



### Fire Service Leadership Traits

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

Some people like to debate whether leaders are made or born. The most likely answer would be that some true leaders are born, but most are made – “self-made”. A smart fire officer will concentrate on developing the leadership qualities and traits that are necessary for success. For the most part, leadership traits in any profession are

The 12 Leadership traits are

- LOYAL
- EDUCATED
- ADAPTABLE
- DETERMINED
- ENTHUSIASTIC
- RESOURCEFUL
- SELFLESS
- TOUGH
- EMPATHETIC
- ASSERTIVE
- COURAGEOUS
- HONORABLE

universal. In the fire service, however, there are specific qualities that an officer absolutely must possess. In this article, we are going to discuss 12 leadership traits that firefighters – and the public – look for in a fire service leader. Officers, and firefighters in general, who regularly demonstrate these leadership traits, will earn the respect and confidence of their peers. By possessing these characteristics, you will make it easier for people to want to follow you. The less time you have to spend on getting others to follow you, the more time you get to spend refining exactly where you want to go and how to get there.

On the following pages you will find definitions of each trait, followed by suggestions on how to develop the areas where you feel you are lacking.

## LOYAL

**Definition:** Being loyal means you are devoted to the fire service, your community, your department, and your crew. Loyalty should flow evenly, up and down the chain of command, to seniors, subordinates, and peers. To be loyal, is to be dependable and trustworthy, which means that you can be relied upon to perform your duties properly, and trusted to complete your assignment, every time.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Refrain from discussing the problems of the department (or your company) with outsiders. Never talk about seniors or superior officers unfavorably in front of your subordinates. Also, carry out every task to the best of your ability regardless of whether you like, or agree with it. Once a decision is made, and you are given an order to execute it, carry out that order willingly as if it were your own.

## EDUCATED

**Definition:** Being educated means that you continue to acquire the appropriate information from reliable sources, and that you understand your fire ground duties; the policies and procedures of your department; and the science of firefighting. Your education should be broad, and you should NEVER stop trying to improve your knowledge base. The day you think you know too much, is the day you should consider retiring.



**Suggestions for Improvement:** Increase your knowledge by committing to continual learning and remaining alert. Constantly listen, observe, and learn about things you don't understand. Read fire service text books, attend educational seminars, talk to street-smart firefighters, and ask questions. There is an endless supply of knowledge available. You just have to seek it.

## ADAPTABLE

**Definition:** Being adaptable means you are able to quickly adjust to rapidly changing conditions. This trait is paramount for all firefighters because situations escalate quickly on the fire ground. A “routine” fire can turn into a life-threatening situation in seconds, which is why there is no such thing as a “routine” fire. Your ability to evaluate and revise your strategies on the fly is imperative.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Again, never stop educating yourself. The more you know, the better equipped you will be to react and adjust. Practice being proactive, not reactive. The more capable you are at seeing problems before they happen, the more effective you will be as a firefighter.

## DETERMINED

**Definition:** Being determined means you have laser sharp focus on the goal you are trying to achieve. There’s a saying, “Brick walls aren’t there to keep you out, they’re there to see how bad you want to get in.” That’s the way an aggressive, strong-minded firefighter should think when performing a duty on the fire ground. The word Determined, with regards to firefighting, is synonymous with Heroic.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Never, ever, give up. Don’t stop until the goal has been achieved. This does not mean you should ever defy the IC’s orders on the fire ground if there is a need to change tactics. It simply means, when firefighters say they risk a lot to save lives, they don’t just say it... they live it.

## ENTHUSIASTIC

**Definition:** Enthusiasm is defined as a sincere interest and exuberance in the performance of your duties. If you are enthusiastic, you are optimistic, cheerful, and willing to accept challenges. You are the type of person who is eager to take on more responsibility. The fire service needs more leaders with this trait because enthusiasm is contagious.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Understanding and believing in the mission of the fire service will add to your enthusiasm for the job. Our mission is to reduce the loss of life and property, and protect the weak. To do this, everyone will have to fulfill a role on the fire ground. It's important to understand why even the uninteresting jobs must be done with the proper attitude.

## RESOURCEFUL

**Definition:** Being resourceful means you are capable of skillfully, safely, and promptly navigating your way through a variety of situations, regardless of the tools, staffing, and resources that are – or aren't – available at any given moment. If you are resourceful, you are creative and you will always be looked at as a person with ingenuity that shows initiative, and can get the job done, no matter what.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Think outside of the box. Don't get tunnel vision. There are always alternative ways to accomplish a task. Once again, being knowledgeable is the key to success in this area. It's not enough to simply know what tools are available. You must know how to use them. To improve your resourcefulness, you must also work on staying mentally and physically alert.

