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Leadership 101: Integrity

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There are various factors that affect a fire officer's performance and the effect that these factors play in becoming a successful leader. Qualities of leadership include:

- Humor, perspective, and flexibility.
- Focus on the achievement of goals that produce results.
- Comprehension of what power and authority are.
- To communicate, listen and persuade.
- Knows when to take risk.
- Stamina, energy, tenacity, courage, enthusiasm.
- Builds morale and can motivate.
- Can form or build a coalition.
- Worldly
- Is willing to learn
- Possesses intelligence, wisdom, and judgment.
- Possesses their own vision
- Has self-knowledge and confidence.
- Integrity, character, and honesty.

Of all the qualities a leader must possess, integrity may be the most important one of them all.

Integrity is defined by Webster's as a firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values (INCORRUPTIBILITY,) an unimpaired condition (SOUNDNESS,) and the quality or state of being complete or undivided (COMPLETENESS.) Types: integrity of character, professional integrity.

Synonyms: Honesty & Unity.

Integrity involves the three R's: Respect for self; Respect for others; and Responsibility for all your actions.

There is a common theme among experts who have studied or written about modern leadership. That all leaders must act with integrity at all times. The first reason for acting with integrity is that subordinates are constantly observing the lead figure.

A leader is the role model by which the group that they command is most influenced. Eventually this will lead to a molding or modeling of the group's behavior. This is why a leader (fire officer), must have and maintain the highest standard of character and integrity whether on or off duty. Integrity of one's character will consist of honor, virtue, allegiance, and subordination. Without integrity the fire officer can never garner the respect and confidence of junior and senior members within the department.

Individual integrity is never easy, and is never suppose to be. At most it may be the most difficult of all personal qualities to hold intact because of its complicated nature and the multiplicity of it dimensions.

One part of integrity is virtue, this can be considered the courage that a fire officer must possess as part of their integrity. This represents one's "bravery" and the endurance required to standup against something that is deemed to be wrong, unjust, corrupt, or dangerous. The rank of a fire officer means little because there will always be pressures placed upon the fire officer to yield to influences from someone else's will as long as they are part of the line staff of the department. This pressure may come from chief officers, company officers, civilians, Governmental agencie(s), political figures or social/community groups.

Succumbing to these types of pressures will eventually lead the fire officer to take shortcuts in order to accomplish a goal. Loyalty and trust by superiors and subordinates must be the ultimate goal for the fire officer rather than shortcuts or "favors" that one might receive, including possible promotional opportunities.

A fire officer must be a "straight shooter," if caught lying to a senior officer(s) then it is an inevitability that the people under his command will eventually lie to the fire officer. Lying only infects the honor system that exists in the fire service. This also breeds deceit, dishonesty, and insincerity among the company and its members. If allowed to manifest this will cause the firehouse to swarm like the hive full of agitated bees. Sometimes fire officers have or will be pushed into a corner by the troops. If pressured the fire officer may lie in order to get out of a jam, but the ramifications of this will not only be deep, but also far reaching. Misleading the subordinates to protect your own skin will eventually return to you tenfold. Lack of trust, lack of respect, and lack of confidence will eventually lead the fire officer down the road to self-destruction.

If the officer attempts to "pull the wool" over a seniors eye's or if the fire officer works a shady deal in order to get something accomplished, then those under their command will assume that this is business as usual. If the organization is based upon absolute integrity of its officers, then the organization will operate as a fully functional unit. If the fire officer commits an act that is not necessarily criminal in nature, or an act that could possibly result in demotion or expulsion from the department, they must still be reprimanded or punished in accordance with the departments prescribed procedures. If no gauge for reprimand has ever been used, then the punishing officials can refer to the "Douglas Factors" as guidance for the initiation of punishment.

