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Things Fire Officers Need to Know!

What is a Leader?

A leader is the person who provides direction to a group of individuals. If the leader is appointed by the employer, he/she is called a supervisor. The key difference between supervisors and leaders is that leaders are selected by the group—*and sometimes the leaders is not the supervisor.*

Leaders are selected!

Leaders have to establish themselves. Why? Because we all want to look up to someone we can follow. A good leader with only average fire suppression skills will get more done on the fireline than will a highly skilled firefighter who doesn't know how to lead. You may have been given the rank and authority, but to be successful and credible, you must acquire and practice good leadership skills. Leaders are selected because they know what they are doing, communicate effectively, inspire confidence, and work cooperatively with others. As a leader, you must have the ability to:

Firefighters follow leaders because of trust and respect.

1. Accept people as they are, not as you would like them to be.
2. Approach relationships and problems in terms of the present rather than the past.

Treat everyone the same.

3. Treat those who are close to you with the same courteous attention that you extend to strangers and casual acquaintances.
4. Trust others, and allow them to take acceptable risks.
5. Remain motivated without constant approval and recognition from others.

Everyone in your organization is as critical to the mission as the next person. The rookie firefighter is as vital as the incident commander in getting a job done.

You have to lead by example.

What are the Qualities that make Good Leaders?

Good leaders are passionate, kind, committed, motivated, and forward-thinking. They take responsibility and set high standards for themselves and others. They have good communication skills, command presence, common sense, and a take-charge attitude. They are supportive of others, and they strive to create success for their team and the organization as a whole.

Good leaders keep focused on the team by using “we,” “us,” and “our” in place of “I,” “me,” and “my” whenever possible. Good leaders are also good listeners, and they aren’t so insecure that they have to top every story with stories of their own. Good leaders are good mentors and coaches. As a leader you must help the next generation of leaders.

“What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Leaders, by their actions, “advertise” their values and character. The principles of good leadership come down to four things:

- **Character** – Be a person who shows drive, energy, determination, self-discipline, willpower, and nerve.
- **Integrity** – Know yourself, and challenge yourself to be the best leader you can be. Keep learning and taking on new responsibilities. Take responsibility for your actions, and set a good example for others.
- **Respect** – Know your people, and look out for their well-being. Keep them informed. Use them to their potential, and help them grow. Build a cohesive and harmonious team.
- **Duty** – Know the job. Make sound and timely decisions. Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised, and completed to expected standards.



“If you want to be successful, it’s just this simple. Know what you are doing. Love what you are doing. And believe in what you are doing.”

Will Rogers

Don’t ever forget, you cannot hide what you do!

How do Leaders set Standards for their Crews?

No technique of leadership is more powerful than leading by example. Don't do anything that is foolish or will jeopardize your crew. Don't ask people to do anything you cannot or will not do yourself, and don't expect to receive special acknowledgment for doing it. Doing the right thing, even when no one notices, is a mark of a good leader (Figure 1.1).

You must also know your limitations and the limitations of your equipment and crew. **Quitting while you are ahead is not quitting.** Follow your instincts, training, and good old common sense so that you don't do something stupid, dangerous, or foolish.

When is "Politically Correct" Potentially Dangerous?

Being "politically correct" may be appropriate in office or agency politics, but it is not acceptable in the fire service if it masks the truth about firefighter safety. The only way safety rules can be effective is if truth rules. You can't let fear of offending people or hurting their feelings compromise safety.

Consider the following scenario: Your crew is sitting around the fireline eating lunch and discussing how many of the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders they have already violated this shift. If you don't address the problem because you're afraid to hurt somebody's feelings, someone is likely to have a lot more than hurt feelings with the next Firefighting Order violation. Tell your crew you are concerned about their actions and attitudes. Do it in a positive tone so that they don't become defensive, but make sure they realize you are concerned about everyone's safety. Call a time-out to discuss how to fix the situation. Even better, empower everyone on the team to call a time-out to address safety violations and situational awareness.



