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Nine Leadership Practices

I still get to fight fire every now and then, but these days I spend most of my time helping people learn to be leaders; interviewing people about safety, health and effectiveness in their organizations and facilitating boatloads of meetings. What I really get to do is a lot of listening. Listening to people's concerns.

So what are people talking about? Here in the U.S., fire folk are talking about the wisdom and implementation of the National Fire Plan, their inability to fill vacancies in their organization, the impending wave of retirements, rumors about continued funding, personal accountability, what might be wrong with the air tanker fleet and a fire season in which Mother Nature conspired with a handful of arsonists to make the National Fire Plan look pretty puny. Though expressed in all these different ways, people are concerned about the vision, the strategy, the values and the leadership of the organizations in which they toil.

Lately, I have been disturbed by two related trends within fire agencies. First, what seems a growing attitude of hopelessness and helplessness. Second, the use of the word "they." It is as if there is nothing anyone can do to influence their organization's direction and effectiveness. I frequently hear people complain about the quality of their organization's leadership, often prefaced with "they."

Some of this frustration stems from the simple fact that fire agencies are bureaucracies, and bureaucracies, by their very nature are concerned with where authority lies. Authoritarianism represents the traditional thinking in government agencies. Leadership is about power and influence and in government agencies that power and influence usually lies with the authority. So, generally speaking, agencies confine leadership in too small a circle.

But you know what? There is a great big problem out there and people are expecting your agencies to fix it. Wildland fire has become an issue with enormous political, public policy, environmental and economic consequences; and the problems are not going to get fixed with traditional bureaucratic approaches with the authority, power, influence and leadership neatly structured at the tops of the agencies.

If fire agencies are going to get the job done, they will first need to accomplish two things.

1. First, they need to focus a whole lot of energy on developing synergy or collaboration within their organizations. Agency workforces are filled with talented, dedicated, energetic people that need to clearly understand their organization's mission, vision for the agency's direction, the strategy for getting there and their part in achieving the strategy. Moreover, people need to feel like they have influence on the organization and, more importantly, their work. Fire agencies must seek an independent and interdependent workforce that taps the motivations of its employees and marshals all the resources that the agencies have at their disposal.
2. Second, fire agencies must simultaneously broaden and deepen leadership within their organizations, and I mean more than providing leadership training. However, it is too simple to say that fire management agencies must empower their people and allow them to develop as leaders. People must also step-up to the challenge to lead when given the opportunity.

I come from the school of thought that says everybody has the capacity for leadership. Yep, contrary to popular belief, leadership does not require charisma, just vision, commitment, and an ability to communicate that vision and commitment.

Also contrary to popular wisdom, leaders are not born. They are made, and often leaders are not made through training, though that helps. Most often leaders are made through circumstance and adversity. Fire management agencies have perfect opportunities (if you look at them as such) to build leaders by allowing people to participate on fire teams, by making them responsible for frightening circumstances, by detailing them into staff and project positions, by asking them to drive the change required in their organizations.

Leadership development can be scary for the emerging leader who is stretching their skills, and for the mentoring organization that provides the opportunity. So, I offer nine important leadership practices that I feel effective leaders must follow. I believe these practices to be universal, whether you lead the crew of an engine or your agency's fire and aviation program; whether you currently lead or are emerging. So, to all those leaders out there, existing and budding, I offer best wishes and nine leadership practices:

Leadership Practice #1. Set Direction and Lead the Way.

The value of organizational vision cannot be over-stated; in fact vision is key to leadership. Unfortunately, the concept or the "vision thing" either scares or escapes many people. However, there is really nothing tough or mysterious about organizational vision. A vision is a description of what you want your organization to look like or be in the future; a realistic, credible, desired future for your organization.

Leadership Practice #2. Be Proactive.

Proactivity means more than merely taking initiative. Proactivity is initiative and responsibility. A leader shows initiative when they recognize their responsibility to make things happen. Of the responsibility definitions that I know, the key concepts include accountability; being the cause, motive, agent or explanation and the ability to answer for one's conduct and obligations.

Proactive people and organizations do not blame circumstances, conditions or conditioning for their behavior, but subordinate that impulse to the value of taking initiative and responsibility.

Leadership Practice #3. Communicate & Share Information.

Find or create ways to intentionally interact with the people that work for you. Break down that big organization into smaller parts by establishing organizations within organizations, and by holding discussion groups or communication meetings. When you have information that will help someone get his or her job done, forget the chain of command.

Leadership Practice #4. Develop Commitment.

An important key to developing commitment is involvement. If you want people to be committed to the organization's goals, they must participate in the decisions that affect their part in those goals.

Trust is an essential element of organizational effectiveness and at the heart of fostering commitment. Research studies have identified interpersonal trust as a major influence on organizational effectiveness. Regardless of a person's level in an organization or how much they participate in decision-making, those who trust their leaders and feel trusted in return are the most satisfied with their leader's effectiveness.

Leadership Practice #5. Inspire Accomplishment.

Expect people to perform at challenging, but realistic levels, and set goals that propel the organization further rather than meeting rigid schedules and planned results. Exemplary leaders make other people feel strong & share power, allowing people to influence decisions about their work.

Leadership Practice #6 Model Desired Behavior

Leaders know that people emulate their behavior, both positive and negative, and therefore set the example. They openly share their expectations and base their example on those expectations. Once a leader has established expectations for desired behavior and unacceptable behavior, they can lead with the message "you may do anything you see me doing".

Leadership Practice #7. Focus on what is important.

It is important for any one in a position of leadership to recognize that people can only pursue a limited number of goals at a time. That is why it is very important that you take care in choosing what to emphasize; focusing on the mission, critical goals, and Pareto's Law which tells us that 80% of our achievements will come from 20% of our goals.

Leadership Practice #8. Connect your group to the outside world.

Effective leaders realize the importance of keeping their organization "outwardly focused." This outward focus is incredibly important in fire agencies, not only because interagency cooperation has become the norm, but because nearly all fire organizations either serve the public, contract to public agencies or serve some larger organization. Effective fire management leaders will take advantage of, and encourage their people to take advantage the important networking opportunities available including the International Association of Wildland Fire and the National Fire Protection Association Wildland Section.

Leadership Practice #9. Put first things first and manage around priorities.

Priorities are key to effectiveness. Deciding what is important or what comes first is leadership: putting those things first each day, carrying the program out is effective management. Organize and execute your work and the work of your people around priorities. When an organization has examined and defined its mission, established a vision and set goals; they have decided what is important. Once those steps are completed, it is important for the leadership to decide what activities to focus on and what activities to stay away from to achieve what they have decided is important.

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