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# 3

# LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Have you ever wondered how to get the best performance out of other people? How come some people in leadership positions seem to have the respect of everyone around them, while others wonder why everyone leaves the room when they enter it? The most likely answer is that the first leader has skill with (and respect for) people, while the other does not.

Any reasonable person will agree that he or she is more loyal to a boss or manager who shows them respect. A fire chief will use strategy and tactics when leading people on the fireground. These two words—strategy and tactics—are also needed when managing change, delegating tasks, critiquing others, motivating a team, and dealing with problem employees.

Developing these types of skills will require work on your part. When you show that you are willing to put forth the effort to try and develop a better work place environment, people will take notice, and things can begin to change for the better. In today's world, leaders are needed at all levels. The boss may run the show and create the overall culture of an organization; however, a subculture can be created that can supersede one that is created by one person if several people on your team possess strong interpersonal skills and leadership qualities like the ones outlined in this chapter. This can

be a good or bad thing. As a deputy fire chief, I have witnessed and brought attention to good examples of leadership that have come from members of all ranks and positions. However, as easy as it is to identify good examples, it's just as easy to recognize bad ones.

I once asked a senior firefighter (I'll call him Phil) to train another, younger firefighter to drive and operate the tower ladder. After a couple weeks, I asked Phil how it was going, and he responded, "Not good. He can't do it."

"What do you mean, 'he can't do it'?" I asked.

"He isn't made for it." Phil elaborated. "He's *untrainable*."

Besides the fact that *untrainable* is my least favorite word when it comes to building a successful team, I couldn't help but wonder why Phil was saying this about a firefighter who seemed perfectly competent in my eyes. I met with the firefighter to talk with him about his lack of progress, and he assured me he could do the job. He felt he just needed "another day or two" to practice. I relayed this to Phil, who proceeded to stress his opinion, "He can't do it, Chief."

My immediate thought was that Phil was lazy and unwilling. A few weeks later, the firefighter was transferred to another group, which had nothing to do with Phil's assessment. The other group happened to be riding short one member due to retirements, and I happened to have one extra firefighter. I sent this particular member because he was the junior firefighter on my shift—a common practice within our industry. Within a week, the firefighter was driving the apparatus without any problems. It was obvious to me early on— and the transfer confirmed the fact—that Phil was the problem. He simply didn't want to take time to work with the firefighter. He didn't want to step up. From that moment on, I knew Phil was not a leader, although I really knew it long before that incident. The fact was *that Phil was "unwilling" to take the time to properly train this new firefighter, which is something I will elaborate on in the 3U section of this chapter. Although I discussed this incident with Phil and dealt with it appropriately, I often look back and wonder if I should have transferred him instead.

Exhibiting the leadership traits that were introduced in the previous chapter is a great start, but leadership—the act—is a skill, and like any skill it needs to be developed. Throughout this chapter, you will be introduced to a number of skills that all people in influential positions should possess. The right skill set will enable a leader to create the right culture—a culture of execution.

# Talent, Skills, and Abilities

Take a moment to contemplate those three words—talent, skills, and abilities. Everybody has them. What are yours? What are you good at? Do you feel your talent, skills, and abilities are being utilized correctly?

If you work for someone else, there is a good possibility that you would answer *no* to that question. Why do I think that? Because most people in leadership positions never take the time to get to know what the people around them are good at. Now, let's flip the script. Are you currently leading a team? Are you guilty of making this same mistake?

Many people in leadership positions fall into the trap of thinking they need to consistently try and prove they know more than everyone else. This is a big mistake, and I'd like to present you with a different way of looking at things. If you have more talent, skills, and abilities than everyone else on your team combined, you have a weak team.

A smart leader will not only want smarter/more talented people on their team, he or she will actively seek them out. "Positional leaders" (those simply with a title, rank, or position of authority), on the other hand, tend to become threatened by talented people. Someone outperforming them, or getting the credit for a specific job, is a blow to their ego and self-esteem. Because of this, they tend, consciously or unconsciously, to sabotage the efforts of others in an effort to keep from appearing weak.

