



# Essays on Fire Service Leadership

Robert P. Avsec, Battalion Chief (Ret.)

# Introduction

Many perspective leaders are looking for that singular style that will help them become the leader that they wish to be. They attend seminars, read books or listen to podcasts looking for their ship, or wanting to be extreme.

Leadership isn't that easy. There is no one style that alone, will make a good leader. The good news is that you have shown the dedication and self-discipline to seek improvement. That has brought you here, to this compilation of different leadership styles provided by a cross section of current fire service leaders.

Your style will be yours, but it will impact the organization in ways you may not be able to imagine. Taking the time to study not only what has worked for others, but how that style was received by the people they work with, both subordinate and senior in standing.

Being a leader in your department or organization is not an easy task. It will take commitment and a true investment in not only your career, but that of others as well. Those in mid management or company officer level positions assume a responsibility of helping to prepare our future leaders. While recent budget crunches have limited the ability of many departments to invest in training and educating those who wish to advance, we must continue to groom them by showing them the way and how to navigate the leadership waters.

Never forget, people are watching, people are basing their actions on the message or image you present. We must always be at our best, and understand that what we support, or even ignore, will perpetuate into action by others.

Even after retirement, Battalion Chief Robert Avsec continues to be a swashbuckling change agent and share his experiences in leadership. In this e-book, he has reached out to other fire services leaders as well, and has provided a broad perception of leadership.

Together these examples of leadership styles or qualities will challenge the traditional norms, which in some cases, hold us back from improving not only our department, but the fire service as a whole. Even after 32-years in the fire service, I could find some fresh perspective in this e-book. Enjoy the read!

Bud Backer, Fire Chief

East Pierce Fire & Rescue, Bonney Lake, WA  
March 2017

# Preface

First of all, Thank You! I believe that your purchase of this book demonstrates: (1) you're a leader in your fire service organization (whether you have a rank or not); (2) you're a person looking to expand your body of knowledge; and (3) you care about your organization's ability to provide leadership and guidance to its people. The fire service needs people like you!

I'm a retired fire department battalion chief. I proudly served with the men and women of the Chesterfield County (Va.) Fire Department for 26-years. All told, I've spent 30+ years in the fire service and EMS.

During that wonderful "1st career", as I rose through the ranks of the department I had many opportunities for personal and professional growth and development. Those opportunities included:

- Serving as an Advanced Life Support Provider, which included a stint as a back-up flight paramedic on a medevac helicopter;
- Serving on our Hazardous Materials Response Team, during which I earned my Specialist Certification;
- Serving as the department's EMS Director while a Captain;
- Serving as Co-Manager of our county's Emergency Communications Center (9-1-1) while a Captain;
- Serving as the department's Chief of Training and Safety Division while a Battalion Chief;
- Serving as an Operations Division Battalion Commander during several rotations; and
- Serving as a member of the department's Strategic Planning Steering Committee.

Since my retirement in December 2007, I've worked in several other capacities: Operations Chief for a private-sector ambulance service; as a Staff Instructor/Course Developer at the Georgia Fire Academy; and as a management consultant for a private-sector company with management services contracts with the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. All of which allowed me to continue to "broaden my horizons."

Since 2012, I've been plying my trade in my "2nd career" as a freelance writer beginning with the creation of my professional blog, Talking "Shop" 4 Fire and EMS. A couple of years later, I was recruited by Mr. Rick Markley to write articles on a monthly basis for the on-line trade journal, FireRescue1.com.

This book that you've purchased is composed of selected posts from my blog. In addition to my own original content, I've included selections from several of my guest bloggers (Thank you!): Marlene Kostyrka; Susanna Schmitt-Williams, Gea Leigh Haff, and Denise Pouget.

Once again, thank you for your purchase. I hope that our words help you to gain a better appreciation for what is necessary to be an effective leader in the fire service.

Robert Avsec

Cross Lanes, WV  
February 2017

# What is a Fire Service Change Agent?

By: Marlene Kostyrka, Battalion Chief, City of Winston-Salem (NC) Fire Department

As I sat in a recent Executive Fire Officer class and discussed the [adaptive challenges](#) that the fire service is faced with, it occurred to me that we all desire positive change.

Change has to become part of our culture, whether that is in the training we are currently using for seasoned staff or with the new generation of firefighters that are coming on board. Part of that desired change is diversity, yet it is a challenge in many professions, including our own, so how do we accomplish it?

## Why is diversity such a struggle?

The retail world has figured out that they need many generations, genders and backgrounds of people representing their stores. The door greeter is usually someone who was working before cash registers were invented and the young high school grad is running the electronics department. Managers are usually the baby boomers who have great work ethics. How has the retail world figured this out, but so many have not?

## Why diversity matters

First, we must understand the value of having a diverse workforce that reflects the community we serve. Often a diverse workforce can connect and reach into communities far greater than one that is not. To do this though we have to increase our approach at all points.

The way we interact with young people and influence them about careers is important. The impression we leave and an ability to identify with them may provide a career aspiration they may not have otherwise had. The way we communicate in our advertising has to be accessible and identifiable.

Succession planning is also a must and that discussion should start in recruit school. Leaders must set examples and be willing to share knowledge. The fire service must do more to begin opening doors to all people.

## Starting with a mindset

As I was packing my car to leave the National Fire Academy, I was approached by a fellow student and he left me with a great message. He reminded that in order for me to be successful in my department I would need to allow every member in my department to be successful. I asked him how this would be possible and he said, "you are a change agent."

I challenge you to be a change agent for your department. Find out the strengths and weakness of your teammates, challenge them to be good at what they do, and place them in the spotlight. At the same time, hold them accountable, make them understand that diversity is good, get them to be part of the cultural shift, and give them hope that change is coming.

[See Related: Seven Roles of a Change Agent](#)

# What is a fire service change agent?

Our people are the key to the fire service's success and they hold the future in their hand. The fire service is an all-encompassing job; it is not just about fighting fire anymore. It is about solving the multiple problems our customers have. To do this we must be able to connect on multiple levels.

"Be the change you want to see in the world."— Mahatma Gandhi

Are you ready to be a change agent?



