

The Value of Mentoring in the Fire Service

By Dr. Kimberly Alyn

The Importance of Mentoring

Many firefighters feel as if they are being “thrown into the fire” when it comes to their job (pun intended)—especially when it comes to promotion. While they feel very well trained to fight a fire, they feel the lack of experience needed to function in the station day in and day out. Considering that less than 1% of a firefighter’s time is spent fighting fires, it’s pretty important to feel comfortable with the rest of the job.

Learning the ropes can be simplified through a quality mentoring program. This is an excellent way to prepare and equip firefighters to perform at the highest possible level in every position. A good mentoring program is beneficial to the person being mentored as well as the one doing the mentoring. Everyone benefits.

Mentoring is the process of sharing experience and expertise to assist someone in their personal and professional growth. Mentoring is widely recognized in many public and private organizations as an extremely beneficial career development tool. Studies have shown that having a mentor contributes heavily to an employee’s success, career satisfaction, and whether or not they stay with an organization. The Coast Guard has had a mentoring program since 1990 and it has proven to be extremely valuable for the mentors and the mentees.

Who Should Be a Mentor

Mentor candidates are people who have experience and expertise in the areas that are needed by others. But more importantly, mentors set a role model example for the person being mentored. A mentor will lead by example.

A mentor can be someone of a higher rank or on equal footing, depending on what areas need to be mentored. Areas that need to be mentored determine who can mentor:

- Learning the job – a mentor who is on the same level or above
- Learning the politics of the organization – a mentor who is on the same level or above
- Promotional development – a mentor of a higher rank (preferably the rank of the desired promotion)

A mentor will help a mentee see the big picture and how the mentee fits into the organization. The mentor will also help the mentee see how the daily job functions of the mentee relate to the vision, mission, and goals of the fire department.

Characteristics of a Quality Mentor:

- Values need to be congruent with actions (You don’t want someone who out of one side of their mouth professes to value integrity and leadership while out of the other side of their mouth puts down management decisions in front of other crew members)
- Strong work ethic
- Strong leadership skills
- Positive work attitude
- Experienced and competent
- A desire to share experience and expertise
- Willingness to spend time with the mentee
- Good conflict resolution skills
- Good understanding of organizational culture
- Loyal to the mission, vision, and goals of the organization
- Confidential

Key Elements to Good Mentoring

- Meet once a week for 30 minutes to one hour
- Establish a personal and professional mission statement and goals for the mentee
- Map out a career development program for the mentee
- Having specific objectives to cover in each meeting
- Be honest!

- Hold the mentee accountable for goals
- Mentors offer guidance, not answers
- Make sure the person being mentored understands he/she has responsibilities—
Must be:
 - o Open to constructive feedback
 - o Honest and open
 - o Willing to learn
 - o Open to new ideas
 - o Willing to take risks and stretch outside comfort zones
 - o Able to identify short and long term goals and make adjustments as necessary
 - o Willingness to invest time off duty to develop personally and professionally

Suggestions for a Quality Mentoring Program

- Let firefighters choose their own mentors from a database
- Allow for email or telephone mentoring
- Keep it out of direct chain of command (this allows for more honesty, openness, and effectiveness)
- Encourage the influential leaders in your department to be mentors
- Consider leaders outside of your department to be part of your mentoring program
- Screen people who want to be mentors
- Create a web-based database for people to search for appropriate matches
- Educate everyone in the organization about the mentoring program, especially probationary and rookie firefighters

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