

By KIMBERLY ALYN

# Great Leaders Take Input from Their Followers

*Barking Orders Is Necessary on the Fireground,  
But Can be Counter-Productive in the Firehouse*

**Firefighters all over  
the United States are  
coming up with great  
ideas on how to:**

**save money**  
**lower injuries**  
**increase morale**  
**serve the public**  
**improve processes**

**Are you listening  
to them?**

**KIMBERLY ALYN** is a best-selling author and a professional speaker and trainer. She is the owner of Fire Presentations ([www.FirePresentations.com](http://www.FirePresentations.com)), a company dedicated to training workshops for the fire service. Alyn offers instruction on leadership, conflict prevention and resolution, discipline in the fire service, promotional process, command presence, communication skills, presentations skills, writing skills and sexual harassment. She is the author of eight books and five CD/DVD productions. Alyn holds a bachelor's degree in management and a master's degree in organizational management. She can be reached at 800-821-8116 or e-mail [Kim@FirePresentations.com](mailto:Kim@FirePresentations.com).

I was conducting a leadership training class for a large fire department and I noticed a pretty big morale problem. When I started asking questions and getting to the bottom of the issue, I discovered that every decision that was being made in the department was being made without any input or participation from the front line. Only management was involved in the process and every policy and procedure was being shoved down the throats of the followers who were most affected by these decisions.

People generally find it very difficult to buy into decisions, policies and vision that they didn't help create. If people have input and participation in the decision-making processes, they feel a stronger sense of ownership in the organization. The best fire departments in the nation recognize and implement this principle of leadership. When they are drafting their strategic plans, they solicit input and participation from every rank. They have representation at every level so the end result generally reflects the needs and desires of the team as a whole and not just a few, select members.

I have come across some resistance on this concept in some fire departments where the leaders believe "command and control" is the only way to get results. They are sadly mistaken. Command and control (essentially barking orders at people) is absolutely necessary on the fireground for incident command, but back at the station a command-and-control attitude hurts morale, squelches initiative and causes resentment.

Command-and-control leaders do not take input from others, much less solicit it. Their philosophy is generally rooted in the attitude, "If I want your opinion, I'll give it to you." They believe only people who have promoted into supervisory positions have the ability to come up with the best ideas. They see input and suggestions as a threat or challenge to the way they are doing things instead of an opportunity to do things better.

The U.S. military is known for its command-and-control environment and most people in the military would tell you this is necessary to maintain discipline and combat readiness. However, there are some great leaders in the military who are discovering that when the team is not at war, there is no reason to bark orders at them all day long. There is a very high turnover rate in the military and when asked, most people leaving the military will tell you they are sick of their "managers."

Captain Mike Abrashoff had command of the guided missile destroyer *USS Benfold* in 1997. In a two-year period, he took a ship of 310 navy personnel with an attrition rate of over 70% and turned that attrition rate to zero. Think about that for a minute. When he took command, over 70% of the people on the ship couldn't wait to get off. By the time he finished his command, no one wanted off the ship – in fact, people were clamoring to get on.

What did Abrashoff do to make this happen? He listened to his crew...all 310 of them. He interviewed every single person and asked them why they joined the Navy. He asked them how they could operate as a better team. He prompted them for ideas on how to become a better ship. He provided a safe environment where people felt like they could share their ideas and input without retaliation. He asked them what processes could be improved and then he helped them implement those ideas. It didn't matter if they were an officer or an enlisted person. The captain recognized that those closest to the problems on the ship had the best solutions for solving those problems.

One sailor pointed out that the crew was painting the ship six times a year. It was hurting morale and taking people away from training for combat readiness. His suggestion was to replace some of the metal nuts and bolts on the ship with stainless steel ones. Rust would no longer streak the sides of the ship and the incessant painting could stop.

