



This is an expanded version of a column first appearing as "Thoughts on Leadership" in the November/December 2005 issue of *Wildfire* magazine, the official publication of the International Association of Wildland Fire, published by Primedia Business Magazines and Media.

Learning and the Leader

Those of you, who read this column frequently, know that I believe that leadership is far from an exact science, and that the edges of what we call leadership are not always clearly defined. However, I do know that the traits that have traditionally described "leadership" in the fire service; rugged individualism, unilateral decision-making, and directive supervision won't cut it any longer.

I have come to firmly believe two things about the nature of leadership in the early 21st century. First, we, particularly those of us working in high-risk occupations, will operate in increasingly demanding, turbulent, and chaotic environments. Consequently, our leadership requires a constant state of situational awareness, adaptation to the situation, and initiative. Second, contemporary leadership is much less about looking to an individual for leadership; and more about relying on the collective interaction, wisdom, initiative, and responsibility of the group.

Lately, I've been pondering the relationship between learning and leadership. In an action-oriented group of people, the very subject of learning can cause a queasy feeling. However, I am convinced that leadership and learning are inextricably linked, so I offer the following thoughts on the role of learning to leadership.

If you work in fire, consider yourself and your people at risk. Almost every reader of this magazine works in a high-risk environment, one in which common human error can produce tragically unacceptable results. In our business, what we don't know can kill us. So, why wouldn't we want to know, and want our people to know, all we can?

Understand that continuous learning is critical to organizational effectiveness, and that organizational learning is mission-critical not a diversion from "the real work." Learning; yours, the unit's, and the organization's, is important to getting the job done, getting it done well, and constantly improving performance.

Adopt continuous learning as a personal leadership value. Leaders promote learning in their organizations by modeling. In other words, they learn on a personal level. I have not met an effective leader who was not an intelligent, naturally curious person. Notice I did not say "well-educated" person. However, the effective leaders I have known always want to know more, learn more, and understand more. They are constantly seeking new awareness of their operating environment, and knowledge that is of importance to their team.



Most effective leaders, that I know, take an interdisciplinary, lifelong learning approach. As we increasingly become a knowledge-based society, the changing demands of work-life require an almost continuous renewal and updating of skills. We need a learning workforce, one that can respond to the realities of the changing forms and demands of the work that our organizations perform. Changing skills and competencies required to perform our work will necessitate a commitment to continually updating existing knowledge, redirecting old skills, and learning new ones.

Learn about what we used to call the “soft skills” of leadership. Effective leaders must learn self-awareness and self-assessment, situational awareness, communication skills, group interaction and group processes, teamwork, and teambuilding.

Leadership is a social process that evolves as society evolves. Learn about the current state of the evolving theory and practice of leadership.

Develop your critical thinking skills and promote critical thinking on your team. Critical thinking is disciplined thinking; guided, directed toward some purpose, working within some limits, and exemplifying better ways of thinking that are appropriate to the fire service. Critical thinking is important because we are increasingly trying to cope, remain productive, and act responsibly, in an environment in which we are bombarded by a massive proliferation of information; some of it good and some of it worthless.

Seek out new information, gain new knowledge, and be willing to use that new knowledge to challenge assumptions and conventional wisdom, and stimulate new ideas.

Adopt a culture of continuous learning. Organizations succeed because people at all organizational levels share information and learn from experience. Leaders advance learning by helping others in their units learn. First, help your people learn how to learn; then create opportunities for learning through training, assignments, activities, and events. Lead the learning.

Leaders of effective learning organizations create, and contribute to, an organizational culture promoting learning. Accept responsibility for your organization's learning. Focus on the future. I'm weary of hearing people complain about the lack of leadership in their organization, while they personally retreat into do-nothing mode, because no one is leading. If no one is leading your organization's learning, step-out there and lead it yourself, in whatever small way you can! After all, leadership is all about personal responsibility, accountability and credibility.

Recognize that not everyone learns in the same way. Learn a little bit about learning theory; how people learn; and learning practices including teaching, training, and facilitating. Develop these skills in your team and lead these learning practices yourself.



Focus on “learning after doing.” Learning after doing improves performance by preventing recurrent mistakes and repeating successes. The after-action-review (AAR) provides us with a powerful tool for learning after doing, the desired outcome of which is purposefully modified behavior that reflects insight and knowledge gained from reviewing experience.

Leadership is far from an exact science. The boundaries of what we can legitimately call leadership are not always well defined, and I am often critical of what people choose to call leadership. However, the evidence is clear that the qualities that have traditionally been described as leadership in the fire service are no longer adequate.

Consider the relationship between learning and leadership, for they are inextricably linked. Increasingly leaders, in addition to leading their organization will lead the learning within that organization as one of their fundamental responsibilities

About the Author.

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