I want to encourage you to avoid making this mistake. Instead, find out what skills each of your team members brings to the table

and play to those strengths. Give team members responsibility and look for ways to help them shine and utilize their skills.

Every person around you is unique and has a distinct skill set, but you have to take time to get to know who does what. Make sure you are utilizing those talents correctly. You will accomplish much more by putting the right people in the right positions based on their strengths than you will by trying to get people to do what they may not be capable of doing. Imagine coaching a high school football team and taking a fast, elusive kid with a strong and accurate arm and obvious leadership skills and making him your placekicker. It doesn't make any sense. Many organizations are guilty of making that same mistake.

Within the fire service, we have discovered that some people are made for engine company duties while others are more equipped for the type of work ladder company personnel do. Each requires a different attitude and skill set. Even on each apparatus, there will be three or four individuals with different talents, skills, and abilities. One may be great with medical emergencies, while another is an expert at forcible entry. A true leader will know the talents of his or her team members and utilize them for the betterment of the team, and without trying to take all the credit for themselves.

I know chief officers who are guilty of making this mistake time and time again. They have talented writers, but asked poor writers to craft public relations articles. They have great instructors, but don't allow them to work on developing training evolutions. They have gifted networkers, but don't give them time to visit other departments to develop relationships that could benefit their organization through the sharing of information. They have knowledgeable firefighters with a variety of talents, but they don't even know it. Some say because they don't care. I think it goes deeper than that. I believe some of them actually think they are smarter and more talented than everyone else, and they aren't going to let anyone tell them otherwise. I am describing the classic micromanager who does not know how to utilize his or her resources properly. These people are always angry because others don't do what they want them to do, but they never communicate their vision with anyone until

something goes wrong—then they blame everybody else when things go wrong… everyone but themselves. Do you know anyone like that? Earlier in my career, I remember discussing micromanagers with a talented friend who owns several successful companies.

"I used to work for a micromanager," he said.

"That must have been painful for a guy like you." I replied.

"It was, but I am grateful for the experience because watching his inability to lead people enabled me to identify what doesn't work so I didn't make the same mistakes when I started my first business."

It's unfortunate to come across a talented team with an ineffective leader; however, throughout my career I have found that the majority of leaders within the fire service are smart enough to identify and respect the talent, skills, and abilities of their members.

Here is one simple way to help you learn to value the diversity of your team members. Create a check sheet. On the top column, list all the talent, skills, and abilities you want and need on your team. Down the left side, put the names of your team members. As you learn about each one, place a check next to the categories he or she excels in.

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Talents, Skills, and Abilities check sheet

| Name | Effective Communicator | Problem Solver | Adapts easily | Great with customers | Well Organized | Educated |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mark | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Donna | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Jeff | ✓ | | | ✓ | | |
| Scott | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

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Customize the list any way you want, but understand that as a team leader, a big part of your job is to identify the gifts that others around you have and utilize them.

**Fireproof Tip**

Know your team members' strengths (and weaknesses) and utilize their talent, skills, and abilities in a way that benefits the team as a whole. Only a leader with character, competence, and confidence is wise enough to want to be surrounded by those he or she believes are, in some way, his or her superior. Those leaders tend to build very strong teams.

# Delegation

You will accomplish far more through effective delegation than you ever could by taking on 100 percent of the responsibility of every project and/or making the terrible mistake of chronic micromanagement. Delegation is one of the most important aspects of time management. It's right up there with setting priorities and avoiding time-wasting activities. As an Incident Commander, it would have been impossible for me to arrive on the scene of a three-alarm residential structure fire and try to manage the scene, secure the area, raise ladders to the second floor, advance hose lines, and treat the victims by myself. It would be ridiculous for one person to even consider taking on all those roles. So why, when it comes to administrative tasks, do so many people try to do just that? I've known many individuals in the private sector who have tried to "do it all," only to have their personal performance and physical health deteriorate because of the stress and unnecessary burden they've invited into their lives.