Marlene Kostyrka is a Battalion Chief with the City of Winston-Salem Fire Department, in North Carolina. She has fifteen years of experience in the fire service having served as a volunteer firefighter before moving to Winston-Salem where she started as a firefighter and progressed to engineer and then captain.

Chief Kostyrka currently serves in the position of administrative chief working as the department's Accreditation Manager. She holds many fire service certifications, has earned her Bachelor's Degree in Fire Science and a Master's Degree in Executive Fire Leadership and Disaster Preparedness. Chief Kostyrka is currently a student in the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy.

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# What Does a Future Fire Officer Look Like?

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

In the course of doing my background research for an upcoming article for Fire Chief Digital, I posed this question to several of my fire service colleagues who serve as chief officers in their organization:

What traits do you believe make a firefighter a good candidate to promote to Company Officer?

Two of those colleagues, Fire Chief Bud Backer and Division Chief Susan Tamme, provided some really good insights back to me via e-mail. I could only use a few of their comments in the finished article, but the rest were so good I just couldn't leave them on the "cutting room floor."



Fire Chief Bud Backer

Chief Backer is currently the fire chief for the East Pierce (WA) Fire & Rescue Department. He started his fire service career in 1985 as a volunteer firefighter/EMT with the Benton County Fire District 4 in West Richland, WA. He became a career firefighter with Duvall-King County Fire District 45 in 1988 where he rose to the rank of Deputy Chief in 1994, and later Fire Chief in 1998.

Here were Chief Backer's responses to the question:

- Customer service orientated. Promotes excellent customer care. Goes that extra step to take care of the customer's needs.
- Holistic thinking. Sees the big picture of what it takes to deliver service and operate the department. Understands that actions in the field by crews are directly tied to success at the ballot box on funding issues. Also, has an understanding that administrative positions are needed to provide the line firefighters with the tools that they need to deliver service.
- Shows care and concern for equipment and department property. Treats those items as they would if they were spending their own money on them.
- A good business sense that looks for efficiency, is understanding of budgetary limitations, and helps stretch those funds.
- People person and manager. Can this person set a strong example to others, (is he/she already doing so?) Understanding of human resource issues such as equal opportunity, business practices, and the ability to provide for employee needs.

# What Does a Future Fire Officer Look Like?

- Has the candidate been involved in any community outreach? Does the candidate understand that connecting with the community apart from just responding to incidents, is necessary to maintain the image of the department and continue to be considered a vital part of the community/city/district? Or has the candidate always just shown up and worked their shift? I'm not looking for someone just "punching a time card". How does this person give back to the community?
- Teamwork. And the team is larger than just their individual fire company.

All of that before we look at tactical and field expertise.



Division Chief Susan Tamme

Chief Susan Tamme is currently assigned as the Division Chief of Training for the Tampa Fire Rescue Department, the department where she began her fire service career in 1990. She is also an active member of [International Association of Women in Fire & Emergency Services](#), where she previously served as the Southeast Region Trustee. Chief Tamme currently serves as the Secretary of that organization's Executive Board.

Chief Tamme responded to my inquiry with these comments and insights:

- Initiative – the candidate's ability to anticipate or be aware of areas that could develop into problems in the future and then act to find solutions. For example, while on a medical call for a minor laceration they find an obese patient that could in the future be problematic in the event of a more serious health emergency. After returning to the station they will reach out to find assistance for the situation. This goes above and beyond the scope of the initial call and shows initiative.
- A Good Communicator. The ability to listen and understand/comprehend the messages that are given from above and communicate them downward. Conversely, this works in the other direction: the ability to listen to what their subordinates are saying both verbally and non-verbally and then communicate the right message.
- Sense of Ethics – Looking out for their co-workers in a right or wrong instance. I remember a firefighter who everyone said was so "awesome." He was stationed with a female coworker that was being targeted/hassled by another firefighter. The "awesome" firefighter never said anything or stood up to the harasser. Eventually the woman transferred out of that station. This is the type of sense of ethics [standing up for others] that I am referring to.

# What does a future fire officer look like?

- Respect of the Organization. You would think that this is a given because of organizational policies. The candidate should strive to ensure that even though the policies are sometimes cumbersome (e.g., seatbelt use, hair styles, and tattoos) they must be upheld. The best candidate would seek ways to work within the guidelines of the system to update or address items that may need clarification or updating.

Some pretty good characteristics to look for in your firefighters, no? What are your thoughts? What do you look for in your firefighters as potential candidates for promotion?



# 10 Lessons I Learned in My 1st Year as a Fire Chief

By: Chief Susanna Schmitt Williams, Fire Chief, Carrboro (NC) Fire-Rescue



Fire Chief Susanna  
Schmitt Williams

I just recently finished my first year as a Fire Chief with Carrboro Fire-Rescue in North Carolina. In this post, I'm sharing with you my top ten lessons learned that either I learned this past year or had been advice passed on to me by other fire chiefs that I found to be true.

## #10. Set the mutual expectations

So many times I feel not setting expectations results in fragmented efforts for an organization. Coming to Carrboro as the new fire chief, I did not know the prior work history of my people and they did not know mine. Day #1 at 0730 hours I met with our command staff—shift commanders and division chief—where I expressed my expectations of them as part of the command staff for the department. I also invited their expectations of me as their new chief.

However, that's only part of the expectations needed. Many new chiefs fail to understand the expectations of those they report to (city/town manager, county manager, mayor, fire board, etc.). Somewhere along the way in the course of my career, I remember a presenter stating that new executives typically fail because they didn't meet expectations of their supervisors, but rarely are those expectations explicitly stated.

I knew the expectations of a fire chief from my years in the fire service, but I had no clue about the specific expectations of my supervisor. So I asked, and I asked very early on. Within my first month with Carrboro, my Town Manager and I had a very frank discussion on what he expected out of the department and me. I also told him of my expectations of him as my supervisor so the department would be successful. With clear expectations all around, I was ready to embark on my career as a Fire Chief.

