

What it Means to be an Exceptional Leader

As you look around society today, it gets more and more difficult to find principle-based leaders. Passing the buck is commonplace as everyone points the finger at someone else. Society is starving for quality leadership and it's no different in fire departments all over the world. Firefighters want leaders who will actively engage in the leadership process as they work to develop exceptional leaders for the future of the fire service. I have a leadership acronym for what I consider some of the more important traits of an exceptional leader:

Love What You Do!

Excel in Competency

Act with Integrity

Demonstrate Accountability

Empower Others

Respond Humbly

Love What You Do

People want to follow leaders who love what they do and show some passion for it. You don't have to love every aspect of your job or everything that transpires in the department, but you should at least love being a firefighter, or a company officer, or a chief officer. I have yet to meet a firefighter who didn't have a passion for being a firefighter when they started out. But as the years go by, apathy sets in for some people for a variety of reasons: department politics, the promotional process, boredom, burnout, personality conflicts, and disillusionment. Too many firefighters let their external circumstances dictate their love for the job which in turn is reflected in low quality performance. I read a great quote once that said, "Above all, be true to yourself, and if you cannot put your heart in it, take yourself out of it."

Exceptional leaders are defined by the level of excellence they strive for regardless of their external circumstances. Average people need to be in a great job to excel. Average people need to work with great people to excel. Average people need to have a great boss to excel. Average people need things to go right to excel.

Exceptional leaders don't settle for less than the very best from themselves regardless of their circumstances. You won't hear an exceptional leader say "Why should I give everything I have to this job? My boss doesn't appreciate me!" You won't hear an exceptional leader say "I am going to come to work, give the absolute minimum and go home. Why should I give any more than that to this department?" You won't hear an exceptional leader say "I hate my job. I work with imbeciles. How can I possibly excel in these conditions?" You won't hear an exceptional leader say "No one will let me reach my full potential."

Because when you adopt that attitude and perspective, you render yourself powerless and ineffective. You give others the authority to dictate your level of excellence. You take the easy way out when you use your boss, your co-workers or your environment as an excuse not to do your best. Exceptional leaders give everything 100%. They draw from their internal drive and excellence, not their external circumstances. That's what separates average leaders from exceptional leaders. Exceptional leaders love what they do because they *choose* to.

Excel in Competency

Competency ranks high on the list of desirable traits that followers want to see in their leaders. Competency instills confidence in followers and it transcends the fire ground. Of course firefighters want their leaders to be absolutely competent when taking incident command, but it doesn't stop there. Firefighters also want their leaders to be competent in communication skills, conflict resolution skills, interpersonal skills, administrative skills, negotiation skills, and a variety of other areas.

On average, across the United States, firefighters spend 4% of their time on emergency calls and 1% of that is fire suppression. The remaining 96% is spent back at the station dealing with a host of other issues that require competency in a variety of areas. Exceptional leaders in the fire service recognize that their first call to competency is in leadership. There is a great proverb that says, "He who thinks he leads but has no followers is only taking a walk." Leaders need to focus on their ability to truly lead and improve this critical competency. When this area of competency is focused on, many other areas tend to take care of themselves.

Exceptional leaders never stop improving. They continue to take classes, read books, learn from others, and look for ways to make themselves and their department better in every way possible. They take input from followers, other leaders,

other departments, and anyone who can teach them something new. They are not too arrogant to think they can't learn from everyone. Exceptional leaders excel in competency through continued education, training, and experience.

Act with Integrity

Integrity has been defined as “doing the right thing when no one is looking.” Integrity is doing the right thing no matter what. Whether people are looking or not, exceptional leaders will make the choice to do what is right, even if no one else is doing it. They will make the unpopular decisions because they know it's the right decision.

Having integrity as a leader is a challenge in what I call our current “morally negotiable society.” It seems as if anything goes and anything can be justified (if not justified then blamed on someone else). Thomas Jefferson once said “In matters of style you can swim with the current, but in matters of principle you stand like a rock!” Great leaders may change in style but they don't compromise principles. That kind of leadership is hard to find in society today.

