

Cultural Power Versus REAL Leadership: Whose Side Are YOU On?

By Dr. Kimberly Alyn

Be prepared for a new generation that will be entering the fire service in the next five to ten years. This generation is inundated with music, movies, and television that all send mixed messages about what it means to gain power and position. New recruits will need strong leadership models, outstanding training, and the real truth about leadership if they ever hope to emerge as effective leaders. Robert Greene wrote a book called *48 Laws of Power*. This book has made it to best-seller status, is huge in the hip hop industry, and is making its way into mainstream. In his book, Greene outlines the “laws” of increasing your power in life. I call these “Temporary Power Principles” because while they do increase your power in the short run, they will short-circuit your effectiveness as a real leader in the long run. Unfortunately, these Temporary Power Principles are gaining momentum in our ever increasing self-centered society.

The truth is if you embrace and apply the laws in Greene’s book, you *will* gain power. But it’s the kind of power Hitler and Saddam possessed. It’s the kind of power that breeds hate and mistrust. It’s the kind of power that makes people want to bow to your power and position while in your presence and undermine your authority when you are not around. It’s the kind of power that creates a cult-like following but eventually blows up in your face. It’s the kind of power many supervisors use in the fire service as well as many other organizations across the United States.

Below are just five of the 48 Laws of Power (or more accurately titled the Temporary Power Principles) that are perpetuated by this book with my corresponding “Real Leadership Principles.”

Temporary Power Principle #1: Conceal Your Intentions

The idea here is to keep people wondering about your intentions, your vision, and where you plan to take your followers. This helps cultivate an atmosphere of fear where people will feel more dependant upon you. This concept, in theory, gives the leader the upper hand as no one can prepare themselves for what the leader might choose to do next if the leader doesn’t tell anyone.

The Real Leadership Principle: Reveal Your Intentions

When you are open and honest with people, they feel safe. When you hoard information, people feel unsure of themselves and what they should be doing. By creating a free-flow of information, followers feel empowered to do their jobs and do it right! Real leaders let people know what their intentions are. This creates trust, and trust is imperative with real leadership. If you conceal your intentions, you risk breaking trust. An old Chinese proverb helps explain why that’s dangerous: “Trust, like fine china, once broken can be repaired, but it is never quite the same.” When you break trust with followers, it takes a very long time to rebuild that trust, and often times things are never quite the same.

Temporary Power Principle #2: Get Others to Do the Work for You but Always Take the Credit

This law convinces people of the need to be in the spotlight. The idea is to get others to get all of the work done, but your name should be all over it. You will increase your power and position by taking credit for things you didn’t actually do. Once the person manipulates others to accomplish the tasks, when it comes time for glory, the leader takes it. People who practice this principle are usually first to throw blame on the followers who did the work if something goes wrong.

The Real Leadership Principle: Share in the Work, Accept Blame, and Give Away Credit

Real leaders understand the need to build competent teams. In order to do that, you need to share in the work as a leader. Real leaders will actually accept blame for team failures (since they are the one leading the team), and they will give away credit for team successes (since it really takes the whole team to succeed). By empowering others to succeed, you will succeed as well. When you make others look good, you look good.

Temporary Power Principle #3: Keep Others in Suspended Terror—Cultivate an Air of Unpredictability

The concept here is to never allow people to become comfortable with anticipating your moods or actions. If you are calm and controlled at one time and raging out of control another, people will live in fear of you. They will never know what to expect and will therefore walk on eggshells around you. Followers tend to be extra accommodating for fear they may be the catalyst for the next bad mood. It puts the leader in a more powerful position over the follower.

The Real Leadership Principle: Keep Others Trusting You—Cultivate an Air of Consistent Predictability

Long term, effective leadership requires integrity. Many people define integrity as “doing the right thing when no one is looking.” I agree with that. I also believe that integrity is doing what you said you would do, when you said you would do it, and how you said it would be done. Being unpredictable does not fit that definition, and therefore lacks integrity. Real leaders show consistency in their behavior. They are predictable when it comes to their values, beliefs, and vision. They show congruency between their actions and values and people see them as authentic.

Temporary Power Principle #4: Be Royal in Your Own Fashion—Act Like a King to be Treated Like One

This law perpetuates the concept of “fake it ‘till you make it.” If you want people to treat you like royalty, then you had better start acting like it. If you want people to treat you like you are powerful, then you need to act powerful and show others that you are the one in power.

The Real Leadership Principle: Be a Servant to Others and They Will Treat You Like a King

This is one of the hardest concepts for some supervisors to comprehend and embrace. Many managers and supervisors think that their subordinates or followers exist to serve them. Real leaders understand that they exist to serve their followers, and by doing so, everyone wins. Real leaders don’t have to flex their power at others. Margaret Thatcher put it succinctly when she said, “Being in power is a lot like being a lady—if you have to tell people you are, then you aren’t.” Real leaders positively influence others and serve others. As a result, people *want* to follow. When you exalt yourself, people tend to want to humble you. When you humble yourself, people tend to want to exalt you.

Temporary Power Principle #5: Play on People’s Need to Believe to Create a Cult-Like Following

The idea here is people need to believe in something. If you practice this law and play on this need in people, you can get them under your thumb in a cult-like following, especially if you can be persuasive enough. People who practice this law of gaining power try to prey on the weak first and then work their way to the stronger people in the group. Once they have their following, they can keep people under that thumb.

The Real Leadership Principle: Be the Role Model Leader that People Can Believe In

The fact is... people *do* want to believe. They want to believe in other people. They want to believe in leaders. They want to believe in the vision and direction of the leader. Real leaders give people positive things to believe in. Instead of preying on the need to believe, real leaders fill that need. They serve as role model examples of honesty, integrity, and trust and followers believe in their leadership abilities.

What’s YOUR Choice?

Take a look at your own leadership style. Do you practice some of the Temporary Power Principles instead of Real Leadership Principles? Maybe some of the things you do are more subtle than what I am listing here, but may still be pushing people away from your leadership style. If you want to be a more effective leader, you need to focus on positively influencing others by consistently practicing Real Leadership Principles. For more free information on real leadership in the fire service, log on to: FirePresnetations.com/FreeInfo.htm.

Dr. Alyn is a best selling author and an international fire service speaker and training instructor. She is the owner of Fire Presentations, a company dedicated to fire service training and keynote presentations.

Dr. Alyn has conducted the largest known fire service study on leadership and speaks to fire audiences all over the United States and Canada on the topic of leadership and firefighter development.

An avid writer, Dr. Alyn is the author of eleven books including *How to Inspire People to Achieve More*, *101 Leadership Reminders*, *How to Deal With Annoying People*, and *Discover Your Inner Strength* with contributors Stephen Covey, Ken Blanchard, and Brian Tracy. She is also a monthly columnist for *Firehouse Magazine*. Dr. Alyn has been a featured presenter at Firehouse World, Firehouse Baltimore, Firehouse Central, Fire Rescue Conference, FDIC Indiana, FDIC West, Fire Tech Reno, and many other fire service conferences.

A true supporter of life-long learning, Dr. Alyn holds a bachelor’s degree in management, a master’s degree in organizational management, and a doctorate degree in organizational management with a specialty in leadership.