Other individuals who become aware of the incident will be adversely affected if no action is taken, thus the moral fabric of the department will be damaged. At some point everyone will break a rule or regulation, as this is only human by nature. The failure must be evaluated on whether it was intentional or unintentional and the punishment should be dealt out accordingly. But, if the fire officer fails as a person or as a representative of the department and then fails to admit mistakes or guilt, then they must be removed from their position. This is a distinction that must be maintained in all disciplinary actions within the department.

And what about time spent away from the fire station. The question is "am I, as a fire officer, required to abide to the same rules that govern me at work? In some departments even off duty you are a representative of the department and in reality we all are. But there are cases when someone steps beyond the norm or moral code of the department when off duty and they believe that this will not affect their employment status. Many in the fire service are unable to keep their home life together, does this reflect upon their integrity? In some cases, yes it will affect the way senior department members and subordinates judge the fire officer concerning the way they are viewed. Basically if the fire officer cannot get a grip on the conditions, which they live, how can they handle the conditions, which they must perform and work in.

"No one can be happy who has been thrust outside the pale of truth. And there are two ways that one can be removed from this realm: by lying, or by being lied to."

Seneca
Roman philosopher and writer

How does someone develop integrity as part of his or her character? Where does integrity come from? The quality of integrity is not a trait that we are born with, rather it is "learned" as we go through life. Not all (great) leaders come from backgrounds that would indicate their level of integrity either, instead, during the process of learning, integrity of the individual is developed. As with fingerprints, no two people have the exact value system that we live by. Within the fire service as in the law enforcement community or the military, we find others with whom we have similar values. But, no two people have the same level of integrity even though we share common ideologies. So how does someone live by a code of conduct and standards? How does a sense of obligation develop towards others, the community, community groups, the fire service, and our country develop?

This process of integrity begins when we are very young, usually taught by our parents, grandparents, neighbors, teachers, and other children whom we may have contact with. This process can also be taught by reading or by the watching of certain television programming. The process by which we develop integrity is also dependent upon our reception senses as well. How many times have we heard of families who were the cornerstone of integrity and wholesome living in the community, only to have a child who turned out to be the complete opposite, otherwise known as "the demon seed?" In defense of that example the reverse can be true as well, there have been some who come from families that have lacked integrity only to have a child who possesses a high level of integrity. While this

does not happen often, it does happen.

Development of integrity depends solely upon the moral fabric of the individual.

There are four ingredients that make up the foundation for someone's integrity. Without these factors joining combining together either the individuals foundation will be weak, or it will eventually crumble and disintegrate. These ingredients include:

1. Receptive Ability: Can the fire officer listen to other's ideas or directions? Failure as an officer occurs when one acts as an authoritarian leader. This person dominates and to a certain extent possesses a certain degree of arrogance that is above the norm.

2. Flexibility: Are you, the fire officer a risk taker? Can you think outside the box? Do you have an active imagination that allows for alternative ways or ideas to be used in accomplishing the departments mission or goals? Fire officers fail when they become rigid or unbending in their way of operating or their beliefs? These are the type of officers who carry the old timers attitude or simply state, "We can't do that because we have always done it this way?"

3. Humility: Can the officer put the organizations concerns ahead of your personnel interest? Or does the officer put a premium on their personnel image (glitter & gold syndrome), and do they remember were they come from? If title, image, and being the center of attention appeal more to you, than humility is one quality they do not possess.

4. Compassion: Can the officer bring himself or herself to reconcile a difference with a member of the company or department? Can they be nice to fellow firefighters and express compassion and mercy to the people to whom we provide service?

But what does integrity really mean? Integrity is:

Self-respect: The fire officer must first start by liking him or herself. If they are unhappy with who they are, they will be unable to show someone under their command compassion or understanding. Having self-respect for yourself will be noticed by those around you and will be appreciated. The perception of you (as a fire officer) can always be enhanced, updated and improved. It will all depend upon factors such as willingness, motivation, and career goals that you wish to accomplish.