A man attended a leadership conference and listened to a powerful message on integrity. He went home and tossed and turned all night, unable to sleep. He began to take inventory of all the areas of his life that lacked integrity. One in particular stood out: he had been cheating on his taxes. So he sat down and wrote a letter to the IRS. The letter said, “Dear IRS, I am trying to become a man of integrity. I have not been claiming all of my income and have therefore not been paying all of the taxes I owe. As a result, I have not been able to sleep at night. Enclosed is a check for \$2,000. If I *still* can't sleep at night, I will send you the rest.”

You cannot practice behaviors that demonstrate integrity half way. Exceptional leaders will do the right thing for their followers, their leaders, their departments, and most importantly, for the public they serve.

Demonstrate Accountability

Are you willing to make yourself accountable to people above you, below you, and beside you? Most people are willing to make themselves accountable to the person above them because they know they are responsible for their performance evaluation. Some will even make themselves accountable to their peers, but few will actually make themselves accountable to their subordinates.

I met an exceptional leader chief officer who understood this concept. He allowed his subordinates to speak into his life when he was curt with a member of the public, or inconsistent with policy enforcement, or not setting a role model example when it came to his attitude and work ethic. Many leaders become indignant at the idea of a subordinate calling them to carpet on an issue. Exceptional leaders recognize that this builds trust, respect, and a culture of mutual accountability.

Unfortunately, I have met far too many leaders in the fire service who look down their nose at people down the chain of command. They act as if they have all the answers and that's why they are in the position they are in. The truth is we all need to be accountable up, down, and across the chain of command if we hope to develop outstanding leadership throughout the organization. Exceptional leaders demonstrate high levels of accountability because as Stephen Covey so aptly put it, “Accountability breeds response-ability.”

Empower Others

Empowering others means establishing, defining, and educating people on the expected results and boundaries to operate in and then setting them free to make things happen. Or as Theodore Roosevelt put it, “The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.” Many leaders feel threatened by empowering others with authority, decision-making, or process determination. They are afraid the employee may fail and it will make them look bad. Or, they are afraid the employee will succeed and it will make them look bad. A lack of empowerment is usually rooted in insecurity.

When you empower people, you communicate that you trust them to use their best judgment. If you can't trust them to do that, you probably haven't provided adequate training. If you have provided adequate training and coaching and a firefighter still isn't using good judgment, discipline needs to follow. If the discipline does not change the behavior, the firefighter may need to consider a different line of work. Unfortunately, because most fire departments have a few dense firefighters who refuse to use good judgment, every other firefighter is punished by being denied the opportunity to be empowered in any way they can be. Company officers and chief officers need to step up and discipline firefighters who need it and the union needs to back that discipline so the other firefighters can have confidence that management and labor share the desire to have the highest levels of excellence in the department at every level.

Empowerment increases morale and allows firefighters to take ownership in their departments. People find it very difficult to buy in to missions, visions, and goals that they didn't help create. Empower your firefighters to become part of the process and you will be amazed at the increase in participation and buy in. Exceptional leaders empower others.

Respond Humbly

Humility is a highly desirable trait in a leader. Many leaders in the fire service mistakenly think that if they are to exhibit confidence, they can't exhibit humility. You can be both highly confident as a leader and still be humble. In fact,

those are the easiest leaders to follow. No one wants to follow a humble leader who is insecure or unsure. No one wants to follow a confident leader who is arrogant either.

Humility is best exhibited in your ability to listen and take input from others. If you invalidate the ideas and input of others, people will view you as arrogant. If people come to you and point out an area you could improve in, respond humbly. If people come to you and praise your abilities, respond humbly. If you have offended someone or acted like a jerk and you know it, swallow that pride and respond humbly. When you maximize your mistakes, people want to minimize them. When you minimize your mistakes, people want to maximize them. When you exalt yourself, people want to humble you. When you humble yourself, people want to exalt you. Humility covers a wide variety of areas as a leader, and exceptional leaders will respond humbly. Just remember the words of Ezra Taft Benson: "Pride is concerned with *who* is right. Humility is concerned with *what* is right."

If you want to become an exceptional leader, these are a few key areas you can start with. Love what you do, excel in competency, act with integrity, demonstrate accountability, empower others, and respond humbly. Society is absolutely starving for exceptional leaders and you have an opportunity to step up in your department and be the leader your fellow firefighters need.

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