Dividing tasks multiplies your chances of success! Effective delegation is an absolute necessity when it comes to an organization's success. Subsequently, failure to delegate will ultimately result in failure to adequately develop your team. In the end, everyone will suffer. People need to learn how to perform under pressure; otherwise, they will never be ready to take on more responsibility. If you don't develop your people and let them feel a little heat today,

they'll end up getting burned when you need them the most. One of the best ways to prevent this is through effective delegation.

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*Dividing tasks multiplies your chances of success.*

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Knowing how to delegate (and whom to delegate to) will not only make your overall job easier, it will also show the rest of your team that you are a strong leader who has faith in their abilities. The byproduct of which will be greater efficiency and increased morale across the board.

Here is what happens when you try and do it all yourself:

1. You only have your own personal input.
2. You fail to develop your team.
3. You create unnecessary stress and burden.
4. You develop health issues.

Here are the byproducts of effective delegation:

1. People see you as a stronger leader who has confidence in his/her team.
2. Increases morale throughout organization.
3. Produces greater overall efficiency.
4. Enables you to accomplish more.

When leaders delegate responsibilities, they should give their team members the authority to take whatever actions necessary (legally, morally, and ethically, of course) to complete the task and achieve the desired end result. This holds just as true in corporate America as it does in the fire service. Once you assign a task, don't look over the shoulders of your subordinates and question why they are doing it "this way" rather than "that way." Instead, make it a priority to arrange things so the task can be completed without interruptions from you or anyone else that may impede progress.

Don't be fooled into thinking that delegation is the simple act of "passing the buck." As sure as there are rewards for proper delegation, there are absolute consequences for poor delegation. In order for supervisors to delegate effectively, they should first feel secure about their own position and understand the talent, skills, and abilities of those around them.

When a fire officer arrives first on the scene of a structure fire and establishes command, and four additional apparatus carrying twelve or more firefighters pull onto the scene shortly afterwards, the first thing those firefighters will do is radio, or walk up to the command post and ask the question, "What do you need?" Immediately, assignments are given and off they go. One team will inevitably be assigned the job of searching the fire floor of the building; another will be sent in with a hose line with the task of confining the fire; and another will be assigned the job of ventilation. If the individuals leading these teams are well trained, you will not have to tell them how to do their assigned task, they'll already know how—and they should know how, because firefighters train every day just for that reason. As a chief officer, when I arrive on the fireground, I give out an assignment, knowing with 100 percent confidence that it is going to be completed within an acceptable timeframe. I know this because I understand the abilities of each of my officers and firefighters. Being in this position takes the weight of the world off my shoulders.

The same way an incident commander delegates on the fireground is the way you should delegate tasks on an everyday basis. Delegation should happen in the planning, research, development, implementation, and evaluation stages of all projects. The bottom line is that every job is easier when you delegate properly.

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*Every job is easier when you delegate properly.*

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You may like the idea of delegating, but you are so used to doing everything yourself that you don't know where to begin. Here are some tips on how to delegate effectively.

# How to Delegate

## 1. Establish and maintain an environment that is favorable to delegating.

This begins by creating team spirit. You are one team, with one mission. Everyone should understand that they all have a role to play in the overall success, or failure, of the mission.

As the team leader, you must clearly understand the tasks that you are delegating—and you must be able to articulate the reasons why each task is important. If the "what" and "why" are not clear in your own mind, you will not be able to communicate either to the others. You must also take into consideration the resources that are available to you and the timeline in which the task needs to be accomplished.

When delegating assignments, be prepared to express the scope of the task, the desired results, the available resources, the sensitivity of the task, acceptable practices, deadlines, and of course your confidence in the person you select. At this point, you are ready to delegate; however, don't lose sight of the fact that when you delegate, you are not relinquishing responsibility. As the leader, you are still in control of the overall project.

## 2. Select the right person for the job.

When I was initially assigned as the Tour Commander of C shift, I went around to each station, stood in front of the firefighters who worked there, and asked each of them to share a little about themselves, specifically, what skills they may have that could assist us on the fire scene or around the firehouse. I learned quite a few valuable things about each one of them on that day. Some firefighters

were licensed electricians and/or contractors; one spoke multiple languages; another had computer skills. One was a member of the state's urban search and rescue team. Having this knowledge made it easy for me to call on the right person for the right job.

