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## ***A Solemn Obligation***

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I still get to fight fire every once in awhile. I recently took a couple of fire assignments, one as an Incident Commander Type 3, and one as an Operations Section Chief; and I found myself in the unique position of working for my former seasonal employees. We joked that I had come full circle, but maybe it was they who had cycled, like kids who end up taking care of their parents. I couldn't avoid thinking about how far these guys had come, and how well they had done for themselves. That got me thinking about the responsibility a leader has to develop his or her people and the obligation the leader has to prepare the next generation of their organization's leaders. Don't get me wrong, I claim no responsibility for the success of these men; they've had no influence from me for nearly fifteen years. However, someone presented them with the opportunities they needed to develop their skills, take on responsibility, gain experience, get noticed, and move up. Given the demographics of many fire agencies, the duty to prepare your successors may represent one of the fire leader's most important roles.

We could talk about how smart, successful organizations formally plan for succession, and have intentional, well formed leadership development programs ensuring the organization with a reliable supply of well-qualified, internal candidates to fill its vacancies. However, have you noticed that many of the leaders in your agency are around the same age, as in approaching retirement very soon? Have you noticed that your organization is bipolar, with baby boomers in the leadership roles; young, eager, but inexperienced people at the entry level; and a big skills gap in between? As I look around, I notice these things, and have little confidence that our fire agencies can get ahead of, what I see as, an imminent leadership crisis as the baby boomers begin to retire en masse.

So, let's not talk about succession planning, but about what an individual can do to prepare the next generation of leaders. I regard this role, the act of tenaciously grooming future leaders as an obligation of leadership. Regardless of whether an agency has a formal succession strategy and succession planning, an individual leader at any organizational level, can do much to help prepare future leaders. So, how does an individual leader make an impact on the development of the people who will succeed them?

First, think about what the agency needs and will need in the future, from its leaders. A leader must first consider the organization's needs. What competencies do the agency's leaders require, and what skills will they need in the future? Match the skills of the agencies people to the needs of the organization. It remains nearly certain that competent leaders will continue to require interpersonal skills, an ability to influence positively, an aptitude for teamwork, and character qualities that enable them to lead effectively in the foreseeable future.



Next, look around and ask, “Who has the skills or potential to lead in this organization?” Be objective, and honestly assess leadership capacity. While past performance can forecast future success, remember that, once these people transition to leadership roles, their job responsibilities change and their past performance may no longer predict their abilities. Though mid-career adults may be best positioned to learn to lead, do not hesitate to identify potential leaders as early as possible in their careers. Many agencies face a legitimate leadership crisis, and need to identify and invest in people with leadership potential as quickly as they can.

Once you've identified leadership candidates, help them to plan their self-development and do what you can to provide them with education, training, and growth opportunities. Think of leader development as a marathon, not a sprint. A weeklong training session does not a leader make. Guide people with potential to a variety of opportunities. Traditional leadership training programs are important; but so are details, projects, special assignments, and other developmental assignments that allow developing leaders to receive feedback as they learn by doing. These assignments should cause people to stretch, broaden their knowledge, work outside their normal circle, and learn from success and failure. Most importantly, when guiding the development of future leaders, constantly ask, “Are they getting the opportunity to lead?”

Finally, mentor and coach developing leaders liberally. Stay actively involved, provide individual attention, require budding leaders to identify and pursue their development needs, help them focus their energy, and lend a hand as they come up against obstacles. Hook people with leadership potential up with leadership role models from whom they can easily learn. Provide honest, and supportive feedback that helps them grow, mature, and become confident. I just don't think we can overestimate the value of a person taking an interest in another person and their personal development, particularly when that happens early in someone's career.

Current leaders cannot pass up a chance to take a person with leadership potential “under their wing” and facilitate that person's career development. Indeed, particularly in fire agencies facing the impending retirement of many of their leaders, mentoring and coaching emerging leaders may represent one of the most important roles a current leader can play--a solemn obligation.

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

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