

Reigniting Responsibility

Winston Churchill once said “The price of greatness is responsibility.” Many people gravitate toward leadership or supervisory positions for the “greatness” they think it will offer. Few embrace the true responsibility that comes with that greatness. Personal responsibility is becoming more and more scarce in our society. People want to blame or sue everyone else for everything that goes wrong in society. Few people are willing to step up and take responsibility for the mistakes they make or the rules they break. Exceptional leaders will rise to the personal responsibility challenge, even if no one else is willing to join them.

I tend to tick a few people off when I speak or write about the topic of personal responsibility. I don't care. It's important enough to me and the future of the fire that I am willing to take the flack for it. I plan to pick on management and labor in this article, so rest assured that I don't take sides when it comes to who I think needs to step up in this area. The bottom line is this: everyone needs to step up!

I'll start with management. Taking responsibility starts with admitting your mistakes. Leaders who can't admit when they are wrong create a lack of trust with followers as well as a lack of respect. Exceptional leaders learn how to say, “I was wrong,” and “I am sorry,” and “What can I do to make it right?” Taking responsibility or admitting you are wrong is not sending out a mass email to everyone saying, “We could have handled that situation better but let's all just move on.” When you minimize your mistakes, people want to maximize them. When you maximize your mistakes, people want to minimize them. The more you downplay your errors, the more people want to bring it up until you own it. The more you acknowledge your errors and profusely apologize for them, the more grace people want to give you.

The failure to admit you are wrong conveys an arrogance that followers find repulsive. I know I am being rather blunt here, but I think it's imperative. When you screw up, admit it, take responsibility, and take ownership. As management, if you expect your firefighters to own their mistakes and take the discipline that comes with it, you need to model that behavior.

I have had command staff members and fire chiefs tell me that my advice in this area goes against the advice of their city attorney. They tell me they are often advised to never admit guilt because if a lawsuit follows, that admission could incriminate them. The right thing to do is the right thing to do no matter what the circumstances may be. If you made a mistake, the right thing to do is to admit it and try to make restitution. People tend to want to file lawsuits as a result of people *not* taking responsibility. Again, if you expect your firefighters to admit guilt and accept the discipline that comes with that guilt, you had better model that. If your admission of guilt comes with a price tag, then that price needs to be paid.

In October of 1982, the makers of Tylenol, Johnson & Johnson, faced the worst possible crisis management scenario an organization could ever face. Some psycho decided to pull bottles of Tylenol capsules off the shelves and inject them with cyanide and then return to the shelves where unsuspecting members of the public would buy them and consume them. Seven people in Chicago died as a result, including a child. The connection to the Tylenol was made very quickly and the company stepped up immediately to take responsibility and protect the public. Johnson & Johnson was in no way at fault, yet they took full responsibility.

An immediate recall of all Tylenol capsules was made, which constituted about 31 million bottles and \$100 million in lost revenue. The company then launched a triple safety seal tamper resistant package that included a plastic seal over the neck of the bottle, a foil seal over the mouth of the bottle and a glued box. Johnson & Johnson reached out to the families of the victims, providing counseling services and financial assistance even though the deaths resulted through no fault of theirs.

Now let's contrast their reaction to that of Exxon. In March of 1989, an Exxon oil tanker spilled eleven million gallons of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound. The crew master had been drinking; a crew member was tired, overworked, and could not properly maneuver the ship; there was an inadequate number of trained crew members; and the ship contained inadequate equipment. Exxon was 100% at fault and it would seem to be a no-brainer to step up immediately and assume responsibility. But unfortunately, that is not what happened.

When initially asked by the press about the incident, the first response of Exxon executives was “No comment.” This caused public outrage and an assumption that the company was trying to minimize the incident, cover it up, or hide something. While Johnson & Johnson came forward immediately to address their crisis, Exxon drug their feet trying to formulate a plan for damage control on the PR side. Lawrence Rawl, the chairman of Exxon, did not fly to Alaska until two weeks after the spill occurred.

No one ever sued Johnson & Johnson for those deaths. Exxon was sued and ordered to pay \$5 billion in punitive damages in 1994 on behalf of thousands of fishermen and others affected by the spill. Exxon appealed and the award was cut in half and then reduced again to \$500 million in 2008 as the case dragged on for over twenty years! When you minimize your mistakes, people want to maximize them.

Take responsibility folks! And now that I have picked on management to set the role model example of stepping up and taking responsibility, let me pick on labor too. If you break the rules, make a mistake, or screw up, step up and admit it. Don't hide behind your union rep or look to someone to get you off the hook. Your union rep is there to make sure due process is followed. They are not there to get you off the hook or get you a slap on the wrist when you deserve time off without pay. When you fight the discipline you deserve, management wants to throw the book at you. Part of this results when the union wants to "negotiate" discipline and have it lowered.

Don't get me wrong, if you show up late to work for the first time and management wants to terminate you for it, then it's time to fight. That's why the union is there to protect you from that. Or if you are being accused of something you didn't do and the department is trying to frame you because someone doesn't like you, then by all means, get the force of the union behind you. But when you got busted for a DUI and the department wants substantial discipline or termination (justifiably so), and you have the union fighting to stop the discipline, you are not taking responsibility!

The number one cause of low morale in departments all over the United States is having to drag around dead weight firefighters that no one will discipline. Or having to continue to work with someone who needs substantial discipline or termination, but the union fought it and got the person off the hook. It makes the responsible, ethical based firefighters want to give up. This is one of the factors that cause major burn out in the fire service and it has to stop. The union needs to protect all of its members by ensuring firefighters do get disciplined when they need it. Otherwise, you are putting crew and public safety at risk. I met a union president who told me, "We support our company officers and chief officers when discipline needs to take place. We tell our firefighters that we are here to make sure you are treated fairly, but if you did it, you step up and own it and take the discipline." I was impressed! The labor/management relations in that department were amazingly positive and there was not a prevailing "us against them mentality."

My message of personal responsibility does not always go over well with some firefighters. I wrote an article for a southern California magazine and I received a five-page scathing email from a firefighter who was appalled that I would tell firefighters to take responsibility and not hide behind the union. He said, "You mean to tell me that if you were convicted of a crime you would waive your legal right to an appeal?" I told him that if I was actually guilty of the crime I actually would not appeal and I would take the punishment. If the process was flawed or I was not provided a fair trial I would certainly appeal. But just because something is legal, doesn't make it ethical. Just because it is legal to claim "not guilty" when you are actually guilty doesn't make it right. I call that lying and working the system and I think it's wrong and it hurts society. I told him that I realized we had a fundamental difference in beliefs when it came to personal responsibility.

We now live in a society where personal responsibility is not high on the priority list. Irven Ball once said, "Most of us can read the writing on the wall; we just assume it's addressed to someone else." Exceptional leaders rise to the challenge of taking responsibility and ownership for their actions and mistakes. If you want to see your department become a benchmark for excellence, you will embrace this concept wholeheartedly.

Kimberly Alyn is a best-selling author and an international fire service speaker. She is the owner of Fire Presentations (www.FirePresentations.com), a company dedicated to presentations and training workshops for the fire service. Kim works with fire departments across the country on firefighter and officer development. She offers presentations and keynotes on leadership skills, conflict prevention and resolution, discipline in the fire service, promotional process, communication skills, and presentation skills. Kim is the author of ten books and eight CD/DVD productions. She holds a bachelor's degree in management and a master's degree in organizational management. Kim can be reached at: 800-821-8116 or email: Kim@FirePresentations.com.