

By KIMBERLY ALYN, Ph.D.

The Leadership Power of ONE

What Would You Like to Change or Implement in Your Department?

I am always amazed at how powerless so many firefighters feel in their departments. Too many firefighters at every level in the fire service do not recognize their potential to make a difference in their fire department, especially when it comes to initiating positive change.

I want to share a story with you about one firefighter who made a very large difference in his department through vision, perseverance, and determination. A fire department in California did not have a helicopter program, and as far as they knew, they did not need one. But that's not what one firefighter believed. Brian had come over from the California Department of Forestry, where he had been involved in air programs. He thought it would be a huge benefit to the department. He started asking around to see what the possibilities were, and hit nothing but dead ends.

So he started gathering information. On his own time and on his own dime, he started going to national air program conferences to find out what other departments were doing. He started putting together ideas and proposals and taking them down to Kinko's to get reproduced so they looked professional.

One of the lifeguards in the department had a brother on the city council. Brian asked him to set up a lunch meeting where he could meet with the lifeguard's brother. He ran his idea by the city council member, who loved it and said if more support could be garnered, he might get some city money allotted to the program. It would cost \$4 million to get the

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helicopter and \$2 million a year to keep it in service for the department. The city council member suggested going after some corporate sponsors.

He went back very excited to some of his chiefs and pitched the idea. They all shot him down. "There is no way we will convince the fire chief or taxpayers that money should go to a helicopter when we need new engines and other equipment." "Your fellow firefighters will oppose it if it means money taken away from things they need." "We've survived just fine all this time without one, why would we need one now?" "The way we've always done things has worked just fine." "We will never see something like this happen in our lifetimes...give up, it's a waste of time."

Most people would have done just that. Brian didn't. He continued to go to conferences and gather information. He refused to let the vision die. He spent a couple of years persisting with the idea and influencing people in every way possible. He finally got a few chiefs behind the idea. He got some other firefighters behind the idea. They scheduled meetings with local and state political officials to see what could be done. A county supervisor came up with a possibility. He knew of government funds that the project might qualify for that would produce a substantial amount of money toward the project if they could match it.

The city council finally agreed to come up with \$400,000, which was matched to sponsor a 120-day program. Wildland fires hit the area and the helicopter was put into action. The media covered the fires and the benefits of the helicopter in saving lives and property. The public saw how beneficial it was. Now there was support for getting a permanent helicopter program.

Brian had to continue the process of positive influence to get surrounding participating agencies on board and circumvent some surfacing resistance. During this long process, Brian was promoted to captain and then to battalion chief and then to division chief.

After eight years of persistent influ-

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ence, Brian's fire department became the proud owner of its first helicopter. It took a lot of influence and leadership to get city council support, taxpayer support and corporate sponsors behind the new permanent program. The city council allocated \$2 million a year to the program. The department now has a second full-time helicopter and the department is one of only two in the nation that use night-vision goggles to fly and perform operations at night.

Dream Becomes Reality

You won't see Brian's name in any of the newspapers that announced the new program. You won't see his name on the side of the helicopter. He wasn't on the maiden flight with the fire chief and the mayor. And he does not need that credit. He was just proud to see his dream and vision become a reality after eight years. That is influential leadership and Brian was at the bottom of the organization as a firefighter when the process started.

Brian did not give up on the idea that one person can make a big difference. It took a lot of people to make the dream a reality, but it took one person who was willing to invest the time, energy and even money to get the concept off the ground. Most people would have given up at many points in the process as it became more and more difficult to implement this massive change in the department. One person with a lot of vision and perseverance can make a lot happen!

I want to share another example with you. Rocky Robinson lives and works in a New York City neighborhood known as Bedford-Stuyvesant ("Bed-Stuy"), one of the most dangerous and impoverished neighborhoods in the United States. When Rocky was 26 years old, his 7-year-old niece was hit by a car. No one on scene knew first aid or CPR. The average response time for an ambulance was 30 minutes. By the time help arrived, she was dead.

This drove Rocky to become a paramedic. While becoming a paramedic in New York, he discovered that more than 50% of the city's emergency calls came from high-crime areas like Bed-

Stuy, where the wait time in these areas for emergency assistance averaged 25-30 minutes after calling 911. Calls in more affluent areas were taking a fraction of the time for response because these communities had organized their own ambulance corps to supplement the city services that were being overwhelmed with calls.

Rocky decided to start his own ambulance corps in Bed-Stuy with a fel-

One person can make a difference – just ask Rocky Robinson.

low EMT. Unbeknownst to them at the time, they started the first minority-run ambulance service in the country. The obstacles they would face would be overwhelming. They first occupied an abandoned building and used an old Chevrolet and two-way radios to receive emergency calls and get to the scene of accidents, shootings, stabbings and fires. When the car wouldn't start, they would strap oxygen tanks to their backs and hoof it to the emergency scene. They were mocked by drug dealers, cops, bystanders and everyone else except the people whose lives were being saved.

The space they occupied had been used by drug dealers who were not eager to give it up. The windows were shot at, they received threats, and Rocky and his partner were shot at on their way to calls. The drug dealers finally cut them some slack when they realized they were saving some of their own people.

Finding a Purpose in Life

Rocky began to build a crew of volunteers. He had to draw from the community he lived in, so many of the volunteers were recovering alcoholics, the unemployed and drug dealers trying to straighten out. After months of training, these young volunteers began to go on calls and found a purpose in life. Some went on to become nurses and doctors.

A local newspaper finally ran a story on the two crazy guys running around the neighborhood with tanks strapped

to their backs. A philanthropist saw the story and donated an old ambulance to their cause. Rocky finally had his true ambulance corps.

On the first day of using the ambulance, Rocky's team arrived first on scene to a fire and rescued 10 people from a burning building. The next day, they delivered a baby. They developed a continual pattern of being first on scene with an average response time of four minutes (quite the leap from the normal 25- to 30-minute response time for the city services). Donations and grants began to come in from people all over the country who were inspired by Rocky's tenacity and vision. When times were lean, Rocky held car washes or solicited funds in the street if he had to – whatever it took to keep the corps going and continuing to save lives.

The Bed-Stuy Volunteer Ambulance Corps has been in continuous operation since 1988, and is now the busiest volunteer ambulance service for its size in the nation, answering over 100 calls per month. For its remarkable accomplishments and ongoing efforts, the Bed-Stuy Volunteer Ambulance Corps has received numerous honors, including the Robin Hood Foundation Hero of the Year Award and New York City Hero Award.

One man had a life experience that gave him a vision and a purpose. One man turned that vision into a reality and changed the lives of countless people. One person can make a difference. Think about the things you would like to see changed or implemented in your department. Have you rendered yourself helpless because you have made the assumption that there is just nothing you can do about it? I encourage you to embrace some vision, perseverance and determination and you might just discover that you can make all the difference in the world.



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