

Developing Future Leaders in the Fire Service

By Dr. Kimberly Allyn

The future of the fire service depends on the ability of current leaders to develop future leaders. Many fire departments are forced to open up the promotional process to other departments and districts to try to find good leaders to fill vacant positions. This is especially true at the command staff level and fire chief level. This is often indicative of a lack of leadership training, development, and mentoring.

Succession planning involves more than lining people up to fill future leadership positions. Succession planning should also involve developing your current firefighters to be amazing leaders, even if they never promote. Mentoring, training, and coaching firefighters at every level in the organization in some key leadership areas would be extremely beneficial for the fire service and the firefighters. These areas include making principle-based leadership decisions, operating from the foundation of the department's core values, taking responsibility, demonstrating accountability, and setting a role-model example in work ethic. When these key areas are focused on, succession planning tends to take care of itself.

Developing future leaders in the fire service takes a lot of time, energy, and commitment. It requires the willingness to train outside the box. All fire departments conduct training drills on technical skills. Volunteer fire departments may conduct fire ground training once or twice a month while career departments may be doing it weekly or even every shift, depending on the department. How often do you think most fire departments conduct role playing exercises for ethical dilemmas or conflict-based scenarios? If your department is the average fire department, you never do. In many departments, the only role playing exercises firefighters will encounter is in an assessment center for the promotional process. That is not enough to create a confidence in the process of subordinate counseling or address the inevitable conflict that comes up in the department. Without ingrained training and consistent role playing exercises, firefighters will resort to what they are the most familiar with, and that is most often not the best approach.

Organizational theorist Karl Weick tells the story of airplanes that are flown by U.S. pilots in North America and Europe. The plane is pretty much the same whether in North America or Europe except for one thing: the ejection system varies by location. In North America, the pilots eject through the top of the plane. In Europe, the pilots eject through the bottom of the plane. Many of the U.S. pilots were accustomed to flying the planes in Europe where the pilots eject from the bottom. These pilots are trained in an emergency situation to roll the plane and eject themselves upward so they can parachute back down to safety.

When these pilots transfer to the United States, they are re-trained for the North American planes which eject the pilot from the top. They are taught, in an emergency, simply eject yourself upward and you will parachute safely to the ground. It seems simple enough, but it's not always that simple. Some of the transferred pilots during times of emergency rolled the planes upside down and ejected themselves to their death. Under stress and crisis, they reverted to their most deeply ingrained training.

This is what we do in life. When we find ourselves in conflict or crisis, we revert to what we know best. If your firefighters have not been thoroughly trained in principle-based leadership and constructive conflict resolution, they will revert to what they know best when stress or crisis occurs.

You cannot just train someone once and expect that your problem is solved. Ingrained training that creates a subconscious desired reaction takes practice, practice, practice. You must train over and over and over on conflict resolution, core values, communication skills, and ethical decision-making until this new training becomes second nature and is the most deeply ingrained training that firefighters will revert to in times of conflict and crisis. This ingrained training will equip them to be effective leaders in the fire service and take over top leadership positions when the time comes.

One of the challenges fire departments face is mentoring and training this next generation coming into the fire service. I call them the “E” generation for the “Electronic and Entitlement” generation. They are born with electronics surrounding them: the iPod in their ears, the cell phone in their hands, and the computer in their lap. They have not experienced a life void of the luxuries technology affords us. Unfortunately, many of them come with an entitlement mentality. Personal responsibility has not been brainwashed into the heads of many of the young kids who will be entering the fire service in the years to come. Few understand what hard work really looks like and many of them expect everything in life to be handed to them. Manual labor, service above self, and team work is often foreign to them.

The mentoring process in the fire service will need to factor these things in. A focus needs to be placed on essentially parenting this next generation in the important areas of personal responsibility and accountability. I know you already see a need for this in the fire service today, but you will see an even greater need in the years to come as our society in general continues to shift focus away from personal responsibility. There are far too many people who do not appreciate the opportunity they have been given simply by living in the United States of America.

The CEO of 7-Eleven went undercover awhile back in his organization to see how some of the local stores operated. One of his undercover assignments put him on the night shift with a delivery truck driver. At 3:00 am this driver had high morale, was enthusiastic, and full of a love for life. As they were driving to their next delivery, the CEO asked him why he was so motivated at this crazy hour. The driver had no idea he was talking to the CEO and his smile ran from ear to ear as he gushed, “Because I am living the American dream!” The CEO was astonished and said, “I’m sorry, what?” The driver said, “It’s true. I am living the American dream. I came here from Kakistan with only \$50 in my pocket and I did not know a word of English but I learned. What other country gives you this kind of opportunity to have a job like this that will feed my family *and* make me happy? America is wonderful and Americans take that for granted. They don’t what they have.”

He was right. Most Americans just do not know what they have. A person living at the poverty level in the United States is still in the top 5% of income earners worldwide. One out of every six people in the world live on less than one dollar a day! We don’t know how good we have it. We are living the American dream and we just take that for granted, especially this next generation.

A New York News correspondent was interviewing kids on the streets of New York. These kids ranged in age between thirteen and eighteen. With a camera in their face and a microphone to their mouth they were asked, "What do you feel you owe your country?" The number one answer was.... "NOTHIN'!" One kid said, "I don't owe my country, my country owes me." This is the entitlement mentality fire departments will have to break through as they attempt to mentor, train, and coach effective leaders for the future of the fire service.

This is going to take a lot of patience and a lot of training. And as I said before, it needs to be ingrained training, not a one-shot training class that you send your firefighters to. It should involve mentoring and ongoing discussions about the core values of your department. When behavior conflicts with the core values, company officers need to step up and have the tough conversations with their firefighters to get their behavior aligned with the core values. Depending exclusively on policy to discipline and change behavior is inadequate for creating effective leaders. The core values of your department need to play a crucial role in molding behavior and correcting behavior. Core values such as honesty, integrity, professionalism, respect, teamwork, and excellence all form the necessary foundation for establishing what is acceptable and what is not. When your firefighters are driven by values to make decisions instead of policy, you will see a big difference in leadership development. That is what this next generation is going to need a lot of direction on, and your current leaders will need to provide it.

I want to encourage you in this area. It may feel like an uphill battle and a completely lost cause, but it's not. Some of the young men and women from this next generation have just not been exposed to the concepts of true leadership and the concept of serving others. You might be surprised at how many of them want strong role model examples to follow in regards to values, ethics, and integrity. You might also be surprised that some of the young men and women of the next generation coming into your fire department bring these values with them. Some of them have had parents who were willing to invest the time and energy to equip these young adults with core values, strong work ethic, and an appreciation for what they have in life.

Winston Churchill once said, "The price of greatness is responsibility." Current leaders in the fire service have a responsibility to develop the future leaders of the fire service. Tom Peters put it well when he said, "Great leaders don't create more followers; they create more leaders." That should be the number one goal and objective of every leader in the fire service: to create more great leaders for the future of your department and the future of the fire service. The investment is well worth it.

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