

# You Lead, I Follow: Qualities of an Effective Leader

By Jeff Sturtevant, Firefighter/EMT-P, A.S.

Fire service leadership is very unique. All officers are as different as snowflakes when it comes to leading their troops into battle, whether against a hot, smoky fire or a dirty floor in the firehouse that needs to be scrubbed. While there is no one cookie-cutter style of managing firefighters, there are several ways to keep the men and women working for you happy and respectful, and at the same time, making sure they get the job done.

In the paramilitary style of the fire service, there are two different ways to have your firefighters complete task work. *Orders* and *requests*. On the fire ground, *orders* are given: "Throw the twenty-four-foot ground ladder to the roof." There is no ambiguity. There is no discussion. Usually.

Sometimes the noise on the fire ground makes it difficult to hear clearly. A firefighter could ask for clarification: "What size ladder was that?" "Where exactly do you want it?" "What was that, Cap? I didn't hear you." Clarify and explain *as necessary*. A firefighter asking, "Why do you want me to do that?" might not be a fitting question at the time of

an emergency. That question should be answered as the officer sees fit, and with his or her best efforts to not use vulgarities and insults. After the emergency is mitigated, discipline the firefighter into thinking that asking why is usually not appropriate during an emergency. Explain that command has a strategic plan and although sometimes an order may not make sense, it may be a tactic that needs to be performed in order to satisfy the big picture.

If an order is disobeyed, deal with the situation as necessary. If appropriate, find someone else to complete the task at hand. Do not waste time on the scene of an incident arguing with some knucklehead that will not follow orders. After the incident, it may be a good idea to approach the firefighter and find out *why* the order was disobeyed. It could be due to a simple miscommunication. If so, make an agreement to make sure orders are heard clearly, and in turn make sure that the firefighter agrees to follow those orders without delay. Firefighters cannot read minds. Be clear with orders.

Blatant insubordination should be dealt with, sometimes in the form of verbal/written warnings, suspension, or termination. A good firefighter's reputation or personnel file could be tainted over a simple miscommunication. Make sure the facts are straight before jumping to conclusions. When handing out discipline, do not punish or reprimand an entire group because of the actions of one individual. Sit the firefighter down in a private meeting to discuss his errant ways. Depending on the formality of the meeting, the firefighter may request a witness or some type of representation. If an entire shift or group is lacking in motivation, or is failing to meet the objectives of the fire department, speak to them as a group. Discipline as necessary. For example, if Joe Firefighter is consistently late for his shift, do not tell Jane Firefighter—who is always fifteen minutes early—that she needs to make sure that she is in time for work. Jane may feel picked on and insulted despite her excellent attendance record.

On the fire ground, orders are given, usually without discussion. However, back at the station, a request may be more reasonable. No one wants to be *ordered* to scrub toilets. "Hey guys, how about getting the chores done?" sounds much better than "Go do chores." When there is no emergency, some discussion might be appropriate. "Joe Firefighter, scrub those toilets." "If you want me to, but I've done them three times today. Would you mind if someone else does them?" Accommodate as needed in order to spread equal amounts of work throughout the whole group. No one firefighter wants to do all the work by themselves.

Another key component to requests is the use of words like "Let's," and "we." The best way to get a group of firefighters to complete work is to get up and do it, too. Roll up the sleeves and get some dust on that gold badge. Leading by example is one of the better ways to motivate a firefighter, both on and off the fire ground. Respect is earned so don't demand it. Discipline appropriately and lead by example. Show respect for the men and women working under you and it will be returned.

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