

This is an expanded version of a column first appearing as Thoughts on Leadership in the November/December 2009 issue of *Wildfire* magazine, the official publication of the International Association of Wildland Fire, published by Penton Media.

## ***High Performance Requires a Diverse Team***

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Frustrated by a feeling that their organization valued people who didn't rock the boat over all else, a friend recently asked me whether I thought it important to hire people different than oneself. While many people would deny it, when it comes to hiring, most people charged with leading others seek out people who echo their own personalities, values and styles of working. I think people do this for two primary reasons. First, no one wants employees they dislike or who they cannot influence and motivate. Second, in the interest of achieving or maintaining high performance teamwork, we place a premium on people we think will fit into our team well; people the rest of the team will readily accept. I understand and admire both motivations, and believe that most fire people with responsibilities for hiring and team building mean well.

However, in reality, plenty of evidence exists to suggest that high performing teams actually require a diverse mix of perspectives, skills and experience. Unfortunately, too many would-be leaders seeking flexible, adaptive and resilient teams actually produce ordinary performance by diligently hiring employees who too closely resemble themselves and the others on their team. Really good leaders, those who build teams that perform reliably, overcome adversity, anticipate and contain unexpected events, and minimize human error, know they need people with attributes and experience different from their own. They recruit for a variety of skills, abilities, expertise and thinking. Why? Because, while uniform teams tend to get along well and think they produce better results, recent research indicates that diverse groups actually make decisions, avoid "group think" and solve problems better.

In her book *Team of Rivals*, author Doris Kearns Goodwin chronicles how President Abraham Lincoln, facing the crisis of civil war, chose a cabinet of the finest minds available; people with a variety of thinking, expertise and styles; people who he knew to be more capable than himself in their area of expertise. Most interestingly, Lincoln chose men who, for the most part, had been his rivals. While few would-be leaders today may possess the wisdom of Lincoln, smart leaders will seek out people with a variety of characteristics and experiences and recognize that people's differences add value. Most importantly, authentic leaders seek to fill gaps in their own skills, experience and interests.

Let's be clear. While highly desirable, team diversity can also prove uncomfortable at times. Team diversity brings with it diverse perspectives, expectations, and approaches to teamwork. Encouraging different perspectives while keeping everyone focused and ready to make efficient decisions can present a leadership challenge; and the leader must prove able to anticipate and resolve conflicts within the team. However, this seems like a small cost for the improvements to performance a diverse team can bring.

So how do we take advantage of this knowledge? First, take a quick inventory of your current team or staff. Do they tend to look like you? Think like you? Act like you? Have similar skills and experiences as you? While "yes" answers to all these elements might produce a compatible team, a team of people from similar backgrounds and duplicating one another's strengths and weaknesses will likely produce something other than greatness and resilient performance.

Building a diverse team starts with the selection process. Unfortunately, formal, standardized recruiting and hiring processes common in most fire agencies can work against the principle of hiring for diverse thinking, skill-sets and experiences; inadvertently producing unbalanced organizations with a narrow band of skills. Bureaucratic hiring processes are, after all, seeking a degree of sameness. Even agencies ostensibly promoting diversity tend to do so in superficial ways focused on visible characteristics like race, culture, gender and physical ability; but fail to seek out uniqueness of knowledge, experience and thinking. Choose people for their abilities and experience.

Effective leaders know the backgrounds of their people and ensure that team members maximize their familiarity with one another and know each other's knowledge, skills, experiences and opportunities to contribute. Help team members to understand how their work affects one another, and create opportunities for team members to see how their various abilities complement one another.

Ensure that the team stays focused on the mission. Establish a team vision that not only rises above, but takes advantage of team member differences and creates a team culture that encourages relationships, teamwork and unit cohesion.

Once comfortable with people's expertise, defer to that expertise. Allow leadership to shift around the organization and emerge as necessary. Allow decisions to migrate, both up and down the organization, to the people in the best position to solve the problem at hand regardless of formal position.

Most people charged with leading others seek out people who echo their own personalities, values and styles of working; it's just human nature. However, the evidence suggests that alert, flexible, adaptive and resilient teams actually need people with a variety of skills, abilities, expertise and thinking.

## ***Biography***

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