

By *KIMBERLY ALYN, Ph.D.*

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

In the Fire Service

Identifying the Needs, Motives, and Values of Leaders and Followers

Developing effective leaders and keeping firefighters highly motivated is considered critical to the future of the fire service.

The topic of leadership has been thoroughly researched and examined throughout history. Researchers have studied the relationship between leadership and a variety of factors, attempting to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of different leadership styles.

The concept of transformational leadership was popularized by James MacGregor Burns in his book *Leadership* (Harper Collins, 1978), where he differentiates between “transactional leadership,” “transformational leadership” and “laissez-faire leadership.” Burns defines transactional leadership as a lower-level relationship between leader and follower where transactions and agreements occur between the two with no conscious regard for higher levels of morality or motivation. This is a common style of leadership in the fire service. It focuses on policy, process and technical skills. Leaders lay out their expectations and provide rewards when the expectations are met and consequences when they are not. Transactional leadership is not a bad style of leadership, but it is not a style of leadership that causes people to perform beyond their own expectations.

Transformational leadership transcends transactional leadership to a higher level where leaders seek out the needs and motives of the followers and work collaboratively to meet those needs. The focus of transformational leadership is a shared purpose that elevates both the leader and the follower to a higher ground. These types of leaders positively influence people to want to follow, instead of using positional leadership to force compliance.

Laissez-faire leadership is evident in a leader who waits to intervene until things are in a crisis situation. These leaders do not engage in the process of inspiring followers with vision, purpose and passion. They show little to no interest in the individual needs and goals of their followers. They often use their position or badge to get people to do what they want them to do. These are the most difficult leaders for firefighters to follow.

Firefighters find transformational leaders the easiest to follow and the most inspiring. Transformational leadership encompasses four areas of leadership behavior:

1. Idealized influence (charisma)
2. Individualized consideration
3. Intellectual stimulation
4. Inspirational motivation

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Idealized influence is the process of providing a role-model example to followers in regard to charisma. Leaders who are engaging in idealized influence are characterized as having a high level of ethical standards. Leaders who exhibit idealized influence have also been described as loyal, humble, positive, honest and competent.

Individualized consideration involves identifying and supporting the needs of followers. In addition to the organizational goals, leaders seek to help followers meet individual goals. The development of the follower through mentoring, training and coaching is a high priority for leaders. They consider the individual needs of each person on their team (or crew) to determine how to best help that individual grow.

Intellectual stimulation encourages followers to challenge processes and the status quo. Leaders equip followers with the training and tools needed to be creative in problem solving as they learn to come to their own conclusions. Leaders who demonstrate the behavior of intellectual stimulation tend to empower their followers to make decisions instead of dictating process and micromanaging, as is often prevalent in the fire service.

Inspirational motivation is characterized by leaders who articulate a clear, inspiring and engaging vision. While inspirational motivation is a separate category of transformational leadership from the charisma aspect of idealized influence, leaders who exhibit one most often exhibit the other. Leaders who exhibit inspirational motivation show an ability to gain support for the leader's vision and values. Transformational leadership is indicative of a leader who promotes the concept of shared vision and shared values.

Leaders who engage in the leadership behaviors of transformational leadership experience positive outcomes:

- Higher levels of intrinsic motivation
- Increased levels of performance
- Better retention rates
- Higher job satisfaction

Transformational leadership creates positive outcomes for both leader and follower, so everyone wins.

Developing effective leaders and keeping firefighters highly motivated is considered critical to the future of the fire service. Numerous researchers have confirmed that organizational commitment

is a key factor in producing high levels of motivation with public sector employees. It has been asserted by many researchers through the years that leadership style directly affects organizational commitment levels. I conducted a study in the fire service to ascertain whether the perceived leadership style of direct supervisors in the



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fire service had an effect on organizational commitment levels of the firefighters.

There were 1,919 firefighters who participated in the study and answered a variety of questions about their direct supervisor in the fire service and their own organizational commitment level. Every rank of the fire service was represented in the study, from firefighter all the way

to fire chief. The study showed that when transformational leadership style was present, organizational commitment level was higher. The lowest levels of organizational commitment were present when a laissez-faire style of leadership was employed. The positive effects of employing transformational leadership in the fire service are too strong to ignore.

Fire departments respond to over 25 million emergency situations each year and effective leadership is at the heart of the incident command system in the fire service. Recruiting and retaining committed firefighters is a challenge for both volunteer and career fire departments. The recent economic downturn is crippling the budgets of fire departments and making it more difficult to hire additional firefighters. Ensuring that firefighters stay motivated and committed in both career and volunteer departments will be an ongoing challenge for leaders in the fire service.

Low morale in fire departments can often be traced to the leadership styles employed throughout the chain of command. Followers see a lot of hypocrisy and a lack of integrity in their leaders. Transformational leadership involves behavior choices, and those choices are often hard work and require a tremendous amount of effort. Some leaders are just too lazy to invest the time and energy to employ this type of leadership style. What they fail to recognize is this style of leadership will save them a lot of time, energy and crisis in the long term.


Transformational leadership is the process of identifying the needs, motives and values of leaders and followers to facilitate the best interest of everyone. With transformational leadership, the leader strives to inspire and foster motivation in followers and create a bond through a shared vision. Transformational leaders stimulate followers to levels of performance beyond normal expectations. Leaders who recognize the importance of transformational leadership will reap the benefits that this leadership style affords. If you want to see your followers transformed into amazing leaders, transform yourself first by using a transformational leadership style!



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