Figure 1.1 Wear all of your safety gear, and your subordinates will know that you expect them to do the same. Be a leader who lives the motto, "Do as I do, and you will do well."

With good leadership, no one needs to ask, "Who is in charge?"

"Common sense is not so common."

Voltaire

Being politically correct could hurt more than someone's feelings.

The only way safety rules can be effective is if truth rules.

Bad things happen when good people do nothing.

Failing to make a decision is a decision.

Don't be guilty of decision paralysis. Make the best decision you can with the information available.

*"We can't all be heroes, because somebody has to sit on the curb and applaud when we go by."
Will Rogers*

Firefighters sometimes forget that they are in a dangerous profession.

Another form of dangerous behavior is being unwilling to reveal "the whole truth" about what happened in a tragic accident to avoid hurting the reputation of the agency, the injured firefighters or the feelings of the surviving families. In a serious accident investigation, you have to look under every rock in a timely manner to find out what really happened. Learning from mistakes and getting the word out so that other firefighters can work more safely is far more important than protecting anybody's feelings. Accident prevention can only happen when you are willing to take a critical look at what really happened and truthfully discuss all of the factors.

Don't be guilty of decision paralysis. Failing to make a decision is not an option. You don't have the right to do nothing. No decision is not a choice. Right or wrong, make a decision, then regroup if you learn new information.

How can you Avoid becoming a Dead Hero?

If you are lucky enough to be a firefighter, you are someone special in the eyes of the public, and you must do your best to live up to their expectations. Be confident but humble. Don't *expect* the public to consider you a hero. The badge of a hero must be *earned*.

Chief Paul Stein said, "*Firefighters are already heroes. They do not need to die to prove it.*" Never forget that this is a dangerous profession. Be safe, and be professional.

No one wants to speak ill of the dead or to second-guess their choices. However, if this hesitation gets in the way of the truth, more people may die. If we can't learn from mistakes because we don't want to tarnish someone's reputation or memory, firefighters lose in the long run. Not learning from mistakes is an injustice, or at least an insult, to all firefighters and their families. We all make mistakes, because we are human. Even heroes make mistakes. However, admitting one's mistakes and learning from them is a sign of a good leader.

All too often firefighters forget that they are in a dangerous profession. They become comfortable doing what they love to do, and they forget that they are surrounded by things that can hurt them.

Chief Paul Stein is a 32-year veteran with the Santa Monica and Lakeside (CA) Fire Departments. He has a B.A. in Management, is a Master Instructor and is a former "California Fire Instructor of the Year" recipient. Chief Stein has lectured extensively on leadership, command, motivation, and strategy and tactics.

There are several tried-and-true adages that you should remember:

- “You are only as good as your training.”
- “Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.” (Quote by Vince Lombardi)
- “It is harder to unlearn something than learn something new.”
- “Don’t ask others to do something you aren’t willing to do yourself.”
- “You learn best by doing.”

As a leader, you must never forget that you have assumed responsibility for other people. You have to look out not only for yourself but also for all of those in your charge. You must take your crew into battle. More importantly, you must bring them all home safely. At the same time, you must also look out for the public you are sworn to protect. Ask yourself, “*Can I justify my actions or the actions of my crew?*” If the answer is no, don’t do it!

You have to show confidence without appearing arrogant. You must show your crew that you can and will do whatever you ask them to do. But you must not be a kamikaze pilot. If your crew has confidence in you and trusts your judgment, they will follow you anywhere. If they don’t have confidence in you or your ability to lead them safely, they will find themselves another leader, and you will be demoted to a mere supervisor.

How much Discretion do you have?

Everyone has to have rules. As a wildland firefighter, the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders are your rules of engagement. Know them, understand them, and follow them. But, what does that mean?

