

Real Leaders Don't Accept Change Anymore!

The old leadership philosophy was that if you wanted to be a great leader, you had to accept change. The new leadership philosophy is that great leaders don't accept change—they initiate it! But first, let me clarify: great leaders don't initiate change for the sake of change. They initiate change for the sake of improvement. Not all change is good, and running through your department like a bull in a china shop for the sake of creating change is not the kind of change I am advocating. I am suggesting change that increases morale and generates improvement.

A probationary firefighter asked a seasoned veteran about a particular process. "Why do we do it this way?" The veteran snapped back, "Because that's the way we have *always* done it!"

While some of the younger generations may appear to be asking simply to challenge authority, question everything, and irritate the older generations, there are times when it is an absolutely legitimate question. The best answer is an explanation of why things are done the way they are done followed with a question: "Why? Do you have a suggestion for improvement?" If you can't ask that question, you are not engaging in effective leadership, management, or innovation. If you are one of those people who thinks only management can come up with the best ideas and processes, you are missing the boat. Keeping things the way they are simply because "that's the way we have always done it" is a poor excuse for stifling growth.

It reminds me of the young wife who is getting ready to make her first Thanksgiving dinner. She puts the turkey in the oven and then starts preparing the ham. She sets it on the cutting board and chops both ends off the ham, put it in the pan and then covers it with tin foil. Her husband is curiously watching and he asks, "Honey, why do you cut both ends off the ham?"

She stood silent and thought for a minute. "Well I don't know. That's just the way my mom always did it. Let me call her and ask her why."

The young wife gets her mom on the phone. "Hey mom, why do we cut both ends off the ham before we cook it?" Her mom thought for a second, chuckled and replied, "I really don't know. That's just the way your grandmother always did it. Let me call her and ask."

So she gets her mother on the phone. "Mom, why do we cut both ends off the ham at Thanksgiving time?" Her mom shot back, "Well I don't know why *you* do it—I did it because my pan was too small to fit that ham!"

We see generation after generation doing things a certain way and they have no idea why... "That's just the way we've always done it!" We develop ingrained patterns for doing things and forget to ask why we are doing them.

A group of researchers put five monkeys in a habitat. There was a banana hanging from a string at the top of a small staircase. One of the monkeys spots the banana and heads up the stairs for it. Just as the monkey is about to reach the top of the stairs, the researchers spray ice cold water on all five monkeys. The monkey on the staircase backs away from the banana and shakes the cold water off.

The researchers then replace one of the monkeys with a new monkey. He spots the banana and starts to go for it. As he begins to climb the stairs, all of the other monkeys grab him and drag him to the bottom of the stairs. Then they replace another monkey with a new monkey who has never been sprayed with water. This new monkey sees the banana and heads up the stairs. All of the monkeys grab him, thump on him, and pull him to the bottom of the stairs including the new monkey who has never been sprayed with water. The researchers repeat this process, and each time the new monkey always goes for the banana and the other monkeys always intervene and prevent the process. This is repeated until all five monkeys have been replaced. Not one of those monkeys will ever try to get that banana again, and they have absolutely no idea why, because none of them have ever been sprayed with ice cold water. All they know is, "That's just the way it's always been."

Do you notice people in your department attempting to drag people away from change, innovation, and creativity? Do you see a strong resistance to process improvement? Too many fire departments resist change for a variety of reasons. Maybe those who resist change the most have had their ideas sprayed with ice cold water in the past. Maybe they have been thumped too many times for "going against the system." We tend to precondition ourselves to expect what we have always gotten.

Do you know why a full-grown circus elephant can be held by a very small pole and a light chain that is clamped around his ankle and he won't try to escape? I asked this at a firefighter conference once and one of the guys yelled out "Cuz he's married!?" As funny as that may be, it is not accurate. The reason the

elephant doesn't try to escape is because he is conditioned to believe that he is not strong enough. When the elephant is a baby, he is held by the same pole and chain with a smaller clamp around the ankle. At this age, he is too weak to pull himself free. He will try and fail and over a period of time, he will precondition himself to believe that he will *always* fail. So here he is, a full grown, multi-ton animal that could yank himself free in one strong pull, and he won't even try. He just assumes he is incapable. It's called learned helplessness and humans are just as susceptible to this phenomenon.

A study was conducted on piranhas in a huge fish tank. The piranhas were placed in half of the tank and the piranhas' prey was placed in the other half of the tank. A glass divider was placed between them. The piranhas would see their prey and they would swim around and bang their head into the glass divider. They would then circle the tank and try again. As they swam for their prey, their heads met with the glass divider once again! Over a period of time, the piranhas grow weary of banging their head against the glass divider and they give up. They begin to swim side by side with their prey and they never try again. The researchers can remove the glass divider and those piranhas will swim side by side with their prey until they starve to death.

It doesn't take long to reach a stage of conditioned failure and learned helplessness. If you feel like you are merely beating your head against a wall, you tend to give up. If you are constantly going against the tide, it can get exhausting. People often settle into their fire service careers giving up on the idea that any real and lasting change can take place.

The fire service has gone through substantial changes in the past fifty years. Fifty years ago the fire service was a homogenous organization made up of all white males. Today, the fire service embraces multi-faceted diversity including gender, race, religion, culture, and personality. With that diversity comes challenge as people learn how their differences can benefit each other, the department, and society. But diversity also brings with it conflict. Differing opinions and views often slow down change as clashing personalities and priorities elbow their way into the process.

Long-term growth and success in any public or private organization requires constant change and innovation. Surviving this economic downturn will require some creative budgeting and possibly trying things that either didn't work in the past or have never been tried at all. Don't let past patterns dictate future results. The outstanding fire departments of the future will be the departments that embrace change for the sake of improvement and refuse to give up when others have given in. Real leaders, whether formal or informal, stand up for positive improvement in their departments and initiate the changes that need to take place.

Spend some time this week taking inventory of your department. What needs to change to improve the effectiveness of the leadership in your department right now? What needs to change to improve labor and management relations? What needs to change to improve morale? What needs to change to improve your response time or customer service? What needs to change to increase the level of organizational commitment by your firefighters? What needs to change in *you* to be a better firefighter? What changes can you initiate today to make your department the absolute best it can be? Real leaders don't accept change anymore... they embrace it!

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