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Leadership on the Line

If I were to ask you to go to central casting and hire an actor that looked like a fire chief you would probably have a lot of choices. Depending upon your personal perspective you might pick anyone out of hero like characters. In the past individual actors such as Steve McQueen, Loren Green and Denzel Washington have actually played fire chiefs. In the future we might see female actors such as Signore Weaver or Meg Ryan getting the nod to play the role of a heroic fire chief.

The only problem with that type of typecasting is that real fire chiefs don't always look like leading actors. Sometimes they are very average looking. If you catch them out driving around in their civilian attire many fire chiefs are unremarkable, incapable of being picked out of a crowd. You can't tell the book by its cover, as the cliché reminds us, means that appearances are very deceiving.

What really distinguishes a chief officer is not their appearance but rather their actions. It is their behavior that counts not what they look like. Chief Officers are often characterized by their achievements and the level of credibility they possess within their organization, rather than by their compliance with any sort of very specific physical image.

With all due respect to Charlie Tuna fire departments don't need fire chiefs who look good, they need fire chiefs who can do good. If we all agreed that beauty is only skin deep, then we should probably all be able to also agree that performance goes all the way to the bone.

To put this concept into perspective the need to conduct a little exercise which is very personal and very private. Without dwelling on it too long, make a choice in your mind of whom you think is an effective leader. Conjure up their image in your mind. If it helps you might want to close your eyes for a few seconds to create that image. Of course you need to open them up to finish the rest of the instructions. Have you created that image of a person in your mind? You most likely are putting that person into that context because you see this person as being a leader who is effective and who is part of a credible organization. Hold that image there for a few seconds and just contemplate that context. Now, in the next sixty seconds try to describe what that person does to deserve your sense of respect for them. If it helps, act out how their behavior has influenced you. Is it what they say? Is it their thoughts that they translate into behaviors that you can understand? Do they display and more importantly repeat performance that allows people to trust what they are going to do and say that is consistent with that sense of a leadership style?

As we stated earlier and I think we all agree, the idea that all fire chiefs don't have to look like a movie star is very true. However, let's go back and compare the behavioral part of the script of a movie. Some scripts just seem to come to light right in front of us. Others are real stinkers aren't they? Scripts



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consist of words, or dialogue that is spoken in direction, a set of guidelines on how to move. Both of these reflect on the situation that a character has to deal with within the existing scenario.

I was prompted to write this article after the chance occurrence of two events that showed the distinction between the factors of looking like a fire chief and acting like one. The first event was my viewing of a recently released movie, “Master and Commander”. This is one of those rollicking and sea faring tales that is full of everything from humor to pathos and has the kind of battle scenes that almost make you feel as if you were there.

This was shortly followed by a telephone call from a fire service friend of mine that was very upset about an incident that occurred between he and his fire chief. I won't use the story that he told me about because it would be too easy for someone to pinpoint the scenario and perhaps start discussing who I am referring to.

Nonetheless, I was struck between the similarities between several of the scenes in the movie and Captain Jack Obrey had to make very critical decisions that were literally life and death scenarios and this chief officer's anger and frustration at what had happened between he and his superior. The comparison I made was the fact that in the case of the fictionalized Jack Obrey who made several decisions that were based upon the good of the ship, the good of the crew that in fact had adverse effects on individuals. Obrey's fictionalized leadership was focused on behaving based upon principles. And those principles were tested several times but the emphasis was not on personal choices or prejudicial bias the entire emphasis was on what was good for the overall organization.

In contrast the chief officer that was complaining to me was primarily upset that the decision was not the same one he would have made under the same circumstances. I immediately began to ask him a series of questions regarding the situation. Several times in responding to the questions, my friend indicated that he recognized that the decision was a very tough one to be made. It was not one of those “lets form a committee and talk about it” kinds of decisions. The issue went to the heart of the organizations honesty and credibility. In effect it was a classic example of the concept of the loneliness of command.

Here was the issue. The chief had always talked a lot about participating management and the need and necessity to gather large amounts of input before he made decisions. What occurred was that he was confronted with a scenario in which he did not have time to gather that kind of participative input and he therefore made a decision that was inconsistent with his image. It made him appear hypocritical. My friend the chief officer felt somewhat betrayed by the process because it was inconsistent with what the image, as a chief had projected prior.



