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Book Review: "Burning for Success"

I recently had opportunity to read *Burning for Success: How Volunteer Fire Departments Motivate Teams, Coach Leaders And Deliver Killer Customer Service Without Spending A Dime*. Being both a fire and leadership junkie, I was excited to find a book that fed both habits. In *Burning for Success*, authors Scott Harkins and Dr. Frank McCluskey explore how volunteer fire departments create effective teams, leaders, and organizations from an unpaid workforce. The authors' intent is to transfer lessons learned in the fire department environment to businesses and other organizations.

Harkins and McCluskey present what is essentially a wide-ranging collection of business leadership best practices; using volunteer fire departments, and their fire department in particular, as examples. Following acknowledgements and two preliminary chapters, the authors present their main points in twenty-one very brief chapters. Each chapter is self-contained, addressing an issue that all organizations encounter, and the authors intend that the chapters may be read in any order. The book concludes with some final thoughts from the authors, centering on the concepts of passion and commitment for the organization's vision and a sense of urgency at work.

As the nucleus of this book, the authors' assert, with conviction, that for centuries the volunteer fire service has motivated teams, developed leaders, and managed quality "without spending a dime." Harkins and McCluskey draw from their own extensive experience; not only in the volunteer fire service, but also their practice in business and academia. Their assertions seem well informed and experienced, and their conclusions flow reasonably from the presented material.

There is much positive about *Burning for Success*, resulting from its unique perspective and approach. First, the authors write in a clear, simple and easy to read style that keeps the reader engaged and enables the reader to understand their argument and the implications of their ideas. The book is organized into very brief chapters, none exceeding seven pages, a device that enhances the book's readability.

Each chapter begins and ends with a brief exercise, comprised of a series of questions. The authors intend for the opening exercise in each chapter to challenge readers to test their organization against key concepts presented in the chapter. They intend each closing exercise, through a similar set of questions, to help readers reinforce and apply a key leadership concept.



The key strength of the book lies in its focus on the perspective that; if volunteer fire departments can insure excellence without the ability to pay, hire and fire, give raises, or take away pay; then businesses should be able to ensure such excellence as well. The book's other strength lies in its concentration on several key leadership concepts. The authors center on the value of learning organizations and a lessons learned approach; clarity of purpose and vision; and the importance of training, teaching, mentoring and developing people to organizational success. Finally, the book benefits from the authors' emphasis on the link between an organization's training strategy and both its mission and its vision; pointing out that the modern pace of change has implications to vision; demands nimble organizations and "self-organizing systems."

Despite its many attributes, *Burning for Success*, authors Harkins and McCluskey decrease the effectiveness of their book with mistakes both large and small. First, the authors present such an idealized view of volunteer fire departments that one must wonder whether the authors thought that no other volunteer firefighter might pick up their book. For example, in the book's eighth chapter, the authors flatly state, "Volunteer fire departments are able to attract and retain committed employees." While volunteer fire departments do, in fact attract incredibly dedicated people, those close to the fire service know that volunteer recruitment and retention represents one of the greatest challenges facing the modern fire service, and one that has grown to crisis proportions.

As already mentioned, each chapter begins and ends with a brief exercise, each comprised of a set of questions. Unfortunately, too often the authors fail to provide a firm tie-in between the opening exercise and the text that follows, and occasionally propose end-of-chapter questions without clear motivation or purpose. The authors also sacrifice clarity for cleverness with chapter titles like "Attack the Fire Without Hesitation!" and "Somebody has to Grab the Hoseline!" Harkins and McCluskey also overwork their volunteer fire department analogy to the detriment of their book. For example, the authors repeatedly make the point that the actions and decisions of fire department leaders can mean the lives of the department's members. While true, a single mention of this operational reality, perhaps in one of the first two preliminary chapters would have sufficed. Finally, while Harkins and McCluskey do an excellent job of advocating for a mission-focused and visionary approach to leadership, they seem to reverse the conventional understanding of mission and vision.



Harkins and McCluskey promise to uncover the ten secrets of how, for two hundred years, the volunteer fire service has motivated teams, developed leaders, and managed quality all without spending a dime; and intend to enable readers to apply these principles to their business. Despite the book's flaws, the authors succeed at providing their readers with a unique perspective on leadership and an interesting example. Consequently, the book would benefit anyone working in fire and interested in leadership, particularly those who enjoy learning from a simply written, practical, unique, and somewhat unconventional model.

The authors make convincing arguments that business leaders can benefit from lessons about customer service and leadership learned within volunteer fire departments. Considering that perspective, and the practical and direct treatment it receives from the authors, *Burning for Success* provides a moderately interesting read for those who wish to understand the importance of customer service, organizational vision, decision-making, empowerment, teamwork, goals, commitment and teamwork and their implications for organizational leadership.

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