## SELFLESS

**Definition:** The true definition of the word selfless is having little or no concern for oneself. Firefighting is arguably the most selfless job on the planet. It's our job to put the safety and well-being of others ahead of our own. Although selfless is synonymous with *self-sacrifice*, this doesn't mean you should disregard safe practices. To be selfless also means you are considerate of others and openly give credit to those who deserve it.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Think more about others and less about yourself. Avoid using your position or rank for personal gain, safety, or pleasure at the expense of others. Be considerate of those you work with and give credit where credit is due. It's amazing how much your team can accomplish when you praise often and in public.

## TOUGH

**Definition:** To be tough is to be strong and resilient; able to withstand adverse conditions. With toughness comes the ability to endure great strain without breaking. This means both physically and mentally, and it's a necessity for firefighters of all ranks. There is nothing easy about fighting fires. If a person is not tough, this simply isn't the right profession for them.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** You have to learn to love the fight itself. Champions in every arena love to compete. However, it is vitally important to cultivate your love of the fight more than your love of winning. This way of thinking will help improve your mental toughness. Improving your physical toughness will come from a consistent workout program.

## EMPATHETIC

**Definition:** It's been said, "Firefighters are constantly meeting new people and spending the worst moments of their lives with them." Don't lose sight of that fact. Your job isn't just to put the fire out, it's also to provide guidance for the people we serve and protect. Showing empathy means being kind and tactful when dealing with people who have just lost property, valuables, or worse – loved ones.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Treat others the way you would like to be treated.

## ASSERTIVE

**Definition:** To be assertive, is to be aggressively self-assured. Assertive firefighters are confident. They know what to do on the fire ground (and around the fire house), and they know how to do it. More importantly, they don't need to be told to do it. They just do it, and when they recognize an unsafe practice, they are confident enough to stop the act before someone gets hurt.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Know your job. Take a moment to think about your options then be aggressive and self-assured when you make a decision. You should be firm, but remember the third trait of a strong fire service leader is that you must remain adaptable, so you can quickly adjust your strategy when necessary.

## **COURAGEOUS**

**Definition:** The first words that come to most people's minds when they think of firefighters are Courageous and Brave. Courage is what allows you to remain calm while recognizing fear. Moral courage means having the inner strength to stand up for what is right and to accept blame when something is your fault. Physical courage means that you can continue to function effectively when there is physical danger present.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** You can begin to control fear by practicing self-discipline and calmness. If you fear doing certain things that are required in your daily life, force yourself to do them until you can control your reaction. Lead by example. It doesn't take a hero to order someone into battle; it takes a hero to lead others into battle from the front line. Lastly, keep in mind, courage isn't the absence of fear; it's the management of fear.

## **HONORABLE**

**Definition:** To be honorable means you are worthy of honor and high respect. This is a byproduct of the other traits listed above. When you put honesty, integrity, sense of duty, and sound moral principles above all else, you are operating in an honorable and ethical way.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Be absolutely honest and truthful at all times. Stand up for what you believe is right. Always do the right thing. If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. If it is not legal, moral or ethical, DON'T do it!

Because it is important to always remember these essential leadership traits, use the acronym **LEADERS TEACH**. Each letter in the acronym corresponds to the first letter of one of the traits. By remembering this acronym, you will be better able to recall the traits. The irony of this acronym is that it is actually the 13th trait of a good fire service leader. They **TEACH** others what they know. By teaching, you instill confidence, Eleanor Roosevelt said, “A good leader inspires

“A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader. A great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves”

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

people to have confidence in the leader, a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves.”

There are obviously other important traits for firefighters, like humility, good judgment, strong motivational skills, and the ability to communicate, but the ones listed above are vital to your success as a leader. Your skill at exhibiting these qualities will be firmly linked with people’s

desire to follow your lead. Exhibiting these traits will inspire confidence in your leadership ability. Not exhibiting these traits or exhibiting the opposite of these traits will decrease your leadership influence with those around you.

## Traits associated with leadership failure

To be thorough, we should take a moment to discuss some of the traits associated with failure. As important as it is to understand what makes a good leader, it’s equally as important to understand why so many fail in leadership positions. Here is a quick list of some traits associated with poor leadership.



1. Lack of passion
2. Unclear vision
3. Poor communication skills

4. Risk aversion
5. Callous
6. Unethical
7. Poor self-management
8. Incompetent
9. Plays the victim
10. Tears others down
11. Micromanager
12. First to take the credit
13. Last to take the blame

When someone in an authoritative position displays poor leadership traits, the mission they are trying to accomplish is doomed to fail. A fire service officer will never earn the respect of his or her crew unless they develop the qualities that align with those of great leaders.

## Fire Service Leadership Summary

When firefighter's under your leadership look at some action you have taken and think, "That just goes to show why you are the one in charge", you are on the right track. If these moments are infrequent, it is likely that some demonstrations of competency will help boost your leadership influence. By consciously making an effort to develop and exhibit the traits listed in this article, people will be more likely, and willing to follow you. By exhibiting these traits on a regular basis, you will earn the respect of others and increase your effectiveness as an influential leader.



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