Loyalty to the department's vision and mission: As a fire officer you must first realize that without loyalty to the department and its mission your performance cannot make the department fully successful. Great strategy and innovation is not a guarantee for success, the core to success is the employee, and if you are not willing to commit yourself to the department then you are a glitch in the system. The ranks of successful companies are filled with hardworking, dedicated, skilled, honest and faithful employees like you.

Honesty to yourself and others: Officers must always conduct themselves with the

utmost of honesty at all times. Firefighters look up to the fire officer as an example of leadership and guidance. One way to ensure that your integrity as a fire officer is intact is to always tell the truth. By telling the truth you will never have to worry about being caught up in a lie or trying to remember just what you had said. Lying will only lower your self worth in the mind of subordinates, superiors, or worst yet the public. Sometimes telling the truth will not make people happy, or make you the winner of a popularity contest. In some cases you may suffer from “loss of grace” for telling the truth, or for standing up for what is right. But as an adult we find out that this is life, and you can’t please everyone all the time. But being caught in a lie means there will be a much greater need for damage control in the end.

Avoidance

How many employees in the fire service can state with honesty that they can trust every employee in the department’s officer corps? Within the fire service there are probably more supervisors and managers that a subordinate can place their faith and trust in than in other workforce professions. This can be mainly contributed to the nature of our business, which is to help and serve others, including our own. This type of person eventually becomes a leader with a quality inbred within their skills when they ascend as an officer. But there are some in our profession that you should never turn your back on and this is true in every profession as well.

One way to avoid the integrity pitfall is by retaining the quality that appears to be the most important, trust. Once a subordinate or supervisor loses the ability to put their trust in the fire officer the only effect that can follow is that of an uncontrollable vortex that spirals downward. Lack of trust is listed as the number one problem facing many leaders within the world of corporate or governmental business today, including the fire service. Take a look at Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Anderson, representatives of the House and Senate, sports athletes, and celebrities. These are only a few examples of leaders who have failed the integrity test. This has been accomplished through lying, deceit, and greed. Is the fire service exempt, no! Just look at the D.C. Fire Departments debacle that is still ongoing with its recently past chief.

Untrustworthy leadership is not new thing, in fact it has been prevalent since the creation of dawn. But in order to lead an effective and efficient customer service like the fire department we cannot allow ourselves to reward questionable behavior.

Some recent studies have shown why trust has diminished and cynicism has risen:

- a. 74% stated that they would steal from someone who would not miss it.
- b. 76% of honor students in 1996 stated that they have cheated academically at some point during their studies.
- c. 85% stated that honest and ethical management was important to the health of the organization.
- d. 40% stated that honesty and ethical management was present in the organization that they are presently employed by.
- e. 75% of employees have observed unethical workplace conduct within the last year, of the conduct observed were deceptive practices, unsafe working conditions, and the mishandling of information.

f. Employee satisfaction falls to 21% when upper management failed to deal with a supervisor accused of unethical behavior.

g. Most all respondents of the survey consider themselves suspicious of their managers.

*" To educate a man in mind but not in morals is to educate a menace to society."
Theodore Roosevelt*

Understanding employees

Just because we are the emergency service known as the Fire Department, doesn't necessarily mean that employee's don't expect from our leaders what others in the professional workforce expect from their supervisors. A survey conducted in New York (2001) listed the top ten skills that a supervisor should have:

1. 97% of employees want supervisors who can be trusted, to make honest decisions that are value based and who understand the consequences of violating organizational beliefs and policies.
2. 94% of employees want supervisors who can work with others.
3. 93% of employees consider hygiene or personnel appearance (clean clothes/uniform, washed and styled hair, clean teeth, etc.) of importance.
4. 88% of employees want supervisors who can communicate such as receiving, interpreting and responding appropriately using the correct verbal communication. That managers understand body language and also comprehend evaluates and supports the speaker.
5. 87% wants supervisors who demonstrate understanding, are adaptable, show empathy, and politeness to others.
6. 85% of employees want supervisors who show a high level of effort plus perseverance towards goal attainment. This helps employees achieve excellence when tasked with undesirable or unpleasant work assignments.
7. 83% want supervisors to show self-worth and have a positive image of themselves. Also increases supervisor's knowledge and skills.
8. 82% believe it is important for supervisors to communicate through writing, records information and the accuracy of both.
9. 81% want managers to organize ideas and who speak clearly. Appropriate communications to listeners in the correct situations or settings. Participates in groups settings and will ask questions when needed.
10. 80% believe appropriate behavior should be a trademark when dealing with others.