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Reality is that very few people really face one or more situations in their lifetime careers in which they must make instantaneous decisions. On the other hand there are many who face them day in and day out. When I compare the role of being a fire ground commander to the role of making decisions in the fire station there is hardly any room for statistical correlation. On the fire ground we make decisions in a heartbeat and very few individuals openly criticize them. Granted they make take us on in the critique later on but on the fire ground we do not act as if participative management is a preferred leadership style. Nonetheless, we are sometimes faced with real crisis decisions and we don't have time to go through the educational process and have to use a totally different style.

Some fail to make the right decisions under these conditions. Others suffer from their lack of empathy to the consequences of making tough decisions.

Let's take consequence number one. When a person portrays himself or herself as a person who engages in participative decision managing processes they must realize that there are times when they must make a decision upon principle and not on participation. Reflecting back on the movie Captain Obrey made a decision, which was very difficult for his long time friend; his shipboard scientist but in fact there was no time to question it. If decisions are based upon principles rather than position, they can often endure. If a decision is based on positions they change all the time. So, what principle am I talking about? I'll answer that question with a sarcastic response – what principle do you think I am talking about? I am not talking about paragraphs in a textbook. Nor am I talking about some mystical principle that a management guru provided you at the department level during your last team building workshop. I am talking about the "everything I learned in life" type of a list of personal principles. If I locked you in a closet with a piece of paper and a pencil and told you that you cannot come out of that closet until you produce a set of your personal principles of leadership, I wonder how long it would take you. I am not talking about theoretical principles I am talking about the ones that you actually practice. The ones that are expressed in your personal behavior.

In conducting interviews with hundreds of chief officers in my career, I developed two separate lists of such principles. The first is what I call the laundry list type of approach. Open up almost any dictionary and start looking up words that have the ring of authority and credibility and you can probably just start listing them in alphabetical order: approachability, benevolent, compassionate, dedicated, and encouraging, etc.

To create such a list all you have to do is look at what traits that different leaders exhibit in achieving their goals and objectives in dealing with others. I would bet that you could think of a couple of readers that possess two totally different sets of attributes and yet both are eminently successful. Using the attribute listing system you can almost make up three columns of about seven words and describe yourself by taking one from each column, such as "gracious, intelligent, motivated person.



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The second approach is what I call the Ten Commandments approach. It consists of drawing out a set of guidelines that drive your assessment of specific decision-making processes as a template for your behavior. This list could look more like this: always tell the truth, treat everyone with respect, collect all the facts before you act, never lose your temper even when you are disappointed with others, and treat everyone fairly. This type of list is much harder to create and is even more difficult to actually live by. Yet it is the essence of having a leadership style that begins to take shape over time. The laundry list style tends to be more along the lines of the warm and fuzzy stuff. The ten-commandment style tends to produce a set of guidelines and principles that cause you to have a discipline approach to your job.

Going back to the Jack Obrey in the Master and Commander scenario it didn't take me five minutes into the movie to determine what I could expect out of his character for the remainder of the movie. Captain Obrey's "script" was written based upon his inherence to a set of parameters that shaped his behavior. He became predictable. Shifting back to the Chief Officer who had been so upset, I asked him to put himself in his superior's role and face the same set of circumstances. I pursued this from a standpoint of the attribute or laundry list approach. I asked what attributes he exhibited and the chief was unable to come up with any positive ones. I then shifted to the ten-commandment approach and asked him if he had been faced with a similar set of circumstances, what would he have done. As we begin to explore how he would have handled the same situation it became increasingly clear that both of these individuals came to the same conclusion but would have taken drastically different paths to achieve the end result.

There are significant differences between superiors and subordinates with respect to what laundry list they believe in and what Ten Commandments they have to guide their behavior. Our leadership is on the line every time we choose to make a decision that is inconclusive with our outward appearance. It is when our behavior gets tested against our predictable way of doing things is when leadership finally begins to emerge. These two chief officers are as different as the dictionary would allow them to be, and who chose totally different paths to come to similar conclusions actually were in the same place with regard to the consequences of the decision.