## #9. Set the bar high

I made it clear that I set the bar very high for myself and others around me. I had a brief moment where I thought of lowering the bar, but I quickly removed that thought from my mind. I kept the bar high and made my people "reach for it" and achieve it. Which meant that I then pushed it even higher! So my advice to chiefs is: Don't be afraid to continually raise the bar. You will be amazed at what can be achieved.

# 10 Lessons I Learned in my 1st Year as a Fire Chief

## #8. My voice matters

Here's an interesting thing I have noticed since becoming a Fire Chief. My voice matters. I have always been an outside the box thinker who loves to share ideas. Previously my ideas, suggestions, recommendations frequently went unnoticed. Ideas I have shared for years now suddenly held tremendous weight. Nothing has changed in my message, except for my rank.

## #7. My people had great ideas

We are so rank conscious in the fire service that I feel it holds us back. What I learned from my voice not being heard is to solicit feedback and ideas from personnel. They have great ideas. We are rocking and rolling moving forward at Carrboro Fire-Rescue and doing some great things in the community.

And guess what, they are **not** my ideas, not a single one. They came from our people, most of whom are not chief officers. My advice is don't discount the ideas your people bring forward just because of rank. Actively engage and seek input from **everyone**.

## #6. Relationships matter... alot

I inherited an organization where relationships were pretty bad all around; shift to shift, town department to town department, fire department to neighboring fire departments, fire department with community members. Morale was pretty low.

We have worked so hard over the last year to rebuild these relationships. It has been amazing to watch what were once strained relationships blossom into great working relationships. These positive relationships have had such a tremendous impact for the benefit of the community.

The hard work of rebuilding is completed and we now continue to nurture these relationships. Instead of negative feelings festering and causing "shift wars", shifts are having conversations about what went wrong and what can we do to fix it. And these conversations are happening without myself or our Deputy Chief having to step in.

## #5. Leadership matters

Be a leader not just a manager. Model the behavior you expect to see. Empower people to make decisions befitting their rank. When firefighters and officers are given the freedom to do this with the expectation that they make decisions supporting the mission, vision, and values of the department and the town an amazing thing happens, they do the right thing every time.

What is even more amazing is they coach and mentor those coming behind them to make decisions in the same way. Lead by modeling, coaching, and inspiring. Don't manage by policy, mandates, and the disciplinary process. Positive words take an organization so much further and effect much more change than negative words ever will.

# 10 Lessons I Learned in my 1st Year as a Fire Chief

## #4. Core values MUST match

Your personal core values must match the values of the community you serve. If they don't, there will be a disconnect making your job much harder. Carrboro is a wonderful community committed to social equality and is a place where everyone is welcome. Rainbow flags fly at our town hall in support of our LGBT community. We have a bee mural being painted on the side of our town's fire station to bring attention to the plight of the honey bee.

As you can imagine, there are some in the department who aren't as supportive of the town's values. If the Carrboro's values didn't match mine, I am sure I would not be modeling how to be supportive of the town's mission, vision, and values. Moreover, if my values did not match those of Carrboro, I am sure it would be a struggle being the fire chief in Carrboro.

My advice is, wherever you become fire chief you must support the municipality's values. When they match your personal values, it's a better relationship and so much easier to do the job you were hired to do.

## #3. My mental health matters

Being Fire Chief brings a stress level that I am not sure can even be described. It's a weight that can have a profound impact the decisions you make affect the citizens your serve and your people and their families.

As a fire chief, especially in smaller departments like Carrboro, you wear many hats adding to the stress level. It is vital that as a fire chief you protect your mental health. Have confidants that you can vent to (Gripes always go upward—*Saving Private Ryan*).

## #2. My health and physical fitness matter

How quickly the hours go by in a day with all there is to do. It is very easy for physical fitness or healthy eating choices to go by the wayside. If we as chiefs are not healthy, physically fit, and at the top of our mental game how can we make the best choices for the department. More importantly, how can we expect our people to make health and fitness a priority if we don't?

## And the #1 Lesson Learned...Family First

Put your family first. Family vacations must be a priority; and it must be family time where you are engaged with the family, not answering work emails and phone calls. Daily family time must be a priority (evenings and weekends). Do not put your loved ones on the back burner.

I made a promise to myself that barring any evening meetings I would be home for dinner with my sons by 6:00 p.m. at the latest. I put them on the bus each morning with a hug and a kiss. I tuck them in every night that I can.

# 10 Lessons Learned as a New Fire Chief in My 1st Year

Mom runs out on the occasions when the pager goes off, sometimes Mom has late evenings, and sometimes Mom has early mornings, BUT when I'm home, I'm Mom. I check the phone one last time before I retire for the night. Here's why: I know if it's bad, the shift commander or telecommunications will call. I don't need to check the phone 24/7.

I also urge those around me to put family first. If their cell phone buzzes while we are meeting, I encourage them to answer if it's family. When family emergencies arise, we send our folks home to deal with it; we find coverage for them.

When we make shift changes we talk with the people involved to see if there are any life events coming up that we need to be aware of. If so, we make sure that they will have their time off request approved before they move to their new assignment. If need be the department pays OT to cover if this puts us below minimum staffing. We let staff take trucks to their kids games in district. Family first – we live it and as leaders we model it.

I hope those of you who have recently been appointed to Fire Chief, or if you are considering becoming a Fire Chief, have found these two blogs useful. Keep the conversation going and let me know your similarities to my list and other lessons learned you may have.

In spite of the added stress and responsibility this is still the best d\*\*n job in the world!

## About the Author

Susanna Schmitt Williams is the Fire Chief for the Carrboro Fire-Rescue Department in Carrboro, North Carolina. She has 17 years of experience in the fire service having served as Firefighter, Master Firefighter, Driver Operator/Firefighter, Administrative Captain, Volunteer Program Coordinator, and Division Chief. Chief Williams holds many fire service certifications, has earned two Bachelor degrees and a Master's Degree in Public Administration (concentration in Fire Service Administration). She is currently enrolled in the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy and is working on her CTO credentialing.

