

Higher Accountability for Leaders: Can You Handle It?

I work with a lot of promotional candidates for the fire service. I notice they do a lot of preparation for the promotion, but not nearly enough preparation for the position. One of the points I try to drive home in my promotional process classes is the concept of higher accountability for supervisors and leaders. Not everyone can handle this higher accountability and I have actually counseled some people *against* promoting who seem to struggle with this issue.

Real leaders understand a leadership concept that goes back to Biblical times: “To him whom much is given, much is required.” The more responsibility and leadership you are afforded, the more is required of you in regards to accountability. Winston Churchill once said, “The price of greatness is responsibility.” I couldn’t agree more. Supervisors and leaders in the fire service need to recognize a higher level of accountability in these four main areas:

- 1) Have a love and passion for what you do
- 2) Support the mission, vision, and goals of the department
- 3) Model great customer service
- 4) Keep behavior in check (on and off duty)

Have a Love and Passion for What You Do

I can say, with a great deal of confidence, that most people in the fire service were once on fire with passion for the job (pun intended). I know people who have camped out to get an application, people who put their heart and soul into probation, and people who actually looked for ways to serve others. Then we gaze into their lives ten years later and they are disillusioned by the politics, burned out by the grating personalities, and frustrated with the daily drama that goes on in every station.

It’s a lot like a marriage. In the beginning when people are dating, there’s an awe of each other and a driving passion to serve one another and show the best side of each other. Then the years settle in and with those years come comfort, complacency, and apathy. It happens to everyone, and without a conscious effort to change it, the relationship deteriorates. The same is true in the fire service. If you don’t get back in touch with the love and passion you once had, your performance will deteriorate and you’ll hit a point of burnout. Instead of divorcing the fire service, many people just drag themselves around like a dead weight until retirement.

Leaders have a higher level of accountability and responsibility for maintaining that love and passion for the job. Even if you don’t feel like it, if you act like it, the feelings will follow. If you find yourself in burnout, you need to sit down and remind yourself why you got into the fire service in the first place. Followers need leaders with passion and purpose. They need leaders who love what they do. It’s very frustrating for followers to have leaders who are burned out and hate what they do. It’s also contagious. Be a leader who loves the job!

Support the Mission, Vision, and Goals of the Department

You may not support every policy, procedure, or goal the department has as a leader in your department. Few leaders do. However, real leaders voice their disapproval up the chain, not down or across the chain. Real leaders don’t complain to their followers. Real leaders don’t complain to co-workers. They complain to the source or up the chain of command until they find resolution. My theory has always been if you don’t like something, change it. If you can’t change it, then change the way you perceive it. If you can’t change the way you perceive it, change departments. I know that sounds harsh, but leaders need to step up and do the right thing. While small minds talk about people, average minds talk about events, and great minds talk about ideas. Leaders need to be talking about ideas for solving problems, not the people who seem to be perpetuating those problems. More importantly, leaders need to encourage their followers to do the same.

As a leader, it’s important to support the general direction of the department, including the mission, vision, and goals. That doesn’t mean you agree with every decision or policy, but it does mean your followers see you supporting the organization as a whole. If that is not something you can do as a leader, you shouldn’t be a leader in the organization. You need to be in an organization you can get behind and support. In addition to supporting the mission, vision, and goals, leaders need to be talking about the mission and general direction of the department and how it affects the followers on a daily basis. Do your followers understand how their job affects the mission of the organization? Do they understand what actions on a daily basis move the department towards its goals and objectives? How would they know if leaders aren’t talking about it with their followers? As a leader, do you have a very solid understanding of the mission, vision, and goals of the department and city? If you don’t, you need to!

Model Great Customer Service

Real leaders understand that followers often reflect the attitude and actions of their leaders. Maybe you’ve heard the saying “Attitude Reflects Leadership.” If a leader has a bad attitude about serving others, chances are the followers will as well. How a leader treats the public and people within the department can often be seen in the actions of followers.

Leaders need to realize who the customer is. Customers are not just members of the public. You have internal customers as well. Captains are customers to battalion chiefs. Firefighters are customers to captains. Members of the public are customers to anyone who comes into contact with them. Leaders should be approaching their followers with a customer mind-set which includes:

- How can I help you?
- How can I develop you?
- How can I assist you in reaching your goals?
- How can I provide you with the tools you need to succeed?
- How can I ensure your actions are in alignment with the direction of the department?

Leaders often neglect to see their followers as customers. When leaders start to model great customer service to both internal and external customers, followers tend to do the same.

Keep Behavior in Check (on and off duty)

Leaders often struggle with this one. They don't like the idea of higher accountability for off-duty actions. When I go into departments and give an all-day workshop on leadership, this is one of the more controversial issues we discuss. I hear firefighters at every level say "If I am off duty, what does it matter what I do? I should be able to have my private life be private." That's all fine and good as long as every single aspect of your private life is private. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. If someone is getting pulled in to a chief's office for discipline or discussion of off-duty actions, then the actions obviously didn't stay very private.

The further up you go in an organization, the higher level of accountability you have for on and off-duty actions. If you have a firefighter paramedic who goes out one night drinking and on his way out of the bar stumbles into someone and pushes them out of the way, you might expect word to get back to the station and some discussion to take place with his captain. However, if the fire chief goes out drinking one night and the same scenario unfolds, it would probably make the front page of the newspaper. There is a greater level of accountability for higher positions in any organization, but especially the fire service. The public holds firefighters in high esteem with expectations for behavior regardless of whether the uniform is on. When the uniform *is* on, the expectations are even higher.

Leaders need to rise to this challenge whether on or off duty. When driving, interacting with the public, or out having a good time, leaders need to act in a manner that reflects positively on the department and the city. Common sense would dictate that you always act in a manner that your mom would be proud of, but unfortunately, common sense does not always prevail.

Be a Real Leader

Real leaders will embrace the challenge of higher accountability and set the role model for followers. They will demonstrate a love and passion for what they do. Real leaders will support the mission, vision, and goals of the department as they take their complaints up the chain, not down or across. They will model great customer service to both internal and external customers. Real leaders will keep their behavior in check on and off duty as they exhibit the highest level of integrity possible. The fire service needs more great leaders, so as a leader, help raise the bar with higher accountability. And remember, if you hold yourself accountable and discipline yourself, others won't have to. For more free information on how to be a more effective leader, log on to: www.FirePresentations.com/FreeInfo.htm.

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