
危機 Danger or Opportunity?

by Lark McDonald

The future of leadership

The Chinese ideogram for a crisis is the character for danger written next to the character for opportunity. It describes the challenge for a leader: turning weakness into strength, minimizing danger, and seizing the opportunity in a crisis. By some accounts fire agencies have been in “crisis” for years. Some say that the real crisis is still yet to come.

A crisis seems always to be followed by a call for better leadership. The way that a leader motivates and guides his or her subordinates through the mire is critical to both short-term and long-term success of an organization. The importance of good leadership has not been lost on the fire community. Leadership has shown up consistently as an issue in the national firefighter collective psyche. But the search for good leadership in fire has, until recently, lacked purpose, direction, and motivation—indecision at the crossroad, it lacked leadership.

Leadership skill and leadership inconsistency was identified by the firefighters who contributed their opinions to the Wildland Firefighter Safety Awareness Study, following the South Canyon accident. It has been identified as a source of error in a number of subsequent fire accident reports. It is a subject tied to the success and failure of incident management teams, and it sits at the root of most formal employee actions and complaints. The cost of a leadership failure even at the lowest ranks can be substantial. In the past couple of years the issue reached a critical mass when an individual forest launched a test program on their own with the help of the private sector. Although the initial focus was to address their own issues, the program received national attention and has since been expanded considerably. The program, which focuses on building basic leadership competencies in first line fire supervisors, is becoming a foothold for fire agencies in the new effort to improve leadership skills.

If the trend continues and is expanded to other levels of the organization, this cultural initiative has the potential of producing enormous long-term benefits for all involved, and has the potential to raise wildland fire to a new level. But this “program” by itself won’t impact enough people to affect the whole culture. The task of developing future leaders starts on the first day a new employee reports to work and does not end until long after retirement, since many retirees continue to mentor those still in service. Developing and improving leadership must be the passion of all leaders at all levels in the profession.

As the embodiment and communicator of culture, values and character, leadership is at the heart of what an organization is and defines what it can become. Whether in an agency, an incident or a firefighting crew, the leaders provide the methods by which the greater future is realized. Without strong and consistent leadership, the organization is hollow and can drift, becoming vague and meaningless to both its members and itself. The torch of an organization’s future is carried collectively by all levels of leaders, from the squad bosses (leaders of people) through the fire directors (leaders of organizations), and to that end the task should be coordinated and synchronized as much as possible.

Adapting to Change, Dealing with Error

In high risk environments, organizations must be able to change and be resilient to error. They must be able to detect, anticipate, adapt and thrive in dynamic conditions and situations, and be able to find errors quickly and mitigate them promptly. These organizations must be able to “learn” by adopting a mature, professional and realistic attitude about operational errors and mistakes, and be able to learn from them without cutting off an arm in the process. They must embody these attributes **all** the time, not just in the heat of battle. They must be able to handle change all the time, not just in the tactical field.

While firefighters expect changes in the fireground environment, changes in the organization are somehow always unexpected. Organizational change causes stress in the workforce, mostly because there is little separation between who a firefighter is, and the position he/she holds. Understandably, the prospect of change often produces fear and stress, especially for those that are not in control.

In the last 10 years fire services have seen large shifts in the way they do business and the way the public perceives them. It has seen a generation of military-influenced leaders retire and a smaller number of new and very different people entering the workforce. The next few years will prove to be extremely challenging as long needed federal funding is channeled into the system. Though welcomed, the funding comes with a new set of performance expectations from the public. Current leaders, who have an enormous influence on how well subordinates deal with change, and who are going to be responsible for making it happen, are going to be under incredible stress.

Preserving the Core

Without a strong cultural foundation and unified leadership it is difficult for a firefighter to see the difference between who they are and what they do. Who they are—the values, culture, and vision of their organization and their role within it shouldn't change, but what they do and how they do it must change continuously as a matter of operational and organizational necessity. For an organization (be it a crew or an agency) to be adaptive, it must first have a strong foundation and identity—a core—to serve as the anchor to guide its people through the change process. Leaders who embody the values and character of the organization also serve as anchors, allowing change to take its needed course while providing ongoing and unchanging continuity and stability for subordinates.

I recently met with the training officer of a local structural fire district who was interested in getting some leadership training for his unit. When I asked why he thought that leadership was an issue, he described the desire to see his people show more initiative at incidents and lead with more authority. His focus was on a perceived deficiency in his subordinate commanders.

