

What Does Your Work Ethic Say About You?

By Dr. Kimberly Alyn, Fire Presentations

About two years ago I was conducting a coaching session for a group of firefighters in California. One of them was preparing for the panel interview for an entry level firefighter position. One was preparing for a fire captain position and the other two in the session were preparing for the engineer position. As I was throwing practice panel interview questions at the firefighter candidates, the entry level firefighter asked me an interesting question. He said, “Kim, how would you answer an entry level question like this: ‘A fire department within sixty miles of here is taking new applications for firefighters too. They only have a twelve month probationary period and we have an eighteen month probationary period here in this department. Why would you apply with our department over theirs?’” I responded, “That’s actually a very easy answer. If I were asked that question in a panel interview I would say ‘The probationary period is irrelevant. I don’t plan to change my performance level in twelve months, eighteen months, or eighteen years. The only people who should fear longer probationary periods are people who have low performance and fear of being evaluated. That’s not me. I will always demonstrate a high level of work ethic and dedication to the job.’”

Could you say that if you received that panel interview question? Did your work ethic change after you passed probation? Have you slid into a “shift mentality” like so many other firefighters? “I’m just going to do the minimum required on my shift and go home. Why should I give any more to this department than I have to?”

I see a lot of firefighters go through burnout, disillusionment, and a decline in work ethic. Maybe they have been frustrated with the politics of the department. Maybe they have been passed over for a promotion. Maybe they just don’t care about the job that much anymore. Whatever the reason, the decline in work ethic speaks volumes into someone’s character. People with strong character give 100 percent and strive for excellence because they refuse to do less than their best. People with weaker character blame the organization and others for their lack of excellence and settle for mediocrity.

Great leaders make a choice to be great leaders. It never happens by accident, and it never happens to people who live with “victim mentalities.” You are always in control of your work ethic and the level of excellence you put forth. Whether you agree with everything that goes on in your department or not, succumbing to a lower work ethic is just bad leadership and shows weak character.

Larry Bird once said, “I’ve got a theory that if you give 100 percent all of the time, somehow things will work out in the end.” George Bernard Shaw said, “When I was young, I observed that nine out of ten things I did were failures. So I did ten times more work.” People who put forth stellar work ethic seem to have things work out in the end for them. Yes, many of them had to work ten times harder than the average person, but most will tell you it’s worth it.

When you let others dictate the level of excellence you will put forth, you give them way too much control over you. When you let any of the behaviors and actions of others dictate your

reaction, you relinquish control of your life. When my nephew was only five years old, he became frustrated with me and his mother (my sister) for not giving him his way. He crossed his arms over his chest, scowled furiously at us both, and proceeded to yell, "FINE! I am not playing with my toys for the rest of the day!" Then he stormed out of the room as we attempted to contain our laughter. He sure showed us!

That is the same childish behavior adults often engage in when they don't get their way. They withhold higher levels of performance, kindness, respect, or work ethic. In reality, it only hurts you. Becoming bitter towards others is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies. The other person or the organization never dies. Only you do. You die a slow internal death reflected in your burnout, decline in performance, and poor attitude. It only hurts you and it represents a magnificent waste of potential. Take a look at your work ethic today. What does it say about your character as a formal or informal leader? Don't give others the power over your performance. Make a commitment today to give everything you do 100 percent!

Dr. Alyn is a best selling author and an international fire service speaker and training instructor. She is the owner of Fire Presentations, a company dedicated to fire service training and keynote presentations.

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.

An avid writer, Dr. Alyn is the author of eleven books including *How to Inspire People to Achieve More*, *101 Leadership Reminders*, *How to Deal With Annoying People*, and *Discover Your Inner Strength* with contributors Stephen Covey, Ken Blanchard, and Brian Tracy. She is also a monthly columnist for *Firehouse Magazine*. Dr. Alyn has been a featured presenter at Firehouse World, Firehouse Baltimore, Firehouse Central, Fire Rescue Conference, FDIC Indiana, FDIC West, Fire Tech Reno, and many other fire service conferences.

A true supporter of life-long learning, Dr. Alyn holds a bachelor's degree in management, a master's degree in organizational management, and a doctorate degree in organizational management with a specialty in leadership.