# Leadership is About Making Sure of the Small Things

By: Battalion Chief Marlene Kostyrka, Winston-Salem Fire Department

I recently watched a video of Navy Admiral William McRaven speaking to a college graduating class. In his speech he spoke about becoming a Navy Seal and the importance of making his bed. He goes on to explain that this is a “simple, mundane task” for the individual he was training to be a warfighter.

Making your bed every day will give you a sense of accomplishment,” said Admiral McRaven. “Completing the simplest tasks in life matters and if you can’t do the little things right, you will never do the big things right.

When I finished watching this video it was quickly apparent to me that this holds true in the fire service as well. We show up at the station each shift eagerly awaiting the first call of the day. While we wait, we check the truck, make sure all the equipment is there and that everything is in working condition. It may get washed and fuel, it may not.

Others grab the broom, sweep the floors of the station, or clean the bathrooms. Many officers feel they have done their time of cleaning and go to the office to start their day of dreaded paperwork. All important tasks, but simple in nature.

## Not all things are simple

Then the alarm goes off and the heart rate goes up. It’s a medical call at the same nursing care facility you have gone to a dozen times this week. You slowly make your way to the truck and realize you are going to the same elderly lady in room 620, who is one of the “meanest” old ladies there is.

Upon arriving at the door, you realize this time it is different. The “mean” old lady isn’t so mean today. In fact, she isn’t even conscious.

Now you start to panic. Is the oxygen tank full? Did I replace the King Airway the last crew used? Are the batteries in the AED charged? Your mental checklist goes on and on.

## Little things mean a lot

It is the little things that matter. Everyone remembers the big fire they had with multiple saves. The vehicle accident which required three people to be cut out of the car. But what about the routine patient who just wants company?

Or the speech you have to give the children at the local school? What about the child riding in the car next to your fire truck (the one that hasn’t been washed in days) who wants to be a firefighter? What about the family of this little old lady—the one you have been called to so many times and who’s always met you and your crew with sarcasm? Were you ready to engage them in a positive way? Did you pay attention to the details?

# Leadership is About Making Sure of the Small Things

Because they're watching you



As leaders in the fire service, it is your responsibility to "make the bed" every day. You must show up and work harder, with shoes shined, uniform pressed, ready to accomplish the everyday routine tasks. Ready to teach the younger generation that the smallest details matter.

As their leader, you must know the little things better, you must follow the policies and procedures regardless of whether others do not. You must know the most minuscule details of this ever changing job.

It is your responsibility to teach respect, pride, accountability, teamwork, and ownership. You have to encourage and motivate your team to be decision makers by paying attention to the simplest details. As the leader, it is your obligation to pay attention to the little things and hold your crew accountable for their actions. They will never accomplish the big tasks if they have not completed the little things.

Your team "inspects" you every day. If you take one short cut, forget for one moment about the little things, or ignore one failure, the team is not complete. You and they are unprepared and will not hold together when the going gets tough. Just like your bed did not stay together when you forgot to tuck one sheet corner correctly.

Pay attention to the little details and "make your bed correctly" every day. Learn what works to keep it together and work hard to teach others the same principle. Because at the end of the day, it is your bed to lay in.

**Will your "bed" stay together or will it fall apart?**

Marlene Kostyrka is a Captain in the Winston-Salem Fire Department, in North Carolina. She has fifteen years of experience in the fire service having served as a volunteer firefighter before moving to Winston-Salem where she started as a firefighter and progressed to engineer and then captain.

## About the Author

Battalion Chief Kostyrka currently serves in the position of administrative captain working also as the department's Accreditation Manager. She holds many fire service certifications, has earned her Bachelor's Degree in Fire Science and a Master's Degree in Executive Fire Leadership and Disaster Preparedness. Chief Kostyrka is currently a student in the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy.

# Homegrown Fire and EMS Leadership

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

In 2001 I wrote on the following topic for my fourth and final Applied Research Project (ARP) , [Succession Planning in Chesterfield Fire and Emergency Medical Services](#), to complete my graduation requirements for the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP). The following is an excerpt from the ARP's Abstract:

Chesterfield Fire and Emergency Medical Services, located in Chesterfield County, Virginia, faces a tremendous challenge to its ability to provide competent leadership for the organization. Over the next five to seven years the department can expect to lose approximately ninety career members to length-of-service retirements, the first large scale turnover for an organization that has only had a few such retirements to date. Many of these retirees will be officers throughout the ranks, many who have been with the department since its formative years. In addition, the department has five additional fire stations that are to be built over that same period bringing ninety new employees into the organization.

CFEMS made history this past Friday in recognizing the promotion of the largest number of officers at one time in its history: 13 lieutenants, 10 captains, 3 battalion chiefs, and 1 assistant chief. Within that group, the department promoted its first woman to the rank of battalion chief, Joy Wallace.

[See Related: Put the "Lead" Back into Leadership](#)

By most measures, CFEMS is a relatively "young" department having hired its first career Fire Marshal, Robert L. Eanes, in 1967 to develop the county's fire codes. Eanes would later become the department's first career Fire Chief, in 1968 to lead the county's separate and autonomous volunteer fire departments of the time. The first group of twelve career firefighters were hired in October of 1969.

Chief Eanes laid the foundation for the department's "homegrown" leadership when he assembled a group of fire officers from across the ranks of the department in 1985 to begin developing an Officer Development Program (ODP). The ODP—whose target audience was firefighter who aspired to promotion to the rank of Company Officer and incumbent Company Officers—was launched only a few short years later and would continue to be nurtured through the leadership of Eanes' successors as Fire Chief. [See Related: What the Executive Fire Officer Program meant to me and my department](#)

(In CFEMS, the basic company officer is a lieutenant; a captain can be a company officer—along with having management responsibilities for their fire station—or fill a staff officer role).

Those successors, Wesley Dolezal, Steve Elswick, Paul Mauger, and the incumbent Fire Chief, Ed Senter have continued to grow the original ODP and its successors:

# Homegrown Fire and EMS Leadership

- ODP I for the original target audience;
- ODP II for lieutenants seeking to become captains; and
- Applied Leadership for Company Officers, an eight-week program that meets once a week to prepare those firefighters on the current Lieutenant's Promotion Eligibility List with practical information and skills training to prepare them for the "huge" step from firefighter to first-line supervisor.

