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Why Leadership is Like Fire

A while back, my wife and I were driving along in the car, talking leadership. It was during this conversation, that I first thought that, “leadership is like fire.” I tried the comparison out on my wife, who knows a lot about leadership, but was on her last fire twenty years ago. She liked the analogy, and made some great comparisons, and I’ve been considering this notion ever since.

In February, Lance Honda and Alex Robertson invited me to speak on leadership at the combined interagency hotshot, operations and safety workshops for the Forest Service’s Region 6. I decided to ask this group of fire professionals to consider how leadership is like fire. Nearly 60 participants took me up on the challenge, and I want to thank them, not only for indulging me on this exercise, but also for their great thinking on the topic.

Their responses fell into the following five broad themes:

1. Fire is an inevitable, powerful force on the landscape, whose presence or absence can create significant change. Like fire, leadership is a force for change, exerting a similarly powerful impact in organizations and among people. In the modern, 21st century work environment, leadership is all about how people anticipate, respond to, and create change. Like a stand-replacing fire, leadership can transform relationships and organizations. Absent leadership, organizations stagnate and decay. No longer does good management equal leadership. Leadership and management are distinct and separate processes. Both are essential to the function and effectiveness of organizations, but they are not the same thing. Management provides predictability, consistency and stability. Leadership positions people and organizations for change.
2. Fire is neither inherently good nor bad; its implications depend on the circumstances. In the right hands, in the right place, at the right time, a little fire can do a lot of good. In the wrong hands, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, fire can cause enormous harm. Like fire, leadership can be constructive, an incredible force

bringing about positive change or positive response to change. However, when we misapply our influence, act contrary to the common good, or confuse influence with manipulation or coercion, we can cause enormous harm; often under the guise of “leadership.”

3. Leadership is a social process; and as such, is always changing and evolving as society transforms and progresses. We cannot view leadership statically, but must consider it as a cultural phenomenon, that adapts to our changing world. Like stale situational awareness, a leadership model developed to improve our ability to influence people in 1970s industrial America explains the world as it used to be, and does not improve our understanding or practice of leadership. Like a spreading wildfire, effective leadership is dynamic and adapts to the environment, constantly responding to changing conditions and surrounding influences. Leadership, once kindled, must be fed, nurtured, and allowed to adjust to the operating environment to sustain itself and spread.
4. Though we spend enormous amounts of time and energy trying to forecast who will lead and when, leadership confounds our ability to make it predictable. Like fire, we cannot always predict when leadership will occur, how it will emerge, or whether it will remain confined to a specific environment.
5. Fire is a chemical process. Like fire, leadership is too a process, a social process. We all know that fire requires fuel, heat and oxygen to burn. Remove one of those components, and we’ve extinguished the fire. However, fuel, heat and oxygen are not fire – they are the components of fire. It is when those components are combined and interact that a new process is born. At a certain point, we stop identifying with the components, and begin to identify with the new phenomenon – fire.

We don’t look up on the hillside and say, “look at that fuel, heat and oxygen go!” We say “look at the fire,” recognizing that those components have combined, are interacting, and a new process has been born, with the potential to cause change and transform the landscape. The same should be true of leadership. It sounds funny, but leadership is not about leaders. Leaders are people, but leadership is a process. It’s not about the actions of great men and women, seemingly born to lead. Nor is leadership the personality traits or behaviors of the individual leader, even when those personality traits nurture the flames of leadership or the leader’s behaviors are appropriate for the situation. Neither is leadership a charismatic individual transforming other people or their organization.

Why? Because leadership cannot be just about the leader anymore than fire is about heat.

Leadership is a process, specifically a process of influence or persuading others to change their beliefs, attitudes, values and behavior. It requires people who exert influence (leaders), people who allow themselves to be influenced (followers), and a context or situation in which they come in contact with one another. However, the leader, the led and the situation are only the components of leadership. It is when those components combine and interact that a new process – the process we call leadership occurs.

In the modern work environment, the process of leadership is interactive and omni directional. In other words, leadership is a process that people engage in together, one in which everybody leads and everybody follows.

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