

Leadership Excellence:

Communicate Your Vision

BY RON KANTERMAN

WE'VE ALL HAD BOSSES WHO APPEAR TO BE good leaders but who are terrible managers, and vice versa. Both disciplines take hard work. Management entails lots of planning, organizing, staffing, delegating, budgeting, and other responsibilities. Can you be a good leader *and* a good manager at the same time, good at one and not the other, or lousy at both? Yes to all three! A chief of a small combination fire department who was a great manager and administrator could justify an ice delivery to the firehouse on a 5°F day in February and get the funding from city hall, but he couldn't lead the members to the breakfast table—he had no people skills and tended to mess with the troops regularly. When I asked him why he did that, he answered, “Because I can.”

Leadership isn't necessarily what's on your collar. Respect for rank comes with that rank, but respect for you as a person comes with having the right qualities. Think about the best leaders, officers, and firefighters you have worked with. What made them what they were? I'll guess they were trustworthy, dedicated, and well-read people with great integrity who had respect for others at the highest levels.

Also think about the worst leaders you've come across. You can learn from the bad ones, too, because you will know what not to do!

VISION AND A COMMON BOND

Consider the greatest leaders of all time. They were able to lead the masses and bring them to the place they wanted their people to be—for example, Dwight Eisenhower, Abraham Lincoln, H. Norman Schwarzkopf, and Fiorello LaGuardia. They all had one thing in common—vision. If you are going to be a leader in your organization or the leader of your organization, you must have a vision. Don't confuse your vision statement with a mission statement. Most emergency services organizations have a mission statement that include words like service, dedication, best, customer, quick, efficient, effective, ability, and so forth.

But a *vision statement* is much different. It's your opportunity to dream a little and shape your vision into what you believe the organization should and could look like. Put aside the budget and all the other current obstacles, and develop

your vision for your organization. Once you've done that, share it with your staff. It may become a group vision at this point and then start to filter down to the line.

“Our firehouses are 100 years old. We need new quarters. My vision is to build new firehouses.” Sounds impossible? If you don't believe in your own vision to start with, it will never come to light. You must believe in it yourself to make others believe that it's possible. If a vision just came to you and you responded, “That will never happen,” either modify the vision while still keeping with your ideals or change the situation preventing fulfillment of vision.

The leaders mentioned above were effective because they were also *great communicators*. They all had a vision they believed in that they could share and communicate to the masses and thus change the lives of others. If you want to be an effective leader within your organization or beyond, you must have a vision, the passion to make it work, and the ability to communicate it at all times and at all costs. Most importantly, you must first believe in it yourself.

VALUES

A leader has to strike a balance among all the members in the organization. When I ask my audiences where they get their values, most answer “from home or parents.” We are a product of our environment. We read about kids in bad neighborhoods growing up in a single-parent home, surrounded by drugs and crime; the media reports that some are in gangs by age 12. Once in a while, we see a success story of one of these kids who got out and made something of himself, but most do not. They simply become a product of their environment.

Each member of the organization brings his own set of values to the table. As a leader, you must not only deal with them, but you must understand them, too. Your job is to sort through the pile of values on the table and bring everyone to a common ground. That sounds easy. It isn't! It's hard work and takes perseverance.

BE PROACTIVE

You must create the environment and lead by example. Chief Peter Lamb from North Attleboro, Massachusetts, says, “What you allow to happen without your intervention becomes *your* standard.” He also used the letters of his name to develop a personal leadership model. I did the same below.



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Use your name to create your own. If you continually let the tail wag the dog and the day comes when the dog must wag the tail, you will have to go over Mt. Everest to get there. You must set the stage, create the environment, set the tone, and do whatever you have to do, but you must lead at all times, not just when it's convenient. You are charged with setting the tone for ethical behavior, even if you were the biggest prankster in the firehouse. Once you get elevated to the next level, "You can't play cards with the guys anymore," as a former boss said when I moved up a notch.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Before we dive into self-development, consider the "KANTERMAN" GAL (**G**uidance **A**cronym of **L**eadership).