In addition to the formal ODP programs that were developed, there's also a "shadow" officer development program: the CFEMS ALS Training Program and ALS Continuing Education Program. I remember, as a staff officer, "running some numbers" one time for Chief Mauger and at that time something like 90% of the incumbent lieutenants and captains possessed ALS certification.

I attributed that high number—and it may have been greater than 90%—to the impact that gaining one's ALS certification requires one to develop: (1) critical thinking skills; (2) the ability to prioritize and handle multiple problems; and (3) manage people and resources to accomplish a task. And aren't those the same attributes of a good officer?

Many people contributed to these outstanding programs and proof is in who's coming out of the "pipeline" to lead, guide and direct the good men and women of CFEMS at all levels. So once again, congratulations to everyone, past and present", who's keeping the **leadership of CFEMS "homegrown"!**



# Rank Privilege in the Fire Service

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

Rank privilege has no place in a fire department when it comes to inappropriate behavior. The other day, my LinkedIn colleague, Nancy Perry, shared a very disturbing news report about three high-ranking chief officers, including the fire chief, who'd been disciplined for posting lewd photos of themselves on social media while they were attending this year's FDIC in Indianapolis.

A "good" example of the continued existence of rank privilege in the fire service. Pretty sure that if this had been a couple of firefighters or junior officers on their first out-of-town conference they would have been fired in a "New York Minute." And probably without due process.

With increasing rank must come greater consequences for inappropriate behavior (The higher the climb, the farther the fall). This is not likely the first time these three high ranking officers had been to an out-of-town conference. It's also not likely that this is the first time that they've engaged in such unprofessional behavior (While in uniform, no less) while out-of-town on fire department business (And on the taxpayers' "dime").

I also fault the local government leadership for basically administering a "slap on the wrist" to these chief officers, each of who was suspended from duty and received a letter of written reprimand. Can that leadership honestly expect that these fire officers will ever again be worthy of the respect of their subordinate officers and firefighters?

Self discipline is the ability to make yourself do what you should do when you should do it, whether you feel like it or not.—Peter Drucker

How will those officers will be able to enact disciplinary measures, including the termination of employment if necessary, for junior members of the organization? How will they do that without the inevitable "backlash"—and possible litigation—from the aggrieved member, "Why didn't the Chief get fired for what he did?"

Self discipline is essential to leadership, you can't pretend to be a leader, if you don't have some discipline in your life. After all, you are a model for others, and people looks for discipline in the core foundation of their leaders.—Peter Drucker

Those local governmental leaders should have sent a "loud and clear" message to not just the members of the fire department, but all of its governmental employees by terminating the employment of the three officers who failed at having the self-discipline required of a leader.

Harsh you say? Not in my opinion (And we all know what people say about opinions). As leaders of any fire service organization, one of the struggles that we have is maintaining discipline and good order within the ranks.

# Rank Privilege in the Fire Service

One of the more common “bitches” that I’ve heard often from firefighters—while on the job or teaching at various venues across the USA, including the National Fire Academy—is that “the rules don’t apply to everyone.” Their perception (Or in too many cases, like this one for instance, the reality) is that “rank has its privileges.”

And we wonder why too many fire departments still have a culture of “boys will be boys”?

# Moral Courage

By: Gea Leigh Haff, Firefighter/Paramedic/Rescue Diver

The fire service abounds in physical courage. Firefighters will walk into burning buildings, dive into frigid waters, and enter crack houses in the dead of night. Courage is a given. The physical kind, that is. We don't even think about it much; it's such a day to day part of our job. Toxic spills? No problem. Massive fuel tanks about to blow? Check. Active shooters? Give us some body armor and we'll go in. TRT will rappel into almost any space, no matter how deep or tight. Tailboards will climb aboard a roof with fire raging beneath them. Drivers will maneuver trucks through snow storms in the dead of night over ice slicked roads.

It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare.--Mark Twain

But moral courage is different. Instead of respect, it often brings isolation, which is why it's so hard. Moral courage is doing what you believe is right even at the risk of inconvenience, ridicule, punishment, loss of job, security, social status or exile from one's community or country.

It means going against your peers which can be a very painful and even dangerous thing to do. Whistleblowers exhibit moral courage but they're often seen as traitors by their co-workers at the time. On the opposite extreme, the Spartans preferred death to exile. For them to be perceived as dishonorable and removed from their society was a fate worse than a sword through the heart.

Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change a world which yields most painfully to change.--Robert Kennedy

Humans are pack animals. Whether we're survivors of a zombie apocalypse or a Neanderthal in the ice age, we form groups to survive. Even in the modern world we rely on other humans for food, medicine, clothes, roads, love, etc. We are more vulnerable alone, and as firefighters we depend on each other with our lives in a literal way.

But, sometimes there's something about putting on a uniform that can intensify the pack mentality. Yes, it increases a sense of belonging, brotherhood, pride. This is its light side. But the dark side can be group think, reflex steeped in unquestioned tradition, and a contagion of energy, attitudes and beliefs that aren't always helpful to our jobs or our souls.

Firefighters, police officers, and soldiers abound in physical courage. But what if something unethical is occurring or a mistake is being made and no one is saying *anything*? It could be as simple as downplaying a call because your crew assumes it's b.s. (easy to do in this day and age when we're drowning in it), or watching silently as the station bully tears into a new firefighter, chipping away at her confidence right before your eyes.

# Moral Courage

Or perhaps it's leading your crew inside a raging warehouse because command gave the order, even though your gut is telling you it's a bad idea. Maybe you're a brand new officer. Maybe you're a rookie. Maybe you just don't want to look weak. And so we participate against our own instinct.

In *The Things They Carried*, Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien writes, "I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to." It was a war he didn't want to fight, but more inconceivable was being branded as a coward and deserter by his family and small town.

And yet, when Muhammad Ali refused the Vietnam draft, he was stripped of his world heavyweight title and sentenced to five years in jail, and he still didn't relent, saying, "'I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong.'" Then we have Karl Marlantes, (one of my favorite writers) who left a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford to volunteer for active duty in the U.S. Marine Corps and lead troops into intense combat. He recognized the Vietnam War's complexity, but he chose to fight anyway.

