



Paul's Leadership Tips

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EXCELLENCE IN THE FIRE SERVICE

We thoroughly enjoyed our years in the fire service, and as we look back on our careers, we both believe that some of our best times were the assignments we served as Training Officers.

Think about it. The Drill Tower experience is usually the very first contact that recruits have with the rigors and traditions of the Fire Service, and is definitely their initial contact with the culture and philosophy of your Fire Department. As Training Officers, we participated and watched as these recruits developed the skills that would enable them to become reliable team members. Toward the end of the training period, we got to see the joy in the faces of the successful recruits who survived the rigorous and demanding training, and knew we had a part in preparing them for an exciting and rewarding career in the fire service, the same career that we were grateful to have.

The high point of any drill tower class is graduation. With their families and friends gathered to watch, the new firefighters arrive at the drill facility in a fire truck or engine "Code 3", attack a fire, rescue a "victim" from a car wreck, and rappel from the Drill Tower, put up ladders and advance hose lines. Displaying these newfound talents for their loved ones is always a source of pride for the recruits (and the Training Officer too!). After events are completed, there were always refreshments, a slide show and the wholehearted congratulations, euphoria and relief that came with this achievement.

As their Training Officers and initial mentors, we would share some final thoughts with them. We told them to always remember that we enter citizens' lives at a time when they are experiencing a devastating incident, possibly the worst time in their lives; that we all decided to become Firefighters because we care deeply for others and are committed to making the human condition better. Throughout history, firefighters have risked everything to save the lives of people they did not know. All one has to do is recall those photos of the FDNY Firefighters in the stairwell of the World Trade center on 9-11. It can never be repeated enough that being a firefighter is truly a noble profession, and that mark of respect is solely due to those firefighters that have served honorably and paved the way for all of us.

In a world where things change on a daily basis, the character of the Fire Service and the individuals that comprise it has remained constant. Over three decades ago, when we were presented our badges at our graduations, we were given the same message that we pass on to our new firefighters:

When you pin on that badge and put on that uniform, you become a member of the universal fire family and your actions reflect on all the members of that family. Your future in the Fire Service include the demands of a professional, with no real limits to the kind of emergencies you will face.

Your job will take you into places where normal people will be running out of, and your commitment and professionalism will compel you to move toward the danger and a successful resolution of the emergency. Your courage and character will be tested daily, at emergencies, in the firehouse and in your personal lives. For the rest of your career, your efforts will revolve around putting the safety and welfare of others ahead of your own. In the midst of worst possible conditions, you will be expected to act. You will see horrible things and you will perform beyond your own current expectations. And at the end of your shift, you will go home knowing that you helped make someone or some family's life a little better for your actions. You are now a part of a noble history of tradition, character and selflessness combined with innovation, character, bravery and hard work.

But the topic of this article is “Excellence” and unfortunately, not everyone has the desire to achieve that standard. We’re not talking about the occasional mistake and recovery; we are talking about individuals that have proven they are ill suited for this particular line of work. If an organization wants to create a culture of excellence, its gatekeepers (those in charge of setting job standards, hiring, training, retention, and promotion) must exercise clear-eyed objectivity and demonstrate unflinching courage by identifying those who are unwilling or unable to excel.

To paraphrase the words of an old probationary guide, if there is any question about a candidate’s or recruit’s ability or suitability, the decision has to be made in favor of maintaining the standards of the Department and the Fire Service. It’s a difficult task to release hopeful recruits in the training phase, but if an organization wants to create a culture of excellence, we must all be its gatekeepers.

And it’s not exclusively about ability. Every candidate and recruit’s character is a major factor, at the beginning, throughout and at the end of their careers. The character of the Fire Service is to keep trying and learn from our errors, to recover and start over, to accept things with grace and to be glad for the success of others. Our career ethic expects all Firefighters to examine themselves with a critical eye and be accountable for their actions, to avoid excuses and rationalizations and to resist temptations. In the fire service the stakes are simply too high to knowingly accept less. No organization wants a firefighter with less than satisfactory skills or questionable character to represent them.

The great news is that two distinct results are inevitable when we insist on excellence:

- Performance will increase, as the “bar is raised” and everyone seeks to achieve at a higher level.
- Those who can’t meet these high physical, emotional and character standards are released from the Fire Service.

City and Fire Service managers have a high, solemn standard they must maintain in the selection and retention of firefighters. If we avoid our responsibility to maintain our profession at the highest possible levels, we become accountable for the consequences of shirking that responsibility. The fact that excellence is achievable is more than proven by the over two-hundred years of proud and honorable service of America’s firefighters. Striving for excellence is realistic goal, but it is not achieved without high standards, objectivity, discipline and sacrifice.

*VIVI BENE--LIVE WELL
RIDI SPESSO--LAUGH OFTEN
E AMA MOLTO--LOVE MUCH*