I asked about the organization, which had started as a volunteer fire department and who had in recent years, been enveloped by the urban interface caused by the growing Denver metro housing sprawl. Now with several 24/7 stations, they are going through the pain of becoming a larger and different organization. More discussion with him revealed that little doctrine had been developed, and no vision or shared value system was in place or communicated throughout the organization. Performance and leadership were subjective topics. Culturally, their organization was in its infancy—defined mostly by the personalities of the senior leaders (formerly ranchers and equipment operators)

and their idiosyncrasies. Subordinate leaders carried more fear about their own organization and their place in it, than they had for any dicey tactical situation. They were all good people—in fact the best—all doing the best they could, and in the process psychologically mauling each other in an effort to satisfy things undefined, unsaid and undemonstrated by their leadership.

Developing Skills

His request was a good example of a common misperception in fire: that tactical leadership (command position leaders) and organizational leadership are separate and fundamentally different. Leadership—the art of motivating, guiding and leading a group of people to achieve an objective—is timeless. The principles that govern it are essentially the same ones recorded nearly 3000 years ago by the Greek Xenophon. The psychology of providing purpose and motivation, building trust, demonstrating integrity, and communicating intent is common and required for all leadership situations—regardless of application or environment. In firefighting, the methods, techniques and tools change based on the variables in the environment. Few people value the firefighter that uses the same techniques and solution for every fire situation, and likewise, few people have use for the leader who uses the same technique and tools for every subordinate and situation. Just like the fireline environment, the leadership environment has its own strategies, tools and techniques, and a competent leader must have true mastery of these if he or she is to be effective. Mastery of these skills and behaviors take lots of time, effort, and experience. To perform well under stress, these skills and behaviors must be ingrained and adopted at a subconscious or “gut” level.

In battle you cannot separate a soldier from the Army. He is in every way a product of the life experience and the organization that “raised” him. His leadership ability didn’t magically develop in the field, it was grown and nurtured for years. His performance under high-speed and high-stress reflects the skills and behaviors he has truly adopted at a subconscious level. He doesn’t have to think about it, he just does it in the natural process of reacting. It is his “default” setting. Some of these behaviors may have come from early family influence (like patience), but most were generated by his own organization.

Society, through families, work ethic and a significant military force has traditionally supplied a number of “pre-trained” leaders to the firefighting community. But as the conditions have changed, the lack of a leadership recruitment program has left most organizations (in both the public and private sectors) with gaping holes and inconsistencies in leadership skills at all levels. Any of us who have learned our leadership skills through random life experiences have, by no surprise, random leadership skills. Some lessons have been learned well, others not at all. Getting a consistent leadership product in the field is next to impossible, which generates a lot of complaints and dissatisfaction. There are simply not enough good leaders to go around. Left with a simple choice, each organization has the choice to “suck it up and shut up”, or take responsibility for the problem and start fixing it. This means taking responsibility for formally developing your subordinate leaders and trying to leverage the opportunity.

Developing Leaders

The prospect of true formal leadership development is alien for most organizations, fire included. Typically, those people with good firefighting skills are the ones recruited to

being the **leader** of firefighters, even though the skill sets are quite different. Some make the leap gracefully, others stumble and fall. Hit or miss—trial and error. It is expensive and time consuming business that yields a patchwork product. It contributes to a natural mistrust in the field, and always seems to cost a lot when you can least afford it.

While some leaders are better than others, there are no perfect leaders. As with any art, developing leadership skill is a life-long endeavor, accomplished through a combination of training, experience and self-development. Together, these are the foundational pillars of leadership development and stand on the foundation of organizational doctrine, culture, values and character.. All are equally important and the organization has a role in conducting or supporting them all, but don't assume that the foundation is well established. Since 1996, my firm has been sampling variables of crew and organizational culture in the USFS and with national Type 1 firefighting crews. Although we have noticed some shifts in selected areas, especially around awareness to human factors, there doesn't appear to be a global "wildland fire" culture outside the boundaries of any given crew. Within the ranks, the perceptions of the organization vary widely, the values are different as are the ethical norms. As a foundation to support leadership development and organizational growth and change, it is structurally unsound. It will need a little more rebar before adding to the existing building.

With the increase of funding and the expansion of the organization, it is now a race against time. New crews will be started, new resources added, and organizational ranks expanded. For some of these crews, it is an opportunity to establish a new culture rather than change an old one. Will these crews build a new foundation or will they inherit old baggage? Will the existing crews be able to communicate their foundation to the influx of new personnel, or will the foundations be buried in the rush to operational readiness? The heat is on, but the opportunity for positive growth and change is enormous. What is the condition of your foundation? What should be cleaned up and clarified?

These next year hold both danger and opportunity for wildland fire leadership. Which path will the leaders of wildland fire choose?