Who is braver? Tim O'Brien, the white privileged college boy unsure of his manhood, or Muhammad Ali, certain of his, but unwilling to kill people he had no problem with? Or is it Marlantes, who chose to serve his country despite the war's moral ambiguity? I can't say. It's up to each man to answer that question for himself. Only they can know, in those quiet moments, if they listened to themselves and honored their own sense of morality and justice.

These are dramatic examples. Usually, the challenge of moral courage presents itself to us in smaller ways, and yet our choices may be no less powerful or far reaching. Our lives are an accumulation of small choices we make every day.

He who does not punish evil commands it to be done.—Leonardo da Vinci

There are many kinds of courage: some quiet and some loud, some invisible and others clearly heroic. Some choices are simple. Do we support genocide? Slavery? Child pornography? But others are tricky. There isn't always a universal answer. Ultimately, only our own hearts can answer this question. We must decide for ourselves what is just. We mustn't let others decide for us and go with the flow simply because it's easier and more popular to do so.

This is the price of freedom. The Existentialists claim that *we are condemned to choose*. There is no supreme government or religious authority to decide everything for us. It's a huge responsibility. For some it's a burden they don't want. It means listening to ourselves and honoring the voice within. Sometimes it means going rogue and breaking with the pack. It can be dangerous. Fortunately we live in the land of the brave and a country that values freedom of thought. Let's keep it that way.

# Moral Courage

This post originally appeared on Gea Leigh Haff's blog, [Triple F](#), and is reused in its entirety with the author's permission.

## About the Author



Gea Leigh Haff is a firefighter/paramedic/rescue diver with “one of the greatest fire departments in the world (Miami Dade Fire Rescue!)”. She is also a passionate lover of everything literary. She is currently writing a novel, **Warm Blood**, which she hopes to finish before the decade is up! – See more at: <http://www.gealeighhaff.com/#sthash.FrhWvmoS.dpuf>

# The Dawning of the Age of Enlightenment for the Fire Service

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

First a quick review of western European history. What was the Age of Enlightenment?

The 18th Century proudly referred to itself as the “Age of Enlightenment” and rightfully so, for Europe had dwelled in the dim glow of the Middle Ages when suddenly the lights began to come on in men’s minds and humankind moved forward (Lewis, H. The European Dream of Progress and Enlightenment. 1992)

Digging into the details of that statement, Enlightenment was a wide-ranging intellectual movement of scientists, philosophers, artists, mathematicians, theologians and other “heavy duty” thinkers who sought to better understand the natural world and humankind’s place in it solely on the basis of reason and without turning to religious belief. The movement claimed the allegiance of a majority of thinkers during the 17th and 18th centuries, a period that Thomas Paine called the **Age of Reason**. At its heart it became a conflict between religion and the inquiring minds that wanted to know and understand through reason based on evidence and proof.

The fire service is, in my opinion, entering into a similar Age of Enlightenment as long-held truths, strategies and tactics are falling by reason based on proof and evidence. The technology available today to fire behavior researchers like those at NIST and UL gives them an unprecedented ability to measure all aspects of a fire’s behavior including temperature at various levels in a space, air flows within a space, infra-red imaging within a space, and video recording and editing capabilities that “brings all the data together”. Fire based research has given us empirical evidence that proves:

- The long-accepted—and taught—concept that fire streams “push” fire is a myth; proper application of a fire stream in the ceiling area above the fire from the exterior of the structure quickly reduces heat, prevents the ignition of unburned hydrocarbons, and reduces interior room temperatures
- The fuel loads in residential structures have changed. Today’s homes are constructed and furnished with synthetic materials—materials that burn faster, deplete the available oxygen in a space more quickly, and generate more unburned hydrocarbons;
- The way that homes are constructed and the materials used in that construction have changed. The engineered lumber and light-weight building construction techniques, e.g., wood trusses, used in today’s construction do not maintain their structural integrity when exposed to fire like the “old” dimensional lumber used prior to the 1970’s.
- The structural fires that we encounter today—that occur in more tightly closed spaces and involve synthetic fuels—are most likely in a ventilation-limited state rather than a fuel-limited state when we arrive.
- Ventilation does not have a cooling effect on a ventilation-limited fire, but instead can greatly enhance the fire by providing a flow path that brings oxygen to the fire.

# The Dawning of the Age of Enlightenment for the Fire Service

- Exterior fire attack is not strictly a defensive tactic, especially when properly applied to cool the hostile atmosphere and improve the interior conditions for civilians and firefighters.
- Exterior fire attack will not harm victims; cooling the superheated gaseous hydrocarbons in the ceiling area near the fire dramatically reduces interior room temperatures from the floor to the ceiling and improves victim viability.
- The best tactic for combating basement fires is not using a top-down approach; if the flow path is not properly controlled, e.g., a door or window in the basement is opened, the interior basement stairs become the primary flow path and personnel in that flow path will be subjected to intense heat, smoke and fire gases.
- Venting the structure, entering and searching (VES) before suppressing the fire is not the best way to aid entrapped victims and improve their survivability; a more effective tactical approach should be IVES (Isolate the fire, ventilate so as to control the flow path, enter, and search).

Why do I characterize our current day as the **Age of Enlightenment** for the fire service? Because after decades of firefighting strategy and tactics that are based upon the **"I think, feel or believe"** method of decision-making we've entered into an era where **technologies and applied research** are yielding the information we need to truly move toward becoming a data driven decision-making profession.

For those of us with Advance Life Support medical training and certifications, we observed this change happen in earnest in EMS beginning around the turn of the century (the most recent one!). EMS agencies, hospitals, allied health organizations and federal agencies started evaluating the effectiveness of long-accepted pre-hospital treatments, e.g., IV therapy for trauma patients, administration of sodium bicarbonate during cardiac arrest resuscitation efforts, etc. With that examination, many long held "truths" about patient care and outcomes have become obsolete and discontinued.