Kidding: Are you kidding yourself and those around you that you are or can be an effective leader, or are you really committed? This is hard work—you have to apply yourself every day.

Acept that you have problems, and work on them. Fix the big ones first; the small ones will fall in place.

Never forget your leadership role and what your responsibilities are.

Take action every time. Don't procrastinate.

Evaluate each situation carefully for the best plan that will result in the best possible outcome.

Remember who you are, where you are, and the effect you have on the organization at all times.

Make good decisions based on the best information you can get.

Act on everything with diligence and purpose. Prioritize your work.

Never put yourself ahead of the organization. If you follow the organization's goals and objectives, the things you want for yourself will eventually come.

Build effective relationships. Cooperation works most of the time, and cooperating with your team is as important as your team cooperating with you. Sit and listen to members' points of view and ask for their input. Let them know up front that you may not use their ideas, but you want to hear from them. Try a brainstorming session even though the first one may be more like a light drizzle. If your people have never been asked to contribute to the cause, you may get that "deer-in-the-headlights" look. It's okay for you to start it off with an idea or two, but then let them do their thing. You'll be very surprised to hear what comes from your troops; it lends itself to ownership.

When you are each locked in your corners, butting heads, and trying to get to a "win-win," move to higher ground. Agree to disagree if you have to, and move on. At least you agreed on something. When you are conducting a disciplinary meeting, always reserve judgment until after you have all the facts. Don't rush to judge! Do your homework; when you're wrong, admit it, and don't get defensive.

In my last command, two members appeared to have made a serious mistake in their work resulting in what I believed would be a life hazard to personnel. In anger, I hastily drew up the papers for a two-day suspension for each member, which would have resulted in dismissal on their next offense.

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Not only did I misjudge their “supposed bad actions,” but I felt it was my duty to admit the mistake and make it right. The disciplinary action was expunged from their records, and I not only verbally apologized to the men but also sent them a letter apologizing to their families for bringing undue grief on all of them. Not only did this make it right, but these men remained committed workers, and we continued to respect each other. Fire Marshal Bill Hopson of Ocean County, New Jersey, says, “If you mess up, fess up, clean it up, and move on.” Those are words to lead by.

Learn and contribute. As the leader of an organization, you are expected to continually contribute to moving the organization forward. Generating new ideas creates excitement among the members. Try new things. If something new doesn't work, try something else. Get out of the box and see what everyone else is doing. Smash the box, and either rebuild it or go without it. Go to conferences and seminars, and bring home new knowledge (not just a bag of brochures) and, most importantly, apply new knowledge rapidly. If you hear or see something great at any class, seminar, or school and you get home and shelve it, you'll never pull it out again.

On returning from a National Fire Academy class about 10 years ago, I left that oversized white binder with a note sticking out of one page on my desk. That one page was going to change the way my department responded to buildings because of a new method of preplanning that was contained in this book. I knew if I shelved the binder, I'd never pull it down. It sat on my desk for three months until I got to it. I had a meeting with my staff; we looked at it, and all agreed it was the way to go. The project took 10 months to complete, but we were better for it.

Show flexibility with your team. That could mean adjusting working hours for the administrative staff, accommodating a shift person with different hours for a personal problem at home, or bending the rules but not breaking them.

Develop yourself functionally and technically so you can speak, operate, and lead at the proper levels across the board. You don't necessarily need to know how

every new tool operates or have it in your hands when you're at the higher levels of the organization, but you need to understand the concepts so you can support the need. I can't make a 4:1 Z-rig mechanical advantage system, but I know what it's for and why the rescue company needs this device to operate.

DEVELOPING THE DEPARTMENT

Customer focus. Our customers dial 911 and ask us to come and make their

problem go away. The average American doesn't know or care whether we are paid or not—“I dial 911 and somebody shows up and helps me.” That's the bottom line. But it goes deeper than that. You must keep up with your town's demographics; few communities' makeup in the country is stable; people are always moving in and out, and the ethnicities, religions, and genders change rapidly. New cultures bring new challenges for the emergency services.



