

By KIMBERLY ALYN

The Power of **EMPOWERMENT** *In Leadership*

When You Empower Firefighters, Everyone Wins

Too many fire departments won't empower firefighters because they are afraid they may make the wrong decision, use bad judgment or cost the department money.

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Developing effective leaders in the fire service is a growing issue for every department across the United States, both career and volunteer. Firefighters are starving for great leaders. Company officers are in desperate need of better role models. Command staff is wondering why people are not stepping up to real leadership and creating an inspirational work environment. Rookies are wondering why no one is mentoring them in how to become effective leaders, whether formally or informally.

When I conduct a training class in a fire department or at a conference, I preach empowerment. I can see some people in the room lean forward with the "tell me more about this" look on their faces. I see others lean back, arms crossed, with the "you have no clue about the fire service" look on *their* faces. Some people are convinced that empowering people in the fire service doesn't work because it's a paramilitary organization. Let me dispel that myth.

The effectiveness of empowerment shows no partiality to organizational establishment. It doesn't matter if you're a government agency, a corporation or a family: empowerment works! Empowering people to think and make decisions wherever possible accomplishes many things including:

- Building better teams
- Improving morale
- An increased level of ownership in the department
- A feeling of trust
- Higher productivity
- Better customer service
- A stronger public image
- A more efficient fire department
- Better succession planning

Command and control or barking orders at people works on the fireground and autocratic leadership is necessary in an incident command situation. But back at the station (where over 90% of the time is spent), that style of leadership hurts morale. People want to feel like they are part of the process and they want the ability to give input and make suggestions. That is a good thing! That's what inspires people to take ownership in their fire departments.

Many managers suffer from what I call "power hoarding." They think if they let others think and make decisions, it will dilute their own power and render them useless. The exact opposite is true. When you empower others, you increase your level of effectiveness

and usefulness. You multiply productivity and increase responsibility. You show others that you trust their best judgment and when you do that, most people will rise to the expectation.

Yum! Brands Inc., the world's largest restaurant company, is a conglomeration that took over KFC, Pizza Hut, Long John Silvers, Taco Bell and A&W.

After acquiring all of these food chains, Yum! Brands set down a new corporate policy that requires that every employee be empowered all the way down to the front line to make any decision that did not cost more than \$15. That seems like a pretty negligible amount, but not to Pizza Hut. They freaked out. They said the price of a large pizza was \$15 and their

minimum-wage employees would be giving them away right and left. Profits would fall. Employees would abuse it. All hell would break loose.

Yum! Brands felt otherwise. They said employees would take ownership when given responsibility. They said sure, one in a hundred employees would abuse it and each location should use a progressive discipline model to discipline that one employee and not deny everyone else the benefit of the doubt. It doesn't make sense to initiate or prohibit policy because one ignoramus can't follow the rules (hmm, I don't suppose we ever see *that* in the fire service, huh?).

So Pizza Hut went kicking and screaming while implementing the new policy. Guess what happened? Profits soared. Employee morale went up. Customers started coming back more often and bringing their friends. Employees were now able to say "I am so sorry we messed up your order. Let me knock \$10 off for you" or "I am giving you a free soda and salad with your order for the inconvenience of the extra wait time." The employees didn't have to stand there with the deer-in-the-headlights look wishing a manager who could actually make a decision was close by.

The Fear Factor

Too many fire departments won't empower firefighters because they are afraid they may make the wrong decision, use bad judgment or cost the department money. If more supervisors would step up and actually administer some progressive discipline on people who abuse their newfound power, this problem would go away. Instead, most departments make everyone else in the organization suffer when one person blows it. It's called reactive management and it's rampant in the fire service and a lot of other sectors.

The fire departments that have made the decision to empower their firefighters have watched their morale climb and have witnessed for themselves the amount of ownership employees will take when you show you trust them. They acknowledge the fact that they are entrusting these firefighters with hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayer money in equipment as well as the very lives of the American people in emergency situations. Then why in the world couldn't you trust



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them with making a \$500 purchasing decision? Some would say “Well, Kim, they are thoroughly trained to make those life-and-death decisions.” That’s right, they are. Now spend some time training them to make other decisions that affect them most and then hold them accountable for those very decisions. The price of empowerment is responsibility and people need to be responsible for the choices they are empowered to make.

When you empower people to make decisions, stand by them as a manager and show them you trust their best judgment. If they make mistakes, help them learn from those mistakes so a better

decision is made next time. Stop micro-managing people to death. It’s killing morale and causing people to bite at the bit to hit retirement.

Trust – It Works

I hear a lot of managers say they trust their employees, but when the rubber meets the road, their actions speak louder than their words. A tightrope walker was making a dangerous walk across the tightrope over the Niagara Falls. The wind and rain were whipping against his body as he deftly made his way to the other side. When he finally touched his feet on the ground, the crowd erupted below him in applause. Before he could even finish his first bow, his manager was at his side. “Bravo! Well done! Now listen, I want you to do it again, but this time pushing a wheelbarrow in front of you. I brought one with me.” With that, he pushed the wheelbarrow in front of tightrope walker, who looked back at him astonished.

“Are you kidding me? Have you seen the wind and rain? That is a crazy idea!”

His manager pressed him. “No, it’s not that bad. You can do this! I believe in you.”

“Really? You believe I can do this?”

“Absolutely. 100%. Without a doubt! I know you can!”

“OK, then I’ll do it. And if you really believe in me, get in the wheelbarrow!”

A lot of managers pay lip service to trusting and believing in their employees, but they are not willing to get in that wheelbarrow with them. My encouragement to you today is to empower your firefighters, communicate to them that you really trust them and believe in them, and then get in that wheelbarrow!

Empowerment will increase morale. It will facilitate more productivity. It will improve the service you provide to the public. Firefighters who feel they are trusted to make decisions take ownership in the department. When they take ownership, they have a higher job satisfaction rate. When they love their jobs more, they inspire and influence others in a positive way. When you empower firefighters, everyone wins.



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