



By KIMBERLY ALYN, Ph.D.

Focus on Values, Not Policy

Changing the Culture of Your Department

In previous columns, I have talked about the importance of organizational vision and purpose. Now, I want to focus on values.

I conduct leadership training in fire departments all over the United States and Canada. I will often ask attendees this simple question: “What are the core values of your department?” Most of the time, all I can hear is the sound of a cricket in the corner, mocking the total silence in the room. It always amazes me how few firefighters can articulate the core values of their fire department. If the fire chief isn’t talking about the core values to the command staff, the command staff won’t be talking about the core values to the company officers. If command staff members aren’t talking about the core values to the company officers, the company officers won’t be talking about the core values to the engineers and firefighters.

If your department has not articulated its core values, it needs to. These core values are what should guide the daily behavior of everyone in your department. All actions and decisions should be aligned with those core values and the values should be talked about often at every level in the fire department.

A great way to help firefighters remember the core values is to use an acronym. An example would be UNITED

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with the core values of Unity, Niceness, Integrity, Teamwork, Excellence and Dedication. One fire department laminates its core values onto three-by-five-inch cards that all firefighters carry in their shirt pockets. When a strong focus is put on values, the culture of the organization will shift to a values-based culture.

Unfortunately, most fire departments have a culture that is focused on policy, not values, so when something goes wrong in the department, management writes a new policy. Few management teams or company officers think to get together and talk about values. As a result, a policy-driven culture emerges. Policy-driven organizations produce reluctant compliance. Values-driven organizations produce purposeful commitment.

The focus on policy maintains a high focus on discipline and the consequences of violating policy. As a result, most firefighters will give their reluctant compliance and follow policy. But many of them will follow policy only in the presence of an authority figure who has the power to dish out consequences if the policies are violated. In the absence of authority, these firefighters will often undermine policy and undermine the authority behind the policy. Without strong personal values and strong organizational values, people will not commit themselves to doing what is right just because it’s right.

People are positively influenced by strong values, vision and purpose. When firefighters are operating under a values-driven culture, they want to follow policy because it’s the right thing to do. They don’t follow policy because they fear discipline; they follow policy because they align their

behavior with their own personal values and the organizational values of the fire department. As a result, they work with a sense of purpose and commitment that is much stronger than policy.

Core values should guide the daily behavior of everyone in your department.

Don’t misunderstand the point being made about values. I am not discounting the importance of policy, as it is certainly needed in every organization to establish clear guidelines. However, if you focus solely on policy and neglect values, you

will constantly be chasing compliance. When your focus becomes the values instead of the policies, your culture begins to shift to a values-driven culture and policy takes care of itself.

There is a very important catch to focusing on values in your fire department: people don’t care what you write down on a piece of paper and call your core values. They don’t care what you put in a pretty frame and hang on a wall. They want to see those core values come to life in every decision you make and every action you take.

If your department has a core value of “respect,” but members of your command staff constantly talk down to people or yell at them publicly, you’re going to have a real credibility problem. The core values of your department will mean nothing to your firefighters if the management team is not consistently modeling the core values in their daily behavior. Start at the top and begin examining how your fire department approaches your core values.

This discussion on values is so important to the future success of your fire department that I will be continuing this focus in the next two columns as I discuss values clarity and values evaluations.

