



---

This is an expanded version of a column first appearing as “Thoughts on Leadership” in the May/June 2006 issue of *Wildfire* magazine, the official publication of the International Association of Wildland Fire, published by Primedia Business Magazines and Media.

## ***The Difference Between Leadership and Management***

---

I recently heard someone express the view that “Line Officers need to learn more about leadership, things like budgeting.” News flash, budgeting is not a function of leadership. Neither is planning, organizing, staffing, controlling, or problem solving. These are functions of management. One can certainly understand why we might confuse leadership and management, until the 1980s, even the experts largely regarded good management and leadership as the same thing, and some even regarded leadership as simply a sub-set of management. However, our understanding of both disciplines improved, and in the 1980s, these views began to change. Today, experts in both fields generally agree that leadership and management differ from one another substantially, and that they are most definitely, not the same thing.

One of my favorite authorities on the subject is John Kotter, a professor at the Harvard Business School. In his book *A Force for Change*, Kotter separates the functions of leadership and management simply and well. Kotter describes the purpose of leadership as movement and useful change; and the role of management to provide stability, consistency, order and efficiency. Generally speaking, good managers produce orderly, predictable results, keep things on schedule and within budget, and make things work efficiently. Clearly, organizations want good management. On the other hand, good leaders produce important, positive change by providing vision, aligning people's efforts with the organization's direction, and keeping people focused on the mission and vision by motivating and inspiring them. Like good management, organizations require good leadership to succeed.

So, while both leadership and management are essential to the function and effectiveness of organizations, they are not the same thing. In fact, leadership and management are distinct and separate processes, serving different purposes. One, management, provides the organization with predictability, consistency and stability. The other, leadership, positions people and organizations for change.

As important to organizational effectiveness as leadership and management both are, we do not want to confuse the two. By doing so, we fall into the trap of equating leadership, a process of influence, with people holding a formal position. Sadly, we all know that the people in positions of authority, those assigned to manage their organizations, may not actually exercise effective leadership.



Fire agencies need both competent managers and effective leaders. We must also remember that management and leadership represent different roles within an organization, but not different classes of people. In the fortunate organization, the same person may be both an expert manager and a skillful leader. We must also resist the temptation to make good-bad distinctions between leadership and management. I hold the popular leadership press and some of its most well liked authors responsible for both the tendency to describe leaders and managers as different sorts of people and the temptation to make “leader-good,” “manager-bad” kinds of distinctions. In a most famous example, in their 1985 book *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* authors and leadership gurus Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus state “Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing.” Since that time, I've seen and heard this cliché repeated so many times that I've lost count. I don't like the implications of that thinking. Does this mean it is OK for a manager to do the wrong thing? Does it mean that a leader does not need to do things right? I think not.

Bennis and Nanus were not alone. This kind of thinking was prevalent 15-20 years ago, during one of the most prolific periods of leadership writing ever, and the influence can still be seen today. Some of my students, after reading a one-year old leadership text, came to the conclusion that a leader without ethics was only a manager! We've got to get beyond these good-bad distinctions between leadership and management and leaders and managers. Not only can the two processes coexist, they must!

Organizations, fire organizations included, need both efficient managers and inspiring leaders to succeed. Effective organizations competently budget, plan, organize, staff, control outcomes, and solve problems to achieve expected results. However, those same successful organizations must also establish and communicate a clear direction for the future, align people's efforts with that direction, and motivate people within the organization to overcome obstacles to change and transform the organization as necessary.

In most places, the fire management task falls either to government agencies or large private enterprises, most all of which function as bureaucracies - organizations typified by their formal processes, standardization, and procedure. Generally speaking, as bureaucracies, fire organizations are what Kotter calls “over-managed” and “under-led.” So, I would suggest that as we think about what skills we really wish our line officer had, we'd be thinking about things like the ability to establish and communicate a clear vision for the fire program, an ability to align our efforts with the direction we need to be headed, and the ability to inspire people to overcome the obstacles that stand between them and the organization's strategic vision



I'll leave *Wildfire* readers with a few thoughts inspired by my favorite leadership scholars, John Kotter, who I've introduced, and Joseph Rost, a professor emeritus in leadership studies at the University of San Diego, who wrote the book *Leadership for the 21st Century*.

- Leadership is an influence relationship; management is an authority relationship.
- Leadership establishes direction by developing a vision for the future.
- Management achieves results by allocating resources.
- Leadership communicates vision and aligns people's energy with that vision.
- Management establishes structure and delegates authority and responsibility.
- Leadership energizes people and inspires them to overcome obstacles to change.
- Management monitors results, adjusts plans and solves problems.
- Effective leadership brings about positive, needed change.
- Competent management results in predictability, order and consistent results.
- Leadership and management are separate and distinct processes, but both are essential to organizational effectiveness.

### ***About the Author.***

---

Mike DeGrosky is Chief Executive Officer of the Guidance Group, a consulting organization specializing in the human and organizational aspects of the fire service and an adjunct instructor in leadership studies at Fort Hays State University. His interests include leadership, strategy, and bringing the concepts of learning organizations and high reliability organizing alive in fire organizations. He is currently pursuing a PhD focused on organizational leadership. He can be reached at [info@guidancegroup.org](mailto:info@guidancegroup.org)