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As the leader, it's your job to keep up and ensure that your new customers are getting what they need. You may have to meet with community or religious leaders to better understand who they are and what they need. An associate of mine works in a large city where diversity is the norm. An Italian-American fire officer, his firehouse was in the middle of a Hasidic Jewish neighborhood. By taking the time to read about and study their customs, he created a relationship with his customers in which they were able to understand his fire prevention and code issues. Approaching your constituents with a respect for their traditions, culture, or religion will speak volumes and probably get the code compliance you're seeking.

You have internal customers as well—everyone in your department under your command. You need to fulfill their requests in the station as you would out on the fireground. Your people are your greatest asset—take care of them. Other customers include the other municipal agencies (e.g., the police, the department of public works, parks and recreation, and so on.) Take care of them the way you would want them to take care of you when you call for assistance.

Get involved in your community. Successful chiefs I've met have been part of their local Rotary Club or Chamber of Commerce. One volunteer chief told me that his apparatus hit a tree on the way to a call. (No injuries; everyone was belted in.) The local truck body shop called him and asked if it could fix it for nothing! He had attended Chamber meetings for three years

with all the business people in the town. It paid off.

Always personally support your department. If the department leadership talks negatively about it, especially in public, then what could you expect from your people? Most of us support our departments by simply wearing a marked shirt or jacket or by displaying a window sticker on our cars. Remember, however, that you are now a "marked person," and what you do affects not only you but the whole department as well. When a firefighter gets arrested for drunk driving, the news will report that "an off-duty firefighter" or "a volunteer firefighter with 25 years of experience responding to vehicle accidents" was arrested. It's even worse if you're an officer. If you're the chief, forget it. What you do and say in a leadership role affects the entire organization.

Collaboration. If you are at or near the top, discuss with your companies, divisions, bureaus, and units why it's important for all of you to align yourselves with the department's goals, objectives, and guidelines. If you're a company officer, lead your members to the alignment "trough," and have them take a sip. Many firefighters and officers have told me that they work in a four-platoon system that has in effect become four separate fire departments within one. Each shift and shift commander does it a little differently or, in some cases, *a lot* differently. It gets real interesting when a firefighter is detailed to another shift for overtime and is admonished by the officer for doing his job the way he knows how. "We

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don't it that way on K shift," the K shift commander tells him.

Alignment is key, and leaders at all levels are responsible for it. Align the fire prevention bureau with the suppression forces. Align the shifts. You'd think standard operating procedures/guidelines (SOPs/SOGs) would have taken care of that. Align the line and the staff. It's okay if everyone is singing in different keys as long as everyone is singing from the same sheet of music.

Sharing is another way to get collaboration within your department. Share your ideas, and solicit new ideas from within. Share your successes and lessons learned, and document them. We're getting better at that lately; see the Fire Fighter Close Calls Web site, www.fire-fighterclosecalls.com, and the National Fire Fighter Near-Miss Reporting System

also know your department—every function, position, policy, procedure, SOP/SOG, rule, regulation, what to do, and more importantly what NOT to do. You have to know your people. The success of every good leader I have known came from their ability to lead and having good people around them to carry out the mission. As a 19-year chief, I realize that most of my successes came from my deputy and battalion chiefs, line officers, and firefighters. I used to love talking to chiefs who thought they were bigger than their department members. I always had to break the bad news: "They're bigger than you and, by the way, probably much better." They never liked that. Get that valuable input from your staff, look at best practices, and benchmark with your peers and professional associa-

**You must create the environment
and must lead at all times, not
just when it's convenient.**

Web site, www.firefighternearmiss.com. If we don't learn from the past, we're doomed to repeat our mistakes. Insanity has been defined as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Take advantage of collaborating with other agencies as well. Many jurisdictions form task forces with police, fire, and other municipal services. Get on to these task forces, and do some cross-jurisdictional work. As a leader, you are expected to do such work; encourage others to do so too.

