

# Barriers to Effective Leadership in the Fire Service

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I conducted a survey with a variety of departments and a variety of positions in the fire service. I asked what the respondents thought were some major barriers to effective leadership in the fire service both up and down the chain of command. I got some interesting responses and some of them were consistent from department to department. As you'll see, many of the barriers to effective leadership are prevalent in most fire departments across the United States. I am sure you'll recognize some of these issues in your own department. As you read the responses, think about how some of the issues could be addressed in your department. Think about what you as a leader could do to prevent these barriers or what you could do to remove the barriers that already exist.

Below are the fifteen most common answers the respondents gave (in no particular order):

#1. The "us against them" mentality. This is the management against labor mentality that exists in pretty much every fire department. As a leader, this is going to be something that you need to address as you attempt to build the bridge between management and labor, especially in unionized departments.

#2. Never admitting wrongs. Whether it was up the chain or down the chain, whether I was interviewing a captain or a battalion chief, the respondents said this was a big issue: never admitting you're wrong. So as a leader, don't fall into that trap. Admit your mistakes, take ownership, and move on.

#3. Lack of vision and purpose. The respondents felt that a lack of vision and purpose made effective leadership impossible. Whether it was department-wide, throughout the city, or it was their leader in particular, it made it difficult to have effective leadership in their fire department.

#4. Indecisiveness. Taking too long to make decisions was considered a huge barrier to effective leadership. Again, this could fall on the leader, it could be a leader talking about their follower or it could have been a respondent talking about the city in general or the department in general. Just remember as a leader, people generally would rather you make a bad decision than no decision.

#5. Lack of discipline. Trying to be a buddy instead of a boss makes it difficult to be a formal leader. A huge moral killer in the fire service is having to drag around dead weight firefighters that no one wants to step up and discipline.

#6. A lack of standardized discipline. If the captain or the battalion chief actually does step up and discipline, but the discipline is inconsistent or not standardized between the battalions, it creates a barrier to effective leadership.

#7. Lack of accountability. Leaders need to take ownership for your actions and decisions both up and down the chain. The respondents felt that too many leaders in the fire service don't have

enough accountability. So as a leader, one of the ways you can circumvent this problem or this barrier is to make yourself accountable.

#8. Lack of effective communication skills. The respondents felt that a barrier to effective leadership was not knowing how to communicate with people. Maybe the leader didn't listen enough or they weren't approachable or accessible. Or maybe they didn't know how to articulate themselves or they were socially withdrawn. Having effective communication skills is vital when it comes to leadership.

#9. No humility or not taking input on ideas. This is an important one for followers and the respondents specifically said that one of the major barriers to effective leadership in the fire service is acting like you have all the answers, you know everything, you don't need input from anybody and there's absolutely no humility. People find it very difficult to buy into missions and visions they didn't help create, so get input!

#10. Lack of time spent with the troops. This one was specifically directed at battalion chiefs. The respondents felt that battalion chiefs aren't getting out there enough and spending time with the troops and therefore they're viewed as out-of-touch with what's really going on in the station, or with the captains and the firefighters. This can create a barrier and should be addressed immediately.

#11. Lack of trust. Now I want you to think about this one for a minute because this is huge. Do you know what the most effective way is to build and maintain a high level of trust? Do what you say you're going to do, when you said you would do it, how you said it would be done. Let your word mean something. If people can't depend on you, they won't trust you. I read a great quote once: Trust is a lot like fine China-once broken, it can be repaired, but it's never quite the same.

#12. Lack of personal integrity. This actually causes followers to be very reluctant about standing behind a leader. If you demonstrate a lack of personal integrity, you will have a huge uphill battle winning the trust of your followers again.

#13. Fear of retaliation. The respondents felt that regardless of their position, whether it was firefighter, engineer, captain, or command staff, they weren't free enough in the fire service to really put their ideas out there, or say what's wrong, or what needs to be fixed because they're afraid they'll be retaliated against. People need to feel safe in coming forward with their ideas, suggestions, and input. And if you're the one coming forward, you need to do it with respect and humility.

#14. Free thinking leaders are squashed. Now this applies to informal leaders who are attempting to share ideas. One of the barriers to effective leadership in the fire service, according to the respondents, was that there is not enough freedom for free thinking leaders. Informal leaders are squashed and supervisory or positional leaders are very threatened by them. As a formal leader, don't use your positional power to try to keep people in line. Use your positive influence, your vision, and your role model example.

#15. Lack of mentors or mentoring in the fire service. The respondents felt like a barrier to effective leadership, whether it was for them or people above or below them, was not enough mentoring. When people are thrown into positions, they're expected to just figure it out and it's frustrating. It's not just rookie firefighters who need mentoring. Veteran firefighters need it too. Everyone needs good mentoring and good role model examples to look to in the fire service for good leadership.

I'm sure you can identify with many of these barriers. Regardless of your current position in your fire department, there are always steps each individual can take on their own level to start overcoming some of these barriers. Take personal responsibility today to try and create more effective leadership at every level in your department. The future leaders of the fire service are counting on it!

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Dr. Alyn has conducted the largest known fire service study on leadership and speaks to fire audiences all over the United States and Canada on the topic of leadership and firefighter development.

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