When delegating, be sure the person understands that by accepting the assignment and accomplishing the task, that individual will benefit the team, as well as him or herself. It can't be stressed enough that when you know what your team members' strengths and limitations are, you will have an easier time delegating properly. Ideally, the person chosen to tackle a task should have the talent, skills, ability, knowledge, enthusiasm, and time needed to get the job done. If you cannot find those qualities in one person, before selecting a delegate, ask questions like:

- Who is best equipped to handle this job?
- Who accepts challenges and is likely to rise to the occasion?
- Can one person do this job, or will it require multiple team members?
- Does the task require previous experience or is training needed?
- Who would learn the most by accepting this responsibility?
- Who would benefit the least if assigned this task?
- Who can I trust to do the job?

## 3. Ensure that the person accepting the assignment understands it.

When giving the assignment, encourage the delegate to ask questions in order to eliminate any confusion. Also be sure to express how much authority you are handing over. You may choose to provide guidance by saying something like, "Look into the problem, suggest a few possible solutions, and together we'll choose the best one." Or, you may have enough confidence in that individual to say, "Solve the problem and let me know what actions you took."

Be flexible, but set parameters and establish controls to ensure that this authority and the accompanying power will be properly used. If necessary, inform other relevant team members of the situation. The person you are delegating the task to should not only have a clear picture of what you want, they should also be aware that by accepting the assignment, they are taking a positive step forward in their own progress as a competent and valuable member of your organization.

## 4. Keep an open door policy.

The lines of communication should always remain open. Make yourself available to provide assistance if and when needed. Let the delegate know he or she should make first contact, but ask that person to immediately inform you when things are not going according to plan.

If the task or project is one that will take several days, weeks, or even months to accomplish, schedule regular meetings just so you can acquire progress reports to make sure this project is moving forward, along with any others that you and your team may be working on. These meetings do not need to be more than a few minutes long. Your main focus is to find out what has been accomplished, what needs to be accomplished, and what problems, if any, have been encountered.

## 5. Be prepared to accept and deal with the consequences of that person's actions if he or she does not meet your organization's expectations.

I believed it was essential that every one of the firefighters on my shift fully understood that I had his or her back if things unexpectedly went wrong. Your team needs to feel the same way. This does not mean that you have to accept less than their best effort. It simply means that when honest mistakes are made, you will approach the situation with a level head and take into consideration the fact that you assigned this task to this individual because you felt he or she was competent. No one comes to work thinking, "*Today*

*I really want to mess up*." An unsatisfactory outcome could be a result of situations that were out of the delegatee's control. Since you delegated the assignment to a person you have confidence in, that individual absolutely deserves the benefit of the doubt.

## 6. Always reward performance.

Reward and recognition are vitally important when it comes to expressing appreciation. After years of working with organizations to help them develop leaders, I've observed that the people who voluntarily work the hardest are often those who feel the most appreciated. As a leader, it's your responsibility to show appreciation of a job well done by recognizing quality work privately and publicly. Never forget, it's not how much appreciation that you have for another person that's important. What's important is how much appreciation you show them. Sincere recognition will increase your effectiveness as a leader and keep team morale high. Don't reward hard-working team members by giving them more work than you give to others. Although that is a sign of respect for a competent individual, it is also poor management to put so much work on one person's shoulders that you fail to help develop the skills of others on the team. Consciously work to empower others in a way that they help you develop and execute your ideas, and you will become significantly more efficient than you would by doing it yourself.

### Fireproof Tip

The purpose of delegating is not to avoid work or unload difficult or tedious tasks to others. Effective delegation is an absolute necessity when it comes to a team's success. When you divide tasks, you multiply your chances of success. Failure to delegate will result in a failure to adequately develop your team. Through delegation, your team will grow in confidence; and they—and your entire organization—will benefit in the long run.