

By KIMBERLY ALYN

Real Leaders Don't Accept Change



What Changes Can You Initiate to Make Your Department the Absolute Best It Can Be?

The old leadership philosophy was that if you wanted to be a great leader, you had to accept change. The new leadership philosophy is that great leaders don't accept change – they initiate it!

Let me clarify: Great leaders don't initiate change for the sake of change. They initiate change for the sake of improvement. Not all change is good, and running through your department like a bull in a china shop for the sake of creating change is not the kind of change I am

suggesting change that increases morale and generates improvement.

Keeping things the way they are simply because “that’s the way we have always done it” is a poor excuse for stifling growth.

A probationary firefighter asked a seasoned veteran about a particular process, “Why do we do it this way?” The veteran snapped back, “Because that’s the way we have always done it!”

While some of the younger generations may appear to be asking this question simply to challenge authority or irritate the older generations, there are times when it is absolutely a legitimate question. The best answer is an explanation of why things are done the way they are done, followed with a question: “Why? Do you have a suggestion for improvement?” If you can’t ask that question, you are not engaging in effective leadership, management or innovation. If you are one of those people who thinks only management can come up with the best ideas and processes, you are missing the boat. Keeping things the way they are simply because “that’s the way we have always done it” is a poor excuse for stifling growth.

It reminds me of the young wife who is getting ready to make her first Thanksgiving dinner. She puts the turkey in the oven and then starts preparing the ham. She sets it on the cutting board and chops both ends off the ham, puts it in the pan and then covers it with foil. Her husband is watching curiously and he asks, “Why do you cut both ends off the ham?”

She stands silent and thinks for a minute. “I don’t know. That’s just the way my mom always did it. Let me call her and ask her why.”

The young wife gets her mother on the phone. “Mom, why do we cut both ends off the ham before we cook it?” Her mother thinks for a second, chuckles and replies, “I really don’t know. That’s just the way your grandmother always did it. Let me call her and ask.”

So she gets *her* mother on the phone. “Mom, why do we cut both ends off the ham at Thanksgiving?” Her mother shot back, “I don’t know why you do it – I did it because my pan was too small to fit a ham!”

We see generation after generation doing things a certain way and they have no idea why – “That’s just the way we’ve always done it!” We develop ingrained patterns for doing things and forget to ask why we are doing them.

Researchers put five monkeys in a habitat. A banana hangs from a string at the top of a small staircase. One of the monkeys spots the banana and heads up the stairs for it. Just as

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the monkey is about to reach the top of the stairs, the researchers spray ice-cold water on all five monkeys. The monkey on the staircase backs away from the banana and shakes off the cold water.

The researchers then replace one of the monkeys with a new monkey. He spots the banana and starts to go for it. As he begins to climb the stairs, all of the other monkeys grab him and drag him to the bottom of the stairs. Then they replace another monkey with a new monkey who has never been sprayed with water. This new monkey sees the banana and heads up the stairs. All of the monkeys grab him, thump on

its ankle and it won't try to escape? The reason the elephant doesn't try to escape is because it is conditioned to believe that it is not strong enough. When the elephant is a baby, it is held by the same pole and chain with a smaller clamp around the ankle. At this age, the elephant is too weak to pull itself free. It will try and fail over time,

so it will precondition itself to believe that it will always fail. So here it is, a full-grown, multi-ton animal that could yank itself free in one strong pull, and it won't even try. It just assumes it is incapable. It's called "learned helplessness" and humans are just as susceptible to this phenomenon.

A study was conducted on piranhas in

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him, and pull him to the bottom of the stairs, including the new monkey who has never been sprayed with water.

The researchers repeat this process. Each time, the new monkey goes for the banana and the other monkeys intervene and prevent the process. This is repeated until all five monkeys have been replaced. Not one of those monkeys will ever try to get that banana again, and they have absolutely no idea why, because none of them was ever sprayed with ice-cold water. All they know is, "That's just the way it's always been."

Do you notice people in your department attempting to drag people away from change, innovation and creativity? Do you see a strong resistance to process improvement? Too many fire departments resist change for a variety of reasons. Maybe those who resist change the most have had their ideas sprayed with ice-cold water in the past. Maybe they have been thumped too many times for "going against the system." We tend to precondition ourselves to expect what we have always gotten.

Do you know why a full-grown circus elephant can be held by a very small pole and a light chain that is clamped around



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a huge fish tank. The piranhas were placed in half of the tank and the piranhas' prey was placed in the other half of the tank. A glass divider was placed between them. The piranhas would see their prey and swim around and bang their heads into the glass divider. They would then circle the tank and try again. As they swam for their

prey, their heads met with the glass divider once again! Over time, the piranhas grew weary of banging their heads against the glass divider and they gave up. They began to swim side by side with their prey and they never tried again. Now, the researchers can remove the glass divider and those piranhas will swim side by side with their

prey until they starve to death. It doesn't take long to reach a stage of conditioned failure and learned helplessness.

People often settle into their fire service careers by giving up on the idea that any real and lasting change can take place. The fire service has gone through substantial changes. Fifty years ago, the fire service was a homogenous organization largely made up of white males. Today, the fire service embraces multi-faceted diversity, including gender, race, religion, culture and personality. With that diversity comes challenge as people learn how their differences can benefit each other, the department and society. But diversity also brings with it conflict. Differing opinions and views often slow down change as clashing personalities and priorities elbow their way into the process.

Long-term growth and success in any organization requires constant change and innovation. Don't let past patterns dictate future results. The outstanding fire departments of the future will be those that embrace change for the sake of improvement and refuse to give up when others have given in. Real leaders, whether formal or informal, stand up for positive improvement in their departments and initiate the changes that need to take place.

Take inventory of your department. What must change to improve the effectiveness of the leadership right now? What must change to improve labor-management relations? What must change to improve morale? What must change to improve your response time or customer service? What must change to increase organizational commitment by your firefighters? What must change in you to be a better firefighter? What changes can you initiate to make your department the absolute best it can be? Real leaders don't accept change anymore – they embrace it! 



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