



Paul's Leadership Tips

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CONGRATS, YOU ARE THE NEW BOSS – NOW WHAT?

I would like to share with you my thoughts and personal experience about becoming the new boss. I believe I'm really qualified to share this information with you because as I review my leadership career, I realized I had a lot to learn about effective leadership.

Hopefully, you will learn from my mistakes and errors in judgment. OK, here we go.

You are the new boss. Congrats, however it can be very difficult being a boss who is not respected, and ineffective in dealing with your team, or even actively disliked. How to get your team to be the best thing that ever happened to you? The answer is intuitive: by being the best boss that ever happened to them.

First, let's discuss the fire service dirty little secret. Leadership positions come with surprising little guidance. Whether you are promoted from the inside or brought in from the outside, you probably want to hit the road running; however, due to vaguest of goals; you are not sure what direction to run.

It is easy to see why potentially capable, well-meaning supervisors resort to micromanagement, detachment, grandstanding, or sheer block-headedness in an effort to find some stability for themselves and their team members.

I recall when I was promoted to Captain. I considered it was a time to celebrate and it was a time of excitement and possibility. I was also a little nervous about the possibility not being an effective leader or falling into the new boss traps. However, with my personality and youth (six years on the job) I did fall into many supervisory pits.

First of all, on my first day I fully expected my Battalion Chief to have a discussion with me regarding his expectations, my expectations and his personal do's and don'ts. He was in the same station so I waited and waited. Finally, I decided to talk to him. When I asked him about his expectations and some direction his reply was "just do your job, and keep me out of trouble."

With this advice I thought about doing my job and keeping the boss out of trouble. So, I reviewed department policy and procedures (which were out of date) considered my professional behavior, (young, immature, aggressive, testosterone heavy) oh my, and performance, past and future.

One of the things I tried to do is not be a gossip spreader. Easier said than done. I'm sure you have heard of the fire department philosophy "if you haven't heard a rumor in 24 hours, start one." Not to mention the old firefighter saying for gossip spreading "telegraph-telephone-tell a firefighter." I realized that gossip does nothing but negatively affect the workplace. My goal was to keep away from talk that bashes someone else. If I found myself in a situation where someone was spreading malicious gossip about another firefighter, I would either ask if they really had the actual facts or just walk away.

Back to the present to make a point about rumor, I recently conducted an organizational climate survey for a department. While I was interviewing department members I heard many uncomplimentary comments about the behavior of the department leadership. Most of the comments were just not true, embellished, or just lacked the facts.

Rumor can be debilitating for any organization. It creates a kind of parallel universe that siphons vital energy from important work. Rumors cause a need for leaders to do damage control they would do if the rumors were actually true. Reason:

People believe is reality to them.

I shared with department members that the antidote to rumor is trust. Trust and rumors are mostly incompatible. If there is low trust, it is easy for someone to project something negative about someone or for the future. Where trust is low, it creates a roaring wildfire where wind, fuel and terrain make for a perfect fire storm.

If trust is high, the spark might still be there, but it will have trouble catching on and growing. This is because people will just check with the boss about the validity of the rumor.

I'll bet that most of you studied your department's policy and procedure (PP) or standard operating guideline (SOG) manual prior to the exam process. As a supervisor it is necessary to align your activities with the SOG's. Remember, these guidelines set expectations of standard behavior and guide the department members in their efforts to provide organizational control and quality customer service. SOG's enforce a more structured organization, and helps to make the organization more professional. Also, having written guidelines reduces freelancing and encourages members to behave in a rewarding manner.

I recall when I was a Battalion Chief, every once a while a Captain (not familiar with my MO) would call me and ask if his crew could conduct an activity he was concerned about doing (if you know what I mean). I would reply "You are the person in charge. I'm not going to tell you what you should do or not do. I suggest that you review the SOG's and read the department's mission statement, goals and objectives. If what you want to do is in line with them go forward, if not you should rethink what you want to do." I would also remind the officer that we are expected to observe a standard of conduct which will not reflect discredit on themselves and the department. You and your team are charged to conduct their duties in a manner to ensure public confidence in the integrity of the department.

During my tenure as a Battalion Chief, I was "not aware" of any Captain that because of his action discredited the department. You notice that I highlighted "not aware of."

Let's move on to the professional behavior past and future. We all are aware of the premise that success as a supervisor depends on conducting ourselves in a professional manner at all times with everyone you come in contact with while on duty. Your success depends on your ability to project and maintain a professional image that is backed up by competence, confidence, and commitment.

The next several paragraphs contain information that I have learned over the years. Unfortunately, it took me several years after becoming a supervisor to adhere to the advice below. One contributing factor to my lack of success as a new supervisor is that I was a product of my environment. As a young firefighter my Captains were part of or influenced by members of what Tom Brokaw coined "the greatest generation." They were people who grew up during the deprivation of The Great Depression and then went to fight in World War II. They were proud, loyal, frugal, and demanding. When they said "jump" you said "how high." It was their way or the highway. You wouldn't think about asking "why" when they gave direction or an order. Also, you would never think about sitting in the Captain's chair or going into the Battalion Chiefs office unless you were cleaning or heaven forbid told to go to their offices. At that time the fire department was definitely a paramilitary organization.

Well, that was the attitude and behavior I assumed when I got promoted. It worked fine for a while and then that supervisory style didn't work any longer. No one was happy to work for a dictating autocrat who was still wet under the ears. I was dogmatic as hell and realized my success as a supervisor needed a new supervisory style.



I attended several training sessions on effective supervision. That is where I met two of my mentors, Chiefs Alan Brunacini and Ronny J. Coleman. They both took me under their wings and shared with me the way to become an effective and well respected leader. Here are some of the concepts they taught me:

Your behavior toward your team members directly affects their performance, productivity, morale, and loyalty. Supervisors that are respected by their team members are able to get the best performance from their crew and achieve the best results. Your behavior toward other officers directly affects your effectiveness, the success of your department, and your future in the organization. Supervisors who get along with colleagues and are admired by their peers have the best opportunity for recognition and advancement

It is important to remember your behavior toward your boss and others in top management affects your career and your opportunities in the department. Supervisors who project a professional image are generally those who succeed and move up in management.

And lastly, behavior toward customers and others outside the organization is also important. To these people you represent the organization. If they have confidence in you and respect for your professionalism, they will maintain a positive relationship with the organization.

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

