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Hot Topic: Accountability and Responsibility

I recently moved my office, and, as I sorted through some old files, I came across a copy of the work produced by the “Field Team” assembled for the TriData Firefighter Safety Awareness Study. In 1998, the five Federal fire agencies assembled this team of handpicked personnel from the field level of their organizations, and gave them just one objective; prioritize the study’s 86 goals and 220 implementation strategies. I was quickly reminded of the interagency fire community’s priorities in those post-South Canyon days. This team of field-level experts ranked, as their first priority, a recommendation that “individuals at all levels should be held accountable for safety violations.” The recommendation to “Foster a sense of individual responsibility for safety actions” came in a close second.

So what is accountability and what role does it play in the process we call leadership? Let’s say that accountability is the quality or state of being accountable, an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions. It seems to me that accountability and responsibility represent important qualities for a credible leader to possess. By credible leader I mean a person who is believable, dependable, and worthy of people’s trust and confidence. I’ve said, in previous columns, that I believe that, at the bottom line, it is credibility that matters and credibility that provides the foundation of personal leadership. That same credibility is essential to effective leadership at the organizational level as well. Like choosing to follow individual leaders, to allow themselves to be influenced by their organization, people must believe and trust the organization’s leaders. I contend that people cannot allow themselves to believe, depend on, trust or show confidence in a person or an organization that cannot, or will not, accept responsibility or account for their actions. In this way, the concepts of credibility and accountability are tightly coupled for both individual leaders and organizations.

A credible leader acts with character and integrity, and leaders earn and maintain credibility when they hold themselves accountable and they behave in ways consistent with the values of accountability and responsibility. I believe that, to view their leader or organization as credible, constituents need to know that the people expected to lead will

accept responsibility and account for their actions, claiming ownership for results produced as a result of their involvement, regardless of success or failure.

Despite our unreasonable expectations for flawless leadership, people fail. Fire management is a human undertaking; humans are fallible; and where people are, there will be human error. Conditions change; situation awareness degrades; people make judgment errors; fail to do what they say they will do, what they intended to do, or what thought they would do. These failures, large and small, take a toll on a leader's credibility. However, in their book *Credibility*, authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner assert that a leader can regain lost credibility and regain the trust of followers by responding to their failures in a way that is acceptable to constituents.

However, the leader permanently cements damage to their credibility when, by failing to take responsibility for their actions, the performance of subordinates, and the actions of the organization. In other words, when their actions appear inconsistent with the values of personal accountability and responsibility. When a person expected to lead, fails the accountability test, their honesty, character and integrity come into question. Trust is broken, and we know that trust is essential to both credibility and leadership.

But what about accountability in contemporary wildland fire organizations? Firefighters have been calling for their organizations to hold people personally accountable for their decisions and actions on the fireline since at least 1994 that I know of. However, six and one-half years down the road from the Field Team's priorities, the wildland fire community continues to struggle with personal accountability and responsibility. Why does the idea of personal accountability stir such controversy and emotion in our business? Why do people appear to support accountability and personal responsibility as an abstract concept, but react with great emotion when their organization holds someone accountable for their role in unacceptable results? I do not pretend to know the answers, and I hold myself out as no expert on accountability, but I have some ideas.

First, agencies have not prepared themselves or their employees for an enormous change in the operating environment. Wildland fire agencies are on the radar screens of their communities, the families of their employees, and oversight agencies like never before, and these people are demanding agency accountability and personal responsibility. Unfortunately, the agencies find themselves unprepared, lacking policies, procedures, or training necessary to assess responsibility and apply consequences in an even-handed, comprehensive and systematic manner.

Second, an organization cannot satisfactorily hold people accountable without first firmly establishing comprehensive standards and standard operating procedures. In June 2003, Lark McDonald wrote in this column of the importance of standards. Among his essential points:

- ❖ Standards draw a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable performance
- ❖ Conflicting standards guarantee failure. Eventually the organization fails to meet or the other
- ❖ Using discipline without clear standards produces fear
- ❖ Legal protections shield personnel only if you have clearly communicated solid standards

Finally, accountability must be assessed fairly and consistently. When an investigation uncovers negligence, malfeasance or dereliction of duty, the organization must ensure that responsibility is accurately established, and that all responsible parties feel the consequences of accountability commensurate with their involvement. People dissatisfied with the ability to assess responsibility at all organizational levels, often cite how, at least in principal, things work in the military, a system by which the commanding officer is held accountable for the actions of their subordinates. Take for example, the U.S. Navy who, like other navies and consistent with a fundamental and enduring principle of maritime law, maintains that the responsibility of the commanding officer is absolute. Along with the prestige and privilege of command comes a heavy burden. In the Navy, strict accountability is integral to command, and responsibility, whether in regard to success or failure, rests squarely on the shoulders of the person in charge. If a subordinate grounds the ship, the Captain is relieved of command. Others have adopted this philosophy of accountability up the chain of command. I am reminded of a police chief who lost an officer in a bungled sting operation. When terminated from his position, the Chief said many of the flaws in the operation, and the investigation of it, were beyond his control, but also conceded that a police chief is ultimately accountable for what happens on their watch.

There are those who question whether applying accountability to supervisors and managers in such a strict, undeviating manner could work in civilian agencies, and with good reason. To truly understand the Navy's strict approach to accountability, one must understand that absolute responsibility means, not only ultimate accountability, but also an enormous amount of independence and single-minded focus on command. Appreciating the military approach also requires awareness that the military separates criminal responsibility from the person's fitness to discharge his or her responsibility as a commanding officer.

Accountability and responsibility are essential to credible leadership, at both the individual and organizational levels. Credible, accountable leadership represents a critical concern, now more than ever, in wildland fire agencies. However, enforcing standards, holding people accountable and executing consequences for non-compliance present civilian agencies with a host of complicated challenges. For that reason, public agencies must attend to policies, procedures, training, standards and standard operating procedures if they hope to assess responsibility and apply consequences in an even-handed, comprehensive and systematic manner. For organizations to embrace personal responsibility will require significant cultural change and visionary leadership at the top. More importantly, an ethos of accountability requires credible leadership-by-example at all organizational levels.

Biography

Mike DeGrosky is Chief Executive Officer of the Guidance Group, a consulting organization specializing in the human and organizational aspects of the fire service. His interests include leadership, strategy, and bringing the concepts of learning organizations and high reliability organizing alive in fire organizations. He is currently completing a master's degree in organizational leadership. He can be reached at info@guidancegroup.org