The most important figure in this survey was also the number one answer, trust and honesty (someone's integrity) meant the most to employees, and I venture to say that higher level managers would feel the same if asked about lower level supervisors.

Corrective measures

- a. In order to meet the goals and mission of the department, fire officers should deliver clear and concise messages to the firefighters. Many times verbal or written instructions are received differently and the end result is the placing of blame upon one another as to why the goal or mission was never attained.
- b. Fire service managers must be willing to deal with those under their command who act unethically. Failure to do so will result in loss of integrity by the fire officer.
- c. Fire officers must be vigilant and remember that there is a constant threat to their integrity. Compromised integrity will only lead to defeat.
- d. As a fire officer, never make promises to subordinates or superiors that a task or goal will be accomplished or met if you know it cannot, no matter how minor the assignment is. This can only help to reinforce among the parties involved that trust within the system is either damaged or broken.

Many of today's fire chief's compromise their integrity when they must take on and act out the wishes of city managers or Mayors, even if the chief was a person of the highest moral fabric before assuming the chief's position.

Accepting the position as fire chief means that you (may) have to hold the corporate line in order to continue your employment status. If the city fathers want to slash the fire department budget, cut staffing, or close stations, as the chief of the department you will be responsible for carrying this directive or manifesto out, no matter how unpopular it may be. By carrying out such wishes means the fire chief now has become the scapegoat or whipping boy for city managers. Accepting these recommendations without any resistance even if you disagree can kill any integrity that you had spent your whole career to build. Going against the city managers wishes may mean loss of your job, or a falling out of favor, or being ostracized by the bureaucrats.

So many fire chiefs have to make many critical choices in today's politically filled arenas. The smart chief will either fight or attempt other ways of convincing the city fathers on the importance of reversing or at least modifying the decision(s) or plan that they want to see implemented.

One way to succeed without seeming to be putting up a fight is by seeking change through accurate and detailed justification, something many of our fire service leaders either fail or do not know how to do.

Then there is the puppet chief, who will go about granting the city fathers every wish, even though the chief knows that it is not the right thing to do for the department or the community. The puppet chief will also never have anything new to report on even if the department or service provided by them is not sufficient or may be falling apart. They will always report that the department is doing fine and

there are no problems. Is there a simple answer on what to do? No. The fire chief must do what they feel is right. If the chief does not then they can continue to wear the pretty uniform with all its glitter and gold, drive around in their new Crown Victoria and continue to play the part of the pawn. Remember the pawn takes all the heat for the decisions of the city fathers. In the end the only person that will be adversely affected is the fire chief.

Integrity is the most important of all qualities that a fire service leader must possess. To view everyone and the relationships that they have, how they conduct their lives, and see them as not just a number to provide staffing. This will enhance the productivity that all managers hope for. It is easier to keep ones integrity than to recover it. Firefighters and fire chiefs can see a phony, and whether they have respect for others around them.

The fire officer who is fair in all their dealings will garner not only respect but also responsibility. Not being able to rise above prejudices will lead to failure. Being a prisoner to peer pressure, modus operandi, useless traditions or conventional rules will eventually lead to the loss of integrity. To see far beyond ones environment, to use proper ways and means, and to bring a task to a desirable end is the true sign of an effective leader. To discount exterior pressures is what separates leaders from followers.

"Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful." Samuel Johnson

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