It means you have to follow their intent, but have discretion as to how they are applied. In a 2006 civil court case in Montana,⁽¹⁾ that involved the use of a backfire by the USFS Forest Service and the contention that the Fire Orders were violated, the judge said, “*The vague principles of the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders and other directives show that hard-and-fast rules are not appropriate to all fires under all circumstances, because fires are unpredictable....*

Because one firefighter decided a burnout was too risky on one day

⁽¹⁾ *United States District Court for the District of Montana Division - BACKFIRE 2000 (CV 03-198-M-DWM) and Allstate Insurance Company (CV 03-201-M-LBE) vs. United States of America, September 5, 2006. For a copy of this court case, go to www.deervalleypress.com.*

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Can you justify your actions? If you can't, don't do it!

The 10 Standard Firefighting Orders are the basic rules of engagement.

at one location does not mean that the next firefighter, assessing different or even identical circumstances, would possess any less discretion in making his or her judgment.... Safety directives as rigid prescriptions not only would diminish firefighters' discretion, but would hamper firefighters' ability to fight fire effectively.... The 10 Standard Firefighting Orders and 18 "Watch Out Situations" ...are flexible principles to be used in fighting fire, an activity that depends on firefighters' judgment, common sense, and experience."

Be sure you know and understand the intent of the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders.

So, what does all this "legalese" mean? It means that the Firefighting Orders are sound and must be followed, but that you have some discretion in how you apply them. For example, the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders say you need to have safety zones, but it's your responsibility to find or establish safety zones that are appropriate for the given situation.

This discretion in how the rules can be applied is a two-edged sword. It affirms the right of firefighters in the field to exercise judgment, but reinforces the need to consider the meanings of all the rules before making a decision. Do you know what the rules mean?

Everybody must be a safety officer.



Figure 1.2 Communicate Up, Down and Sideways! It isn't just the incident commander who has a responsibility to ensure that everyone on a fire is in compliance with all 10 Standard Firefighting Orders. If you have important information, don't wait until you are asked for it—get it to the people who need it.

Everyone needs to be a Safety Officer

Even if you know the rules, **everybody** must be a safety officer. As a leader,

you must make sure that everyone around you on the fireline is also following the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders.

Communicate UP, DOWN and SIDEWAYS!

Communications are vital to safety. This is true for everyone involved with the incident. If you are a dispatcher and have the latest weather forecast, get it to those who need it. Don't wait for them to ask for it. If you are a division supervisor, coordinate with other division supervisors. Don't wait for them to ask you what you're up to—**Communicate—Up, Down, and Sideways** (Figure 1.2).

It also means you have to take your training seriously. A firefighter is only as good as his or her training. Los Angeles City Fire Department's motto is, "Train like your life depends on it, because it does." The Fire Department of New York Training Academy, greets everyone with the motto, "Let no man's ghost come back to say my training let me down." Your firefighters' lives depend on their training!

Firefighting is a dangerous business. Many of those who have been hurt have forgotten that, if only for a moment. Don't let it scare you. Let it inspire in you a respect for the job and respect for the role you play in directing the safe actions of others.

The fireline is loaded with hazards, many of which we can't eliminate. However, you can fight fire aggressively and safely and return your crew tired—but uninjured—to their families at the end of the day (Figure 1.3).

Firefighters say that they become firefighters because they like the thrill and excitement of the "firefight." They like saving lives, and helping people who are in need, and serving the community. Safety is not usually the first thing they think of when they arrive at the scene of an emergency. Rather, they see the problem and want to solve it.

However, smart firefighters think about safety every hour they are on the clock. They approach the situation with their eyes wide open, and they develop the strategy and tactics that will get the job done with the least amount of risk.

There are two spikes in the injury curve for firefighters. The first is when they are new and don't have the training or experience to keep themselves out of trouble. The second is at about eight to ten years on the job, when firefighters become complacent or overconfident and forget what they have learned. Don't allow yourself or your crew to become complacent or overconfident.