THINK AND ACT STRATEGICALLY

First things first: You need to know who *you* are. You can't do anything until you are comfortable with yourself and confident in your position. Once you've conquered you, then you can lead others and make the necessary changes to move your department forward. You must have your act together and believe in yourself before you can pre-sent anything to others. You must

tions. Today's fire service leadership has no excuse not be on top of current information and technology. A fire department in 2013 can't operate like it's 1955. Successful leaders are part of local, county, state, and national organizations so they can get what they need to stay ahead or at least keep up. Chief Charlie Dickinson, former administrator of the United States Fire Administration, once described "The Five Horns" of a fire chief: the department, the firefighters, public safety, politics, and integrity.

That last one says it all. If you give up your integrity, you lose everything. If you lie to your people and they find out, they will never trust you again. Some things you just can't get back. Maintain your integrity at all times. Your leadership legacy depends on it.

Part of thinking and acting strategically is *consistency* in how you handle your people when things go right and when things go wrong. It's most important when things go wrong. Inconsistency can ruin a department, whether it's



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allowing four different shifts to operate four different ways or it's preferring charges against one volunteer when two of them committed the bad act. Consistency is critical to keeping the ship not only afloat but upright, on course, and moving forward at all times. Leadership makes the world move in a positive direction, so contribute.

Training the troops, the staff, and yourself and cross-training are the hallmarks of strategic thinking. Fire

departments that don't train or do very little training are doing a disservice to themselves and the community they serve. In fact, it's more important to do more training when things are slow than when they're busy. When things slow down, we tend to lose our edge.

A large city on the East Coast reported an alarming rate of firefighter injuries in the middle to late 1990s every night on the news. I called a friend who was a deputy chief at the time, who said,

"We're losing our edge because the number of fires is down. With the influx of the new kids who haven't seen a lot of fire duty like we did in the 1970s and 1980s, we're getting hurt. We need to do more training."

Present opportunities for training. Take companies out of service if you can. If you're too small, get mutual aid to cover you so you can get out and train. If you're a volunteer outfit, use a neighboring company to cover your area so you can get to the fire academy at night or on a Saturday morning to get in those live burn exercises. There are many training ideas available through online programs, books, and magazines. Bring your members the resources they need to train and get the job done. As a leader, it's your job.

DEVELOP YOUR STAFF

Your immediate staff are the people who will help deliver your message or, more importantly, your vision. You rely on this group of senior officers every day whether you're in or out of town. If you haven't developed them to your level, you're cheating them and yourself. Bosses that have "held back information because they can't know what I know" need to get out of this business.

You must delegate for development purposes and stand behind them in case they should trip and fall. Be there to catch them, stand them up, and guide them forward.

There are many tools that you can use for staff development: setting specific goals, offering constructive feedback, rewarding performance, and encouraging training/personal development and flexibility.

"You do not lead by hitting people over the head. That's assault, not leadership."—Dwight D. Eisenhower

COMMUNICATIONS

This is the cornerstone of good leadership. It must be clear and concise to be effective. It's almost like giving fireground commands over the radio. *Almost.* You must be consistently open and effective to maintain your leadership. Part of this is dignity and respect; yes, treat people as you would like to be treated. Take the high road. Even



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when the team manager is kicking dirt on his shoes and screaming profanity, the umpire quietly takes his hand and points to the top of the stadium indicating, "You're out of here." Not that you should throw the person out; remain calm, evaluate the problem, and quietly and effectively deal with it. Screaming matches don't work; you'll bring yourself down to a lower level where you needn't be. Show patience and courtesy even when the other person does not. Here's

where your leadership skills really kick in again.

I had an employee more than 10 years ago with whom I would have confrontations at least weekly. The louder he got, the softer I got. I called him "Mr. Smith"; he called me unprintable names.

On the other side of communications, keep the information flowing. So many of my seminar attendees say, "They tell us nothing." No excuses. Bulletin boards, e-mail, chat rooms, notices, and good

old one-on-one or group conversations can get it all done. I tend to send more, not less, information so they can never be uninformed.

WHAT WILL THEY SAY?

What will they say at your retirement party or your funeral? Maybe the standard answers: He was firm but fair ... a good husband and father ... a good boss ... he cared ... we learned a lot from him ... dedicated ... could be trusted ... never lied to us ... and so on. If you think they may not say the things you want, then you may have some work to do. ●

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