Who was right in this scenario? You know I can't say for sure whether either one of them was right, but I do know at least one thing. The one, who was more responsible for the decision than the other, was the one that has to be confident that the decision was right. You can call that the "lonely aspects of command" because that is what leadership is when we put it on the line. It is when we make decisions that we do not have the ability to turn around and ask for instantaneous compliance. At some point we have to act as master and commander. To call that a lonely position is to deny the fact that it is the rightful role of all leaders to be in charge. Command is not a committee function and every time it is advocated in stressful sets of circumstances it diminishes the authority and significance of the role.



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All of this takes us back to the opener of this article. Is it better to look the part of the chief or to act the part of a chief? If you want to be considered to be an actor you may be able to get away with a laundry list approach. You can be popular, friendly, humorous, etc. however, in order to behave a little bit more in a specific fashion you need to adopt the Ten Commandments approach. If I take those last set of attributes, for example of being popular, then a behavior would be don't offend anyone. If I am talking about being friendly you might be able to pull that off by rewarding your friends every chance you get. If a person is humorous they might try to avoid tough decisions until a crisis is created. You might think that last list of comparisons I made might be a little goofy, but I can assure you that there is a behavior exhibited by individuals all the time in positions of power and influence that is equally that goofy. Some are downright outrageously bizarre and yet people get away with those kinds of leadership styles for a while.

Now for a quantum leap of logic. In this article so far I have been talking about being the type of leader that does the right thing the right way and therefore leads the organization in some direction in such a fashion that they develop a followership. I am not sure our profession is creating that kind of leadership. We tend to look at attributes all the time as if we are losing specific attributes instead of acquiring new behaviors.

Of course I can't be talking about you. You're reading this material, so I am already convinced that you want to improve upon yourself or you wouldn't be this far into this type of article. My observations are based upon the phenomenon that fewer and fewer people really want to be the leaders of fire agencies. I am basing this also upon the phenomenon of people believing that appearances are more important than performance. I recently witnessed a candidate excluded from a testing process because "he didn't look chiefly". I consider that to be outright discriminatory at one level and absolutely stupid on another. I believe that the contemporary idea that leaders look a certain way has to be matched with they must behave a certain way. If I go back to the fire service of some fifty – sixty years ago and look at the photographs of the individuals who are leaders, I sometimes have to chuckle. They don't look like the kind of person that I would see sitting across from me on an assessment lab. Some had weak chins; some were in dyer need of a shave and haircut. Yet, they formed a consensus of the early part of this century that was so powerful that it drove the fire service for almost fifty years. If you think that I am stretching the truth, go back and take a look at the achievements of the fire service in the 1920's. There was more consensus in the fire service in those days than there is today. Granted there were fewer special interest groups and there were far less divisions of authority than we have today. However, if you also look at the behavior of the fire chiefs in those days it was very focused.

Jack Obrey, where were you when we needed you to apply for the job of being a fire chief? Leadership in the fire service is on the line in many ways like the role of master and commander was in those days. On the one hand we really prize the incident commander and all that they stand for on the fire ground and yet we criticize them without constraint. We have safer buildings to live in and catastrophic fires to



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cope with. When that same fire chief who was a courageous fire ground commander goes out on a limb to achieve the goal of making the community less vulnerable to attack from fire through the installation of sprinkler ordinances, and/or addressing other issues they are often attacked from within our own ranks. There are individuals who provide every opportunity to criticize the management of an organization. There are management people who do everything in their power to diminish the role of labors effort in improving working conditions. Neither of these people is right.

In some ways the fire service looks like a dysfunctional family. – Or not. If you are ready for another quantum leap it is time to do that now. We have a great potential to make giant strides forward at this time. We are on the verge of actually achieving a set of national credentials that has never been conceived in the fire service before. We have a new and real opportunity to build better relationships between the private and public sectors. I am one that believes that we have opportunities for new leaders to emerge at almost all levels but in order to achieve that we have to stop acting the part and behaving the part.