No one wants to be a failure. However, you are not a failure if your gut tells you to revise your tactics as fire behavior worsens. You are not a failure if you tell the division supervisor that the plan is too dangerous and you decline the assignment. You are not a failure if you alter or terminate activities that might violate one of the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders. These are all the right things to



Figure 1.3 This firefighter is beat, but uninjured. He is going home to his family tonight. That is your goal as a leader.

*All too often,
firefighters think of
solving the problem
before considering their
safety.*

*Commit yourself to
excellence.*

do. You become a failure only if you do something you know is too risky or you repeat mistakes from the past. Both are unacceptable, especially in a dangerous profession like firefighting.

As a leader, you need to commit yourself to excellence. Make that commitment, treat everyone with respect, then move out and do the right thing.

ICS is just another tool in your tool kit...use it, but don't let it drive how you fight fire.

About ICS

This book focuses on leadership and the strategies and tactics of wildland fire suppression, not on the processes of the Incident Command System. So you won't see a lot about ICS in this book. ICS is a tool. Use the ICS structure as a guide—not a rigid one, but a flexible one, designed to support your operational needs. If you need to break strike teams into smaller, more efficient working units, do it. If you need to augment a strike team with watertenders or hand crews and make them a task force, do it. If you want the structure protection groups to work for a division supervisor, do it. The efficiency and effectiveness of your operation is more important than making it all look good on paper.

Reading is good.

How one Learns

Will Rogers, the famous American humorist, says this about learning: “There are three kinds of men. The ones that learn by reading. The few who learn by observation. The rest of them have to pee on the electric fence for themselves.”



Figure 1.4 Reading about a subject is the best way for a firefighter to learn about firefighting. The need to read doesn't stop when you put on the uniform. You need to constantly update your knowledge base by reading trade magazines, after-action reports, or anything else that will provide new information.

“You can see a lot by observing.”
Yogi Berra

- **Reading** – When you read and learn about firefighting, you can do so without risking life and limb. Reading allows you to learn from experts—firefighters who have “been there, done that.” The more technical or dangerous the subject, the more you need to study it before attempting to do the job (Figure 1.4).

Watching is good.

- **Observing** – One of the best ways to learn is by watching competent firefighters do their job. Watch how they approach a problem and how they relate to others in the

chain of command. Listen to what they say and how they say it. Watch how they think through a situation before they act (Figure 1.5).

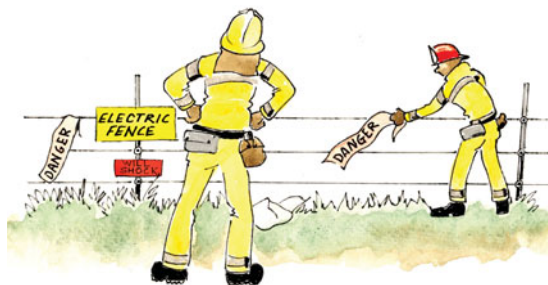


Figure 1.5 Observing or watching is also a good learning strategy. However, make sure that what you are watching is being done properly. Sometimes on-the-job training only perpetuates bad habits or techniques.

You can also learn a lot by watching the fire and what it is doing or not doing. Notice how weather, fuels, topography and aspect are influencing fire behavior. Look at how various suppression strategies and tactics are working (or not working). Take time to see what is going on and why.

- **Attempting** – Every new firefighter just wants to get out there and fight that fire. But knowing what to do is something else. The key to safe firefighting is understanding what to do under any circumstances—something that starts by learning the basics from a book. Firefighting is too dangerous to attempt without a full understanding of what one is doing. Mistakes get people killed (Figure 1.6).

Experimenting with something you have never done before may be okay when the consequences of making a mistake are minimal. However, in a dangerous profession like firefighting, it is a foolish way to learn the trade. It is best if you learn about firefighting in this order: **Read—Observe—Attempt**.



Figure 1.6 All too often, firefighters take on something they don't fully understand. If this firefighter had taken the time to read about electricity or had observed the consequences of someone else peeing on an electric fence, he probably would not have done it. If you do pee on an electric fence, you quickly become an expert who will readily warn others not to make the same mistake.

