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Leadership in the Lower Case

One of the ways we give words a sense of importance is by capitalizing them. For example, if I say Leadership! I am sort of implying a sense of importance. However, if I say leadership it just doesn't seem to resonate quite as strongly. Now let me try one more on you; LEADERSHIP! Now that literally leaps off the page at you. If you have been practicing as a fire chief in the fire service for the last ten or fifteen years you have probably heard leadership expressed in all three ways.

Which one applies to you? Are you a lower case leader, an upper case leader, or an all caps leader? Well, don't feel bad if you are not exactly sure which category you fall into. In actuality there is no real clear definition and/or ways of measuring the concept of leadership. Yet, we are surrounded by constant rhetoric about leadership in the fire service.

Pick up almost any magazine anymore and someone will be talking about leadership. Go to almost any conference and you will hear verbiage about leadership. Go down to one of the bookstores, such as Borders or Barnes and Noble, the book shelves are stocked to the edges with books stating that all sorts of people are going to tell you how to become a leader. There is Patton on Leadership. There is Attila the Hun on Leadership. And of course one of my favorites, - Franklin on Leadership.

And I would have to say to you that if you aren't performing some form of leadership it is because you haven't been paying attention to your job requirements. On the other hand, I might say to you that if you are practicing leadership and haven't written a book, you simply aren't famous enough yet. But neither of those cases is really relevant. What is important is whether or not you are practicing leadership at all. You see that is the real problem. Talking about leadership is real easy. Actually performing it has a lot more difficulty to it and there are consequences.

The first thing we should clear up is that leadership is not a position, it is a behavior. You can be in charge and still not be a leader. You can be a leader and not be in charge. Leaders have a very unique characteristic to them. They have followers. And I am not talking about subservient followers but people who are willing to go the full measure to support whatever it is that person is trying to accomplish.

In my four decades of watching people participate in the fire service I have had a tremendous exposure to a variety of leadership styles. But that is another issue too. There is no one way for a person to be a leader – but everybody seems to know when one is performing in that capacity. Some people are flamboyant. Some people are subtle. Some people only become leaders when their followers are down and out. Others are leaders only act in a leadership mode when the organization is doing well. This



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whole thing seems to smack of magic rather than methodology. Where does a person go to learn to be a leader? What happens when you try to be a leader and nobody follows you?

Sitting around talking about this with some other chiefs, I have decided that it is more important to be a lower case leader than it is to be any other kind. Now what do I mean by a lower case leader? What I am really talking about is the exhibition of personal attributes that causes other people to feel that you are a person that they want to go somewhere with and are willing to commit to a similar cause. I am not talking about blind obedience. I am not even talking about power or position, I am talking about influence.

I am pretty well convinced that you don't go to school or a seminar to become a leader. The reason that I subscribe to that conclusion is watching kids on a playground. Nobody took a five or six year kid and gave him a lesson from Patton on Leadership, yet, there are a lot of five year old children that if you drop them in a crowd of other kids within a matter of a few moments they are organizing things and getting other people to go along with whatever is the course of action that they would like to seek. Now you might say to yourself that that is not the kind of challenge that major leaders face in life – but it certainly is lower case leadership. It is intuitive. It is the application of a set of human behaviors that meet the needs of other human beings in moving them.

In our society we institutionalize this form of lower case leadership all the time but we don't necessarily give it a title. As I reflect back on my own life and remember experiences as a Cub Scout, as a Boy Scout, as a young Marine, as a member of the US Forest Service, US Park Service, and then a wide variety of firefighting agencies I remembered being directly influenced by people who were using lower case leadership. They didn't have to demand that I complied with their desires, but rather demonstrated to me that they cared so much about what we were both doing that I quickly empathized with them and chose to follow them.

On the other hand, can people learn to be better leaders? Take a look at how individuals have been coached, mentored, counseled and even beat up in order to make them better leaders. Oh ya, I think you do have the ability to learn to be a better leader, but you will never get to upper case leadership if you don't have the lower case version of it first. Now that statement is pretty unscientific, but I believe that it has a basis in reality. Leadership that is based upon false premises is vulnerable all the time. Yet, deep down inside if a person's core values demands they think, act and perform in a certain way that is successful over time then they can take new knowledge about leadership and improve upon it.

One of the things that has often bothered me about leadership is the fact that there are two different kinds out there - ones that are good and ones that are evil. I will leave it up to you to define in your own mind what the distinction is. In my own case the distinction that I have drawn is that when a leader uses that influence over other human beings to result in death, destruction or damage to others, then it is



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evil. By my definition good leaders are ones who care, are compassionate and are competent enough to assure that advocating a specific course of action will not damage the people who follow them.

If you are sitting in your fire chief's office right now, or at home, reading this article, I would like for you to think for just a few moments on this one question. What do you think is the single most important character trait that a person possesses in order to be a leader? Is there anything that is so fundamental to leadership that it's impossible to be successful without that character? Think hard on the individuals who have influenced you through your life. Do they all share some particular quality? Think even harder about your own application of leadership on others. What characteristic do you think you share that makes you an effective person in influencing others? Think real hard. Now, you have probably already observed that I have no idea of what you are thinking and moreover it is unlikely that any one of you out there came up with exactly the same description that all of you did. That little exercise is a trick question, because I am not sure I know the answer either. Instead what I think it is is like a concept of a molecule. We can't really see them, but they make up everything and are complex in their own makeup. Leadership is not one thing; it is an appropriate combination of several things that makes a person really effective.

Perhaps a few real world examples might serve my purpose. As long as we are going to think large, let's use an example that is so common almost anyone can relate to it. I would like to use Winston Churchill from World War II in England.

