

## **Leading under fire part 1**

How is it that we recognize the need for leadership? We are considering our profession and reflecting on both the good and the bad. The current scenario versus the preferred outcome or direction. When considering these things the obvious conclusion is that we need someone to lead us. Are you ready to take up this challenge? What will you need to have to lead your organization or even the fire service as a whole?

The answers vary according to your organizations mission, however if your organization does not have it's goal written and posted, then how can you expect anyone to work towards an ideal with any unity? Words matter. Our language defines everything and that is no different in our fire departments. We all need our collective goal clearly defined so when anyone is faced with a challenge of "what do we do now?" we can look to the goal and have clarity. Mission statements won't change your department, but the attitude and work geared towards it will. A mission statement is a foundation stone to building a house with purpose.

The people who lead have the personal traits that attract others to follow them. Personal bearing, energy, and a good attitude with honesty are all mandatory. A leader is someone who can guide a group through changes in their environment. A capable manager maintains processes or things during a change. The best leaders can do both. These high achievers do this not only because they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities but because they have a belief in those they lead. Leaders do their job because they believe in the collective good of the organization.

### **Opportunity to lead**

Change in the fire service can come from many different directions. The most common one is from financial and technological pressures. From training budgets to modern ppe and equipment, great strides can be made to improve a department's capabilities and their moral if properly funded. Of course the inverse is true where the opposite has happened. However the staff's moral can still maintain if the leadership is still dedicated to the mission. This is why some of the poorest and busiest fire houses in America are the best to work for. The mission is understood, and the shared sacrifice and hard work is the reward.

The change agents can vary from population shifts or a change in expectations. Either of these can completely change what it is we are charged to do. If the public elects a leader that campaigns on changing the way things are done, you can bet on that happening. If the mission is redefined, your choices are to lead an effort to match the organization, or galvanize your troops to stand your ground. An example of this happened in northern Ohio in 2015. A dual role fire/EMS department was nearly reduced to half of its membership by the politics that proclaimed the city could find cheaper EMS providers via the private sector. The townspeople and business leaders were educated on the fact that these paramedics were also their fire protection, and the political winds changed quickly in the fire department's favor. In this case the leaders of the union and the administration of the fire department

worked together to reach out to the community to change the mission of the civic leaders. Consider the trust needed between labor and management on this example.

Other wild cards can cause a dramatic shift in our purpose. Outbreaks of disease or disasters that damage infrastructure can reduce one part of our job and assign us new or even bigger responsibilities. New found resources can cause boom towns to pop up where there was once no need for organized services. Natural gas exploration has caused this scenario across Oh, Pa, and West Virginia.

### **The currency of leadership is trust**

When faced with good or negative changes a prolific leader makes all the difference. The process through a changing circumstance is to share the understanding so everyone knows where the organization is going and where they fit in. This kind of process takes trust. Trust is the currency of leadership. Trust cannot be established without some kind of relationship, and relationships are built on shared experiences or culture with a personal interest. This is why any great leader is lauded as not just a great leader but a friend, mentor or confidant. Followers will not be self-motivated to give their all to someone who they do not have a personal relationship.

It is the degree of risk that can define a leader. Most aspiring people want a difficult scenario to not only test themselves, but to also have an opportunity to earn their subordinates trust. The current fire service seems to be running towards risk aversion. Risk is a matter of perspective and the organization's ability. To try to eliminate risk through policy is foolish and a symptom of a lack of leadership. Consider this example: A seasoned senior man (untitled leader) working inside of a burning building directing the attack line, and on the outside is the newly promoted incident commander from a different side of town. Whom do you think the firefighters are watching and listening to first? This is where risk aversion loses to risk analysis.

Experienced risk takers can be trusted but gamblers cannot. Regulating away risk is only a gamble in this profession and the odds are against us.

### **Leading is an action**

Team leading is interdependent on the followers wanting to work for you. If you have to light fires under your people to get them to move, you are just a manager. If you light fires within your people to be self-motivated to accomplish more than is expected, you are a leader. Your job is to make people capable of filling your shoes in the future. This is why leadership failures impact is so long lasting. If there is no example of someone taking on the responsibility of directing the fire department an entire generation can slip into a lazy sea of apathy. Failures include complacency, giving into peer pressure, fear, and not defending your people. Perhaps the most common attribute of a leader who fails their people is one who has an infallible ego. Humility and humor go along way with personal relationships. Without personal relationships you cannot have trust, and without trust you are a one dimensional manager. As a leader you should be very concerned about your character and then let your reputation follow. Leaders know who they are and stay on course even if it means some degree of personal loss. The goal is to benefit the organization, not you.

### **Take on the role of a leader**

Your role as a leader is to pull more than push, but you shouldn't disregard the obligation to push those who need it. If you neglect those who resist or work against you, then those that are with you will slow down to the lowest expectation. Knowing your people and knowing their people (their motivators) gives you the insight to push them. Remember, you only appreciate being pushed by someone you respect. So value what is important to them, and they will most likely return the favor. I will share some insight on problem solving in this article's part 2. Stay tuned.