You can get hurt attempting something you know nothing about.

Attempting, without first reading and observing, can be dangerous!

There is a new norm!

A New Era and Some Realities

Despite all of our advances in fire protection and emergency response, we have seen an increase in devastating wildland fires. Among the worst in the United States was the 2003 Cedar Fire in Southern California that killed 15 people, destroyed or damaged over 2,800 structures, and burned over 273,246 acres. A series of tragic fires in Victoria, Australia, in 2009 killed 173 people, destroyed over 2,000 homes, and burned over 1.1 million acres.

Roger Underwood has nearly 50 years experience in bushfire management. He started his career in a firefighting crew, became a district and regional forester, and spent nine years as general manager of the Department of Conservation and Land Management in Western Australia, where he was responsible for fire management in state forests, national parks and nature reserves for the western third of Australia.

Following the disastrous fire in Victoria, Roger Underwood wrote an article titled, ***Wisdom versus Folly...A case study in Australian Bushfire Management: a case study in wisdom versus folly.***⁽²⁾ He paints a very different picture of the problem and potential solution. The following are some sobering excerpts from his article.

***We are fighting a battle
we cannot win!***

“Many years ago, still a young man, I watched for the first time the grainy, flickering black and white film of the British infantry making their attack on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. The stark and terrible footage shows the disciplined soldiers climbing from their trenches and, in line abreast, walking slowly across no-man’s land towards the enemy lines. They scarcely travel a few paces before the German machine gunners open up. They are mown down in their thousands. They are chaff before a wind of fire.

“I can still remember being struck nerveless by these images, and later my anger when I realized what that calamitous carnage represented. It spoke of the deep incompetence of the Generals who devised this strategy of doom and then insisted upon its implementation....

*“The catastrophic bushfires in Victoria this year...are dramatic expressions **not just of killing forces unleashed**, but of human folly... [T]hese bushfires and their outcomes speak of incompetent leadership and of failed imaginations.... To me, these fires toll like bells: they toll for failed leadership, failed governance and failed land management.*

⁽²⁾ Excerpts printed with permission of Roger Underwood. For a copy of the full article, go to www.deervalleypress.com.

“No, our politicians and bushfire generals cannot say they have not been warned. They cannot say there were no lessons to learn. They cannot say the message had not been sent.

“They can only say that it was not received, or that it was received but ignored. Neither excuse is acceptable....

“There are two answers.

“1. The first is political. Put simply, in the last 25 years and when it comes to bushfire management... governments have failed to govern. The focus of politicians has been on getting elected or staying in power, not in providing intelligent, tough and effective governance. This has led to political parties courting the preference votes of pressure groups and of city-based electors who are in the thrall of pressure group philosophies.

“2. The second explanation is technical. In recent years many...authorities have been seduced by the siren call of technology. This has lured them into a fatal trap. Their assumption is that any fire can be contained so long as they get it early and then have enough hardware to throw at it.”

“Every year more money is poured into the purchase of super-expensive equipment, but the outcomes on the ground just get worse.

“The choices...are straight-forward: do...[we] want our bushfire and land management planning done by professionals with front-line experience, or by campus intellectuals and ideologists? Is it smarter to manage bushfire fuels by burning them at times of our own choosing when conditions are mild, or to stand back, do nothing and risk being engulfed by fire at the worst possible time?... [Do] we see humans as part of the ecosystem and plan accordingly, or do we see them as interlopers, as illegal immigrants in the...bush?

You may agree or disagree with Underwood’s conclusions, but you have to agree he raises some important and timely points. Most of these problems are not unique to Australia. They are being encountered by wildland firefighters worldwide. His solutions definitely speak to the importance of good, strong leadership in the fire service.

Governments all over the world are failing to lead.

We simply are being overwhelmed!