No one can doubt that he was a world leader. But he was also removed from power when he no longer served the needs of the very people that he had worked so hard to protect. How many times have we seen individuals who have risen to a position of influence and then as soon as the conditions evaporate that cause their rise to influence their power disappears also? I know I have seen that.

This tends to make me believe that one of the first attributes of people who are in leadership positions is not what they really want to see happen in life as much as it is them being prepared to achieve something that meets a whole bunch of other people's needs. Gandhi probably stated that declaration most appropriately when he made the statement that, "There go my people – I must get out and get in front of them, for I am their leader".

But sticking to my idea of the one thing – the one thing I have observed most about individuals who rise to high levels of influence is that people trust them. Trust. What a word. If one looks up that word in the dictionary you might get a definition but the real world definition is that it is one of those things that you must give away in order to give back. You cannot be trusted unless you trust others and vice versa.



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In examining leadership, one of the things that also becomes clear is that all great leaders have flaws. Sometimes the flaws are greater than the image of leadership will bear. The degree to which those flaws affect the outcome of their leadership varies considerably. Perhaps if I went back to my discussion of good and evil in terms of leaders it would be easy to determine that sometimes the flaws can become so predominate that they take over the persons influence in a manner that can be perceived as either good or evil.

Earlier on, I asked you to contemplate a character trait that made a person a leader and you probably came up with your solution by thinking of other individuals. Therefore, I would like to go back to that concept for a few seconds and ask you to start thinking right now about people that you were influenced by. Who influences you? Continuing with that line of logic for a minute, whom do you think you influence? What kind of influence do you exert over them? What character traits do those people exhibit that you admire – what flaws do they have that you are concerned about. You take that lesson and turn it on yourself. What character traits do you have to make you who you are – and what flaws do you have that can cause you to derail if you are not careful?

In compiling research on leadership styles, I have found that there is a list of adjectives a mile long used to describe leaders. How we pick and choose among those often determines our personal success. Lacking one of those traits does not mean we are unsuccessful, but rather that we must rely on the strengths of other traits to overcome inertia or to obtain a positive response out of others.

That is where I think the idea of “learning to be a leader” is an exercise in self-assessment. If you don’t know who you are, what you stand for, and what you are trying to accomplish, there is a high degree of possibility that nobody else will be able to figure it out either. One of the first steps in lower case leadership then, is to really have a good grasp on the character traits that you display to other individuals as you attempt to influence them to follow your way.

This leads me to one of my number one characteristics of good leaders. They walk their talk. They don’t say one thing and do something else. Granted there are individuals – especially in the political arena that can get away with that from time to time – but credibility depends upon reliability. If you say what you do and do what you say then people can begin that it is ok to follow you if they concur with the destination.

Where all this is taking us, is to a place where many individuals have already been. That is to the realization that no matter whether we acquire the realization that no matter where we acquired those leadership skills and abilities as a small child, more about them in college or in the workshop – or merely reading a book, there are times when people rise to the occasion and there are times when they fail miserably. Those that rise to the occasion often survive long enough to be able to describe their leadership style in a textbook, but not necessarily to be able to transfer and influence to other people



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along the way. Interestingly, many of the books written about great leaders are not written by the person who was the leader, but by someone that observed their behavior and then wrote about it.

That is why I am not overly convinced that reading a book on leadership makes you a better leader. But, comparing the way you feel about things with what other people have expressed in their dealings with other human beings is a real good starting spot in influencing how you are going to deal with others in the future.

You are not Patton. You are not Lincoln. You may only be the head of a Boy Scout Troop, or you could be the President of the local fire chief's association. You are who you are. You are going to be what you make of yourself. You are going to be a leader when given the opportunity utilizing the combination of how you feel about yourself and what you know about what others feel about you. That is the bottom line.

To me this is all good news. For it simply means that leadership is not bestowed like a velvet cloak covering your shoulders, but rather emerges from within individuals as a sort of personal glow. Everyone can be one. Everybody can be a leader. It is not a case of just one of us out in front of the pack but a case of hundreds of us if not thousands of us leading in opportunities in which influence is important.

The future of the fire service does not depend upon the development of one or two individuals to guide it. What is going to give it its internal strength to be able to survive the challenges of the future is when leadership is looked upon as existing at every level in the fire service. All of your stories may not make up a textbook on leadership. Yet, each and every one of your stories contributes to the idea that anyone anytime can make a contribution.

To steal the lines of Forest Gump, "leadership is as leadership does." You don't need to go to fancy workshops to make a difference. You don't need to have positional power to have influence. However, you do have to have three very specific things in your mind's eye as you approach your job. The first thing is you must have the courage to act on your own initiative. You must have the ability to communicate to others common visions of the future and lastly, you have to put your money where your mouth is. You have to act on things as if they cared to you. Because if you don't it may be possible that nobody else cares about them at all.

If there is a leadership vacuum in the fire service then shame on us. If there is a leadership vacuum in your department you had better start looking in a mirror every morning when you get up. If there is a leadership problem at your fire company level in your organization there is a high degree of possibility that someone who has been given power and influence but has certainly not chosen to do anything with it.



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The beauty of this phenomenon is that all of us, meaning all of you, have the capability of having a lot of influence over the future. Using lower case leadership all you have to do is to wake up every morning with the idea in mind that you are going to act in a manner in which your behavior is consistent with your goals. And, if those goals obtain the support of other individuals it is possible you will get into a situation where you will have a capital "L" on the front of the leadership that you are exerting. Ultimately some of you will have some success stories that should receive local, if not national recognition. So, put your leadership contributions into an all capitals version. Then add an explanation point. It all begins with you.