



By KIMBERLY ALYN, Ph.D.

Give Them the “Sun”

Think of Your Central Vision as Your Guiding “Sun”

It has long been contended that people who are lost will often walk in circles and simply retrace their steps. This has been a widely spread assumption, but no real empirical data was available to support this assertion until a group of researchers in Germany decided to conduct a study. Their objective was to see what happens to people when they are dropped in the middle of nowhere without a map or compass.

In one experiment, they placed tracking devices on a group of people and put some of them in the Sahara Desert and some in a forest in Germany. All of the participants were instructed to try to simply walk in a straight line, in the same direction, for several hours. Those walking in the desert walked in circles, but only when it was overcast. The same was true of those in the forest, and having to maneuver around objects, some of them walked in circles as often as every 10 minutes. As long as the participants had the sun or the shadows cast by the sun to reference, they could maintain their sense of direction. As soon as the sky became overcast, they began to walk in circles.

Some have theorized in the past that walking in circles when disoriented is attributable to minor differences in leg lengths or leg strength. These researchers tested that theory in one experiment by blindfolding some participants and having them walk across a field. They

added thicker soles to the right or left shoe of some of the participants to see whether this would cause them to walk in a circle in a particular direction.

The results showed that differences in strength or length did not contribute to the tendency to walk in circles or walk in a particular direction. Some participants walked in circles to the left one time and then to the right another. Some participants walked in very small circles. The researchers attribute this phenomenon to small random errors that occur with the sensory signals that are responsible for providing information regarding walking direction. These small errors add up, causing a person to walk in circles.

Leaders have a responsibility to light the way for people and illuminate the vision. It's the vision that keeps people focused and purposeful. It keeps them moving in the same direction. It keeps their eye on their destination. While many leaders excel in communicating a vision initially, they often fail to keep the vision at the forefront of people's minds. Countless fire departments pay consultants to help them create committees who hash out a vision statement that hangs on a wall, graces a website and may even be found in brochures. But it's something

that few talk about in the department on a regular basis. Chief officers and company officers need to be communicating the vision consistently.

As team meetings and brainstorming sessions occur, few leaders are showing people how to align goals, objectives or action plans with the central vision and purpose of the department. Few leaders are helping individuals make the connection between their own goals and objectives and the central vision. Some leaders themselves forget what they are aiming for and how they plan to get there.

Just as the sun disappears behind the clouds or a deep layer of fog, the vision is often clouded by daily distractions and the politics of the fire service, causing people to lose focus, walk in circles, lose sight of the goal and give up. Those minor errors in sensory signals that add up and cause people to walk in circles are present in all organizations. They are the daily dramas that every person deals with from crisis management to poor communication to internal conflict.

Think of your central vision as your guiding “sun.” Make sure your followers “see” it constantly so they feel a strong sense of direction. They best way for them to see it is when it's lived out in you. When they see your passion for the vision and your continual reference to “why we are here” from a positive point of view, they become inspired. You don't have to be a formal leader with a badge to accomplish this – you can give people the “sun” from anywhere in your fire department. Be the leader today that you want to see in others.

“Dissatisfaction and discouragement are not caused by the absence of things, but the absence of vision.”

—Anonymous

KIMBERLY ALYN, Ph.D., 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 keynote presentations and training workshops for the fire service. Dr. Alyn has conducted the largest known fire service study on the topic of leadership and works with fire departments across the country on firefighter and officer development. She is the author of 11 books and a variety of CD/DVD productions. Dr. Alyn holds a bachelor's degree in management, a master's degree in organizational management, and a doctorate degree in management with a specialty in leadership. Dr. Alyn can be reached at: 800-821-8116 or email: Kim@FirePresentations.com.

FirehouseExpo
FIRE · RESCUE · EMS

Kimberly Alyn, Ph.D., will present “Master the Discipline Process” and “Building Better Teams” at Firehouse Expo 2011.

JULY 19-23, 2011
BALTIMORE, MD