We need to do everything we can to improve the forest health and reduce the fuel loading.

The New “Mega-Fire”

Historically, there have been three levels of firefighting complexity:

- **Initial Attack Fires** – The vast majority of wildland fires can be classed as initial attack fires. These are the fires that are normally controlled quickly, before they cause too much damage. The burning conditions are low to moderate, and the first-alarm forces can usually handle the situation. Most of the time, firefighting forces use offensive strategies. A limited incident command organization may be established.
- **Extended Attack Fires** – These fires go beyond initial attack, but can't be classified as major fires. An extended attack fire may last for several days and require some logistical support, but not to the extent of setting up a base camp. An incident command organization is established, but with limited command staff and fewer than four divisions.
- **Major Fires** – Less than five percent of fires are major fires. These fires usually occur during periods of drought, when it is hot and dry, when the winds are blowing, or when there are numerous fires, usually caused by a dry-lightning storm. A combination of offensive and defensive strategies will be in play. Homes and communities may be threatened, and firefighting resources may be in short supply. Some of these fires are staffed for weeks or months. The vast majority of suppression dollars are spent on large fires. Fires of this complexity in 1970 in Southern California, brought about the development of the Incident Command System.

When the fire is running hard, situational awareness can be lost.

Those involved in a mega-fire have to train others.

Recent history makes it apparent that there is a fourth level of fire complexity. This is called the “mega-fire.”

- **Mega-fires** – Fires of this complexity are usually disasters, where civilians and firefighters are killed, hundreds of homes are lost, and thousands of acres are burned. Communities are threatened, and infrastructure and services are lost. The fire behavior is extreme for an extended period of time and the firefighting efforts are defensive...save what you can. Situational awareness can be lost at all levels, and plans are often obsolete before they can be printed. Because these situations are so fluid, authority for tactical planning and operational decisions are delegated to the branch director level. The command authority provides broad direction, but the branch director is responsible for on-the-ground firefighting.

Mutual aid is the key to much-needed firefighting resources.

What can the fire service do to prevent or control fires of this complexity? We can't stop these mega-fires by building better fire engines or airtankers. We don't need to spend millions of dollars on research. We already know what needs to be done:

- **Learn from Experience** – Learn from fire officers who have already faced these mega-fires. What did they do right? What strategies and tactics worked? How did they meet their logistical needs? How did they make the incident command system work for them?

Look, also, at the mistakes that were made and how you can avoid making similar mistakes. Keep in mind that one of the best ways to avoid making mistakes is to **practice doing something correctly**. When we merely critique our errors after a fire or drill but don't **practice** doing it right, we reinforce bad habits more so than good ones. It's a matter of muscle memory. We remember more of those things which we have **done** versus those things which we have only **talked about**.

The homeowners and landowners are both the problem and the solution!

- **Strengthen Mutual Aid** – Review and update your mutual aid agreements, and correct any problems. Talk with your neighbors, train with your neighbors, and meet with them any chance you can. It is all about trust!
- **Involve the Homeowners and Landowners** – Although it is controversial and expensive, one of the most effective ways to reduce fuel loading is to reintroduce fire into the wildlands. We must also educate homeowners on the value of fire protection planning at their level, including the benefits of a fire-resistant home and the importance of adequate clearance around structures.

That is all it takes. That ... plus getting our politicians, fire officials, special interest groups, and the public on board. We need to move past competing agendas and focus on the desired results.

The purpose of this first chapter was to give you some general food for thought and set the stage for the rest of the book. The next five chapters (Chapters 2 through 6) deal with leadership, safety, situational awareness, decision-making and tactical planning. In each of these chapters, the information presented will be tied to wildland fire operations. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with command, control and communications, and tactical operations. The information presented in these chapters will be tied back to leadership, safety, etc. The final chapter, Chapter 9, presents 14 historic fires that we should not forget. In most of them, brave firefighters died doing what they had been trained to do. We would do them a disservice if we didn't learn from their deaths.