concerns regarding management and mill conditions. As a leader, how do you handle the silent subordinate?

- Answers will vary. Subordinates may not be communicative in large groups; consider one-on-one communication. Observe actions—"Actions speak louder than words."

15. Norma Rae owns up to her faults and imperfections with her children. What does this accomplish? How can you deal with faults and imperfections?

- Norma Rae gains respect from her children and acceptance of self. She gains conviction in her pursuit to unionization of the mill.
- "Honesty is the best policy." Accepting one's faults and imperfections can provide a catalyst for change. Seek help and assistance from a mentor or peer.

DUTY

Be proficient in your job, both technically & as a leader.

- Take charge when in charge.
- Adhere to professional standard operating procedures.
- Develop a plan to accomplish given objectives.

Make sound & timely decisions.

- Maintain situation awareness in order to anticipate needed actions.
- Develop contingencies & consider consequences.
- Improvise within the commander's intent to handle a rapidly changing environment.

Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised, accomplished.

- Issue clear instructions.
- Observe & assess actions in progress without micro-managing.
- Use positive feedback to modify duties, tasks & assignments when appropriate.

Develop your subordinates for the future.

- Clearly state expectations.
- Delegate tasks that you are not required to do personally.
- Consider individual skill levels & developmental needs when assigning tasks.

Know your subordinates and look out for their well-being.

- Put the safety of your subordinates above all other objectives.
- Take care of your subordinate's needs.
- Resolve conflicts between individuals on the team.

Keep your subordinates informed.

- Provide accurate & timely briefings.
- Give the reason (intent) for assignments & tasks.
- Make yourself available to answer questions at appropriate times.

Build the team.

- Conduct frequent debriefings with the team to identify lessons learned.
- Recognize accomplishments & reward them appropriately.
- Apply disciplinary measures equally.

Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.

- Observe human behavior as well as fire behavior.
- Provide early warning to subordinates of tasks they will be responsible for.
- Consider team experience, fatigue & physical limitations when accepting assignments.

Know yourself and seek improvement.

- Know the strengths/weaknesses in your character & skill level.
- Ask questions of peers & supervisors.
- Actively listen to feedback from subordinates.

Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.

- Accept full responsibility for & correct poor team performance.
- Credit subordinates for good performance.
- Keep your superiors informed of your actions.

Set the example.

- Share the hazards & hardships with your subordinates.
- Don't show discouragement when facing setbacks.
- Choose the difficult right over the easy wrong.

RESPECT

INTEGRITY

Norma Rae

1. Document film clips illustrating the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles.
2. Discuss leadership lessons learned from the film with group members or mentor.

Duty

- Be proficient in your job, both technically and as a leader.
- Make sound and timely decisions.
- Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised and accomplished.
- Develop your subordinates for the future.

What scenes from the movie relate to “Duty”?

Respect

- Know your subordinates and look out for their well being.
- Keep your subordinates informed.
- Build the team.
- Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.

What scenes from the movie relate to “Respect”?

Integrity

- Know yourself and seek improvement.
- Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.
- Set the example.

What scenes from the movie relate to “Integrity”?

Norma Rae

Guided Discussion

1. Norma Rae communicates her doubts that Rueben's union flyer will be understood by workers. What is his response or action to the comment?
2. Why do the bosses in the mill give Norma Rae a promotion? Is this an appropriate and effective technique?
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13. How effective is Norma Rae's last stand in the mill?
14. Mill workers had difficulty in voicing their concerns regarding management and mill conditions. As a leader, how do you handle the silent subordinate?
15. Norma Rae owns up to her faults and imperfections with her children. What does this accomplish? How can you deal with faults and imperfection?