As we continue to move into our Age of Enlightenment, we are seeing the same manner of conflict between "religion"

(That's the way we've always done it!) and the inquiring minds that want to know and understand through reason based on evidence and proof (Look at what the NIST and UL videos are showing about "hitting it hard from the yard!").

So which "camp" are you in?

# Looking Back on Leadership Beliefs

By: Denise Pouget, CFO, NREMT-P

Now that I'm a grandmother looking back on my fire service career, I feel as if I have something to share that I believe will help other public safety leaders to never lose faith in people and their organization. This is the best job in the world and my enthusiasm 36 years later is stronger than ever! I'm going to speak from the heart because I've always been a compassionate person who loves people.

I chose public safety as my career in 1979 at the age of 16. I volunteered in the fire service for two years and was first hired in 1981. I always believed that if I lived my life paying it forward, I would be fulfilled because people are worth it. To know that you have made a difference in the lives of others makes the purpose for you being here real. To serve others is a privilege, not a right.

## 5 Things I Believe

**I believe that we are all equals as people, we simply occupy different roles.** I never had respect for those that acted as if their position entitled them to behave badly. Moving up in an organization or occupying any leadership role does not entitle you to anything. You're still the same person you always were. Now you have the privilege of leading. Don't abuse it! You should have a vision not a personal agenda.

**I believe that information is knowledge and not necessarily power.** As a leader I believe in making decisions in a group rather than in a vacuum. Use your senses! Be aware of your environment and guide your meetings carefully and professionally.

Generally people will come through contributing brilliant ideas taking the organization to a state of maximum effectiveness and efficiency. A defensive posture can lead to a closed mind. Your strength is in the numbers! Share and listen! Public safety leaders should be good partners within their organization, community, government and their region. Operating in a vacuum is dangerous and you will truly never see your organization reach its full potential. Remember, information is knowledge!

**I believe a strong leader recognizes talent and sees what is possible in their direct reports.** The objective should be to fully develop their potential as to allow the organization to thrive! People want to enjoy their work and feel as if they are contributing. Positive begets positive. Providing an environment where people can grow, learn and contribute will most certainly move any organization forward. You can't achieve excellence alone!

**I believe that leadership is about doing the right thing even if you are not making the most popular decision when doing so.** When you make a decision that is based on the greater good of the service, you can never go wrong. However, I would strongly recommend researching an organizations history, culture and political influence before I applied for any Fire Chief or Director position. If you would have to make sacrifices that don't fit your leadership style, then I would strongly suggest that you steer clear of that organization. I'm not suggesting that any public safety organization intends to "do bad things". Many roads can lead to your destination.



# Looking Back on Leadership Beliefs

The question is, are you willing to take on the risk and liability of that organization? What is the organizational culture and does it fit your leadership style? The International Association of Fire Chiefs has identified five wicked problems that plague today's fire service.

- Data;
- Cost-efficiency;
- Staffing;
- Culture; and
- Political Acumen.

All of these problems intersect on some level in an organization. My experience is that it is extremely important that you understand every facet of an organization that you're interested in and how they have dealt with these "wicked" problems. If you can see yourself in that organization as a leader whose beliefs and morals fit that organization's culture, then most likely you will be successful in that leadership role.

**You may be a person that believes hard work and dedication can "move mountains."** I used to believe that too. The truth is it takes honesty, dedication, hard work and political acumen. And in the end....you may still not fit in that organization. If you are thinking about a leadership role in the Fire Service, you need to be honest about what kind of life you want.

You have to be ready for anything all of the time. You're never out of the spot light and you must accept responsibility for everything that goes wrong. Everything that goes right is because of the people that chose to follow you. In addition, your career maybe short lived and you can lose it all in one day (see the five wicked problems of the Fire Service).

Is it worth it to take the risk of occupying a leadership role within the Fire Service? Absolutely! It is an honor and a privilege to lead. You simply need to prepare yourself and understand what that means. Do the research and become an informed leader. In the end it boils down to performance and making a difference in people's lives.

## About the Author

Chief Pouget currently serves as the Director of Emergency Services for Jefferson County, West Virginia. Previously she's been: the Fire/Rescue Chief for Frederick County Maryland Fire/ Rescue Chief; Assistant Fire/Rescue Chief in Alexandria; and the Fire/Rescue Assistant Chief in charge of Safety in Montgomery County Maryland (From which she retired in July of 2008). Chief Pouget entered the Montgomery County Maryland Fire and Rescue Service as a volunteer in 1979 and later began her service as a career firefighter with that organization in September 1981.

Chief Pouget earned her Master's Degree in Emergency Disaster Management from American Public University. She also holds a Bachelor's Degree in Fire Science from APU as well. Chief Pouget proudly continues to maintain her certification as a Nationally Registered Paramedic.

# Making Firefighter Safety Job #1

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

Reducing firefighter deaths and injuries is, or should be, a top priority for all fire departments in the USA in 2014. The [16 Lifesafety Initiatives](#) from [Everyone Goes Home](#) provide the framework for a department to develop strategies for making the job of a firefighter safer, more effective, and more efficient. The [white paper for Initiative #1—Cultural Change](#) begins by stating:

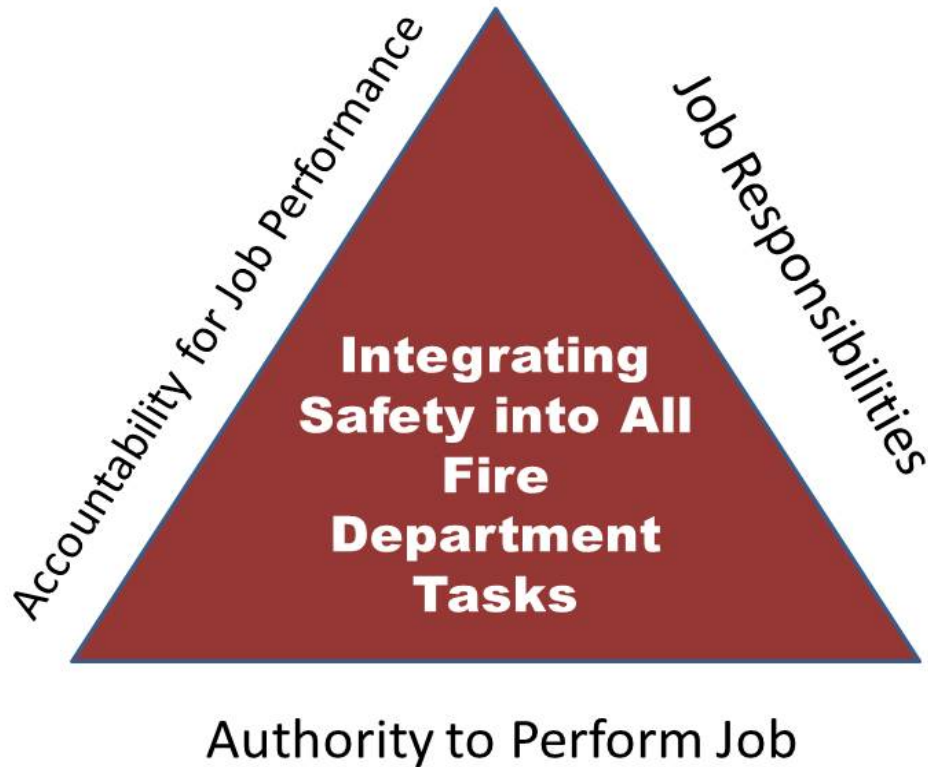
Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety; incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability and personal responsibility.

The [white paper for Initiative #5—Training and Certification](#) begins with the following statement:

Develop and implement national standards for training, qualifications, and certification (including regular recertification) that are equally applicable to all firefighters based on the duties they are expected to perform.

Both documents provide a wealth of information for a department to develop strategies and implementation objectives to improve firefighter safety. In the following diagram and discussion, we'll take a look at a "quick action guide" that a department's leadership may find useful in communicating those strategies and objectives with its people.

# Making Firefighter Safety Job #1



## Job Responsibilities

Every job in a department should have a [detailed job description](#) of the tasks that a person will be expected to carry out when in that position. The job description should include sections for:

- Essential job functions;
- Required knowledge, skills, and abilities;
- Minimum qualifications; and
- Essential physical capabilities.

[See Related: Firefighter Job Description—Chandler, AZ](#)

## Authority to Do the Job

# Making Firefighter Safety Job #1

Think of this as the “licensure” aspect. In the Job Responsibilities, a department outlines what a job entails, e.g., what a firefighter is expected to do. It is then up to the department to outline the required training and certification that the department will provide, or the individual must obtain, in order to become qualified to fill the position. For example, a department requires that a person complete a training program that complies with NFPA 1001: *Standard for Fire Fighter Professional Qualifications* to fill the position of firefighter.

Completing certification training, however, should only be the first step in a person filling a job position. The second phase should be demonstrating competency for the acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities within the framework of the department’s Standard Operating Guidelines. Many departments already have a form of this competency evaluation, e.g., an evaluation for a firefighter to move from probationary status to full-member status.

Departmental leaders for organization that provide EMS are very familiar with this concept of licensure. After a member successfully completes their basic EMT or Paramedic training they typically cannot actively provide patient care in the field until they’ve been granted the authority to do so by the organization’s Operational Medical Director (OMD).

Now some OMDs are more engaged in this process than others for sure. Many simply “rubber-stamp” the “newly minted” BLS (Basic Life Support) or ALS (Advanced Life Support) provider and “away they go” to provide patient care under the OMD’s medical license. In the department that I served for 26 years, Chesterfield County (VA) Fire and EMS, it was a much different story for new ALS providers.

When a firefighter had successfully completed their paramedic training and received proof of certification they would be assigned to an experienced ALS provider who served as their Preceptor. The new ALS provider, i.e., the Preceptee, was expected to ride as the third person on one of the department’s 24-hour ambulances—with their Preceptor as part of the crew as well—for ten 24-hour tours. The new ALS provider would provide all patient care and complete the required patient care documentation; after each call, or before the end of the tour, the Preceptor was responsible for reviewing the care provided and the documentation and give feedback for reinforcement or improvement to their Preceptee.

The Preceptee would ride with their Primary Preceptor for at least the first two tours and the last two tours. In between, they would be assigned to ride with other Preceptors to gain a variety of experiences and perspectives from those other Preceptors. Following the completion of their ten tours, the Preceptee’s “package” of completed runs sheets and Preceptor evaluations would go to the OMD for their “blessing” of the new ALS provider.

(For those personnel hired who prior ALS certification and experience, there was an expedited process that called for only five 24-hour tours of duty with a Preceptor).

A “licensure” process should be a part of every position in the organization from a probationary member to the head of the organization.

# Making Firefighter Safety Job #1

## Accountability for Job Performance

In other professions that require licensure, e.g., doctors, nurses, hair stylists, etc., failure to adhere to job performance standards can result in sanctions that can ultimately lead to revocation of a license. When an individual is “licensed” by the organization to perform a job, e.g., serve as the company officer of an engine company, they should be informed and educated as to the potential consequences for failure to fulfill the performance requirements of the job.

For example, one of a company officer’s job responsibilities is to manage the initial response to a structure fire. If that fire company responds to a structure fire and the officer fails to conduct a size-up of the incident according to the department’s SOG, there must be a progressive course of discipline that helps the officer to understand:

1. How their actions were non-compliant with the SOG;
2. How their actions should be modified in the future so that they are compliant with the SOG; and
3. What future sanctions are possible for future non-compliance with the SOG.

(My usage of the word “discipline” in this discussion is based on this definition from *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* on-line: a rule or system of rules governing conduct or activity).

The organization’s system of discipline should show a range of sanctions that escalate with continued non-acceptable job performance. The range of possible sanctions should include the revocation of an individual’s “license” to perform a job, i.e., reduction in rank from company officer to that of firefighter.

Think of it this way. How safe would our highways and roads be if there were no sanctions on drivers who did not operate their motor vehicles according to the applicable laws? Every person who obtains a driver’s license knows—or should know!—how many driving infraction points (sanctions) will result in the suspension or revocation of their license to operate a motor vehicle.