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Leadership is a Matter of Performance

This month we are going to take a look at history and in the form of an examination.

What is it that these men have in common? Mahatma Gandhi, Adolph Hitler, George Patton, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan.

In the case of the first two men, one was a man of peace; the other was a man of war. The second two men were both military leaders; one was flamboyant and the other was a study in moderation. The two presidents were probably as different as you can imagine; one was a Democrat, the other is Republican; one was liberal, the other is conservative.

What did these men have in common? The answer is that they all have a place in history because enough people believed in them to make them visible in the eyes of the world. These men became leaders because they had characteristics that others found desirable to follow.

In the fire service we talk about leadership, but it is often placed in the context of management and authority. If we examine the list of names above, we might be hard-pressed to find a common thread regarding their personalities or their characteristics. What is it that these individuals shared that allowed them to be selected by large numbers of people to serve in a leadership capacity?

When discussing this issue, a lot of personality traits begin to emerge. Styles and types, such as being likeable, perseverant, or characteristics such as intelligence and courage often emerge. Often these are characteristics we like in others, and that we look for in our relationships with people, but are not necessarily a part of leadership. For example, could Hitler in any way be construed as "likeable"? Perhaps to his closest of friends, but to millions of people he was a threat to their very lives. If we look at leadership traits in terms of personality types, or as having a particularly unique style that is the same, we will be disappointed. Leaders come in all sizes and shapes.

What is the one trait that leaders share? They have the ability to perceive what other people want or need, and they have the ability to give it to them. Gandhi stated it succinctly, "There go my people – I must hurry up and get in front of them, for after all, I am their leader!"

In the context of public services, we often mistake the authority that comes with our jobs with the ability to serve in a leadership capacity. Many individuals who emerge in the top jobs of fire departments have leadership characteristics. However, there are also leaders at the divisional level, at the platoon level, and at the company level. In fact, there are leaders in both formal and informal levels in all organizations. This is to the advantage of the fire service. Unfortunately, a lot of these leadership



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traits are not adequately explored nor given the opportunity to develop. It is often considered to be a threat to authority to exercise leadership in some organizations.

Fire chiefs have to be leaders in one respect – they have the responsibility to move their organization from where it is to where it has to be. Failure to exercise that leadership responsibility results in an organization that becomes stagnant or subservient to the priorities of another organization.

It pays to take a look at leadership traits as they exist in our environment on both vertical and horizontal planes in our organization. There is a lot of room for leadership in the fire service.

What traits are we looking for in leadership in our organization? Where are the leaders? Who are the leaders? What traits do they demonstrate that makes them the potential source of energy for organizations?

Here are some traits of leadership that leaders share:

- Leaders are goal oriented.
- Leaders are change oriented.
- Leaders are future oriented.
- All of the above are internalized.

Simply stated, nobody ever became a leader by standing up and stating: “Let's keep on doing exactly what we have been doing.”

Today the fire service needs strong leadership to emerge at every level. The fire chiefs of today have a responsibility to exercise leadership in a spectrum of activity. Obviously, we are expected to fulfill this capacity in the handling of emergency operations. More subtly, however, we are expected to exercise leadership in fire prevention, public education, public policy, and the development of an emerging philosophy that will transcend the end of one century and the beginning of another.

This is an interesting time to be a fire chief. A century of progress has charted the growth of fire protection development. Philosophical and technological changes are occurring in the fire service. There is opportunity on many levels to exercise the leadership role.

Some will do it – and some will not. Some will succeed at exercising leadership and others will fail. But all will have the opportunity to either make a decision or back away from that role in the near future.

What are the ground rules for becoming a leader in the public sector? Most of us do not have the opportunity as Lee Iacocca, to move from an arena of hostility to a Chrysler-like setting. Most of the leaders that will emerge in the fire service will not have their faces on *Time* magazine, nor will they be



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nominated for president of the United States. They *will* make a difference in the local, regional, state, and national fire scene if they care to do so.

There are some ground rules for becoming a leader in the fire service and they have nothing to do with rank, size of the department, race, or religion. The ground rules consist of four basic premises:

- You must believe in something more than yourself.
- You must learn to be a good follower before you can exercise leadership.
- You must focus on meaningful change instead of change for the sake of change.
- You must be committed to long-term gains rather than short-term wins.

One of the more interesting aspects of leadership is that it seldom occurs spontaneously. Generally speaking, an individual assumes a leadership role after he accumulates a considerable amount of experience in interacting with those he intends to lead. If individuals emerge as leaders within the various levels of the organization, the same aspect applies: patience is absolutely necessary if an individual wants to assume a leadership role.

At the beginning of this article, we talked about different types of leaders. And so it is in the fire service. Depending upon your point of view, those individuals mentioned in the opening paragraphs can be considered either as positive or negative influences on mankind. There are good leaders and there are bad leaders. The exercising of leadership is totally independent of morality or a value system.

There are good fire service leaders and there are bad ones.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, leadership does not always result in rewards. There are those who exercise leadership and have subsequently been attacked, criticized, and, in some cases, were forced to give up the leadership role.

A few years back, the International Society of Fire Service Instructors printed an article called "The Paradoxes of Leadership." Among those paradoxes, it stated, "The biggest of men with the biggest of ideas can be shot down by the smallest of men with the smallest of minds. Think big anyway."

There are hundreds of opportunities to exercise leadership in the fire service. As a fire chief, you can do it in your community. As a battalion chief, you can do it within your platoon. As a company officer, you can do it right in the firehouse.

There is opportunity to exercise leadership in civic groups, and in professional associations. There is no shortage of leadership opportunity. There is a shortage of effective leaders. The paradoxes the ISFSI discussed are often used as excuses for not becoming involved as a leader. For example, if you do good, people will accuse you of selfish or ulterior motives. Individuals who step forward and become involved



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are often accused by those who have been unwilling to become leaders as having ulterior motives for what they are doing.

But, do good anyway.

Of course, as you read through an article of this type, one thought probably goes through your mind – not everyone can be a leader or there won't be any followers. Very true. Probably the one thing that gives an organization its greatest strength is not the identity of the leader, but the collective identity of the followership. If you recognize what leadership is, respect it for what it can do, and support it in a positive fashion, there can often be a winning combination. To choose not to step out in front – that's okay. To choose to support those that do that's okay also. Being part of a winning team is a reward unto itself.

Remember the short but succinct expression of leadership: Lead, follow, or get out of the way.