## A True Morale Booster

The captain *listened* to the sailor's idea and then *acted* on it. He contacted the Navy supply system, only to discover it had no stainless steel fasteners in stock. The captain didn't stop there. He went to the nearest Home Depot, used the ship credit card to purchase the fasteners and had them installed all over the ship. This made it possible for the ship to be painted just once a year. What a boost to morale! It also sent a message that the captain was serious about hearing ideas and putting them to use. The Navy now uses these fasteners on all of its ships just because one captain took input and suggestions from his crew and then took action. That's real leadership.

Fire departments that adopt this philosophy find success in it. They see increased morale and better teams. They see firefighters buying into policies and decisions because they were involved in the process. They are seeing some fantas-

tic ideas and creativity coming out of the front line. Firefighters all over the United States are coming up with great ideas on how to save money, lower injuries, increase morale, serve the public and improve processes. Are you listening to them?

Another area that great leaders are allowing followers to give them input is the effectiveness of their leadership. Most managers and leaders make themselves accountable up the chain of command (because they have to), but few make themselves accountable down or across the chain. Let me ask you a question: Of the following, who do you think could provide the most accurate assessment as to your effectiveness as a leader:

- Your manager
- Your subordinates
- Your peers

Most people would say the subordinates could give the most accurate assessment and then peers, with managers being last. But who conducts your performance evaluations? Your managers. What's wrong with this picture? If you *really* want to get an accurate assessment of how effective you are as a leader (formal or informal), you will open yourself up to input from your followers and your peers. Great leaders see this type of input as beneficial to their growth as a leader. It's easy to make yourself accountable up the chain of command for your leadership abilities, but are you willing to make yourself accountable down and across? Real leaders are.

I recommend a 360-degree evaluation. This lets the people who witness your leadership skills evaluate you whether they are above you, below you, or beside you – thus, the name 360-degree evaluation. This has proven to be incredibly effective for people to take the input objectively and make changes to their behavior based on that input.

You simply have people fill out a one-page form that lets them rate you on whether or not you exhibit certain leadership traits necessary to be an effective leader. I have a leadership assessment you can download from my website for free and customize it to your needs. Then you can enter the results into an Excel spreadsheet program and see where you stand as a leader. Just log on to [www.FirePresentations.com/Assessment/htm](http://www.FirePresentations.com/Assessment/htm).

Have the following people fill it out for you:

- Your subordinates (if you don't have subordinates, have your peers fill it out)
- Your supervisors

- Your peers (people you work with at the same rank)
- Your friends in the department (people of any rank)
- Your friends outside the department
- Members of the public who know you
- Family members (if you want a really honest opinion!)
- *And*, fill one out on yourself

If you foster an atmosphere of trust and respect, people will give you honest input as long as they feel you will receive it objectively and not defensively. People will not be honest if they think you will retaliate in some way. I suggest letting people fill these out anonymously because they are more likely to be honest that way.

Once you have collected the input of people, take an honest look at the areas where they say you need improvement. See it as an opportunity to grow and don't view it as a negative process of finding your faults. The most important aspect of this evaluation is to see how you view yourself in relation to how others view you. Most people are surprised at some of their blind spots, but just remember: "People who are unaware are generally unaware that they are unaware." Think about it.

## Using Feedback

Giving and receiving input takes maturity on the part of the giver and receiver, whether it's input into leadership abilities or input into processes and systems. If you're a firefighter who wants to give more input and offer more suggestions, do it respectfully and constructively. Don't set out to criticize every policy and every person in the organization. People are much more likely to listen to your input if you come to the table with ideas and suggestion to resolve problems instead of attacking the people who you think caused the problems. Come with a cooperative attitude that wants to see everyone win. That's what good leadership is all about.

Great leaders take input from their followers. They solicit feedback on their performance as well as the processes in the department. Give your firefighters the ability to give open and honest input regarding ways to do things and ideas on how to improve processes. Let them make decisions and make mistakes. Help them learn from those mistakes and move forward. You will be surprised at the skills, talents, and capabilities of your firefighters if you just give them the opportunity to be creative and take initiative.



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Kimberly Alyn will present "Rising to Real Leadership" at Firehouse Expo 2009.

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