

## **Where Experience Used to Live**

### ***How Young Officers Get Lost In the Leadership Gap***

The fire service has never poured more time, money, and energy into leadership than it does today. We offer classes on progressive discipline, workshops on difficult conversations, and comprehensive programs designed to shape the next generation of officers. Yet the leadership gap has never felt wider. In the past, officers were not promoted to learn how to lead; they were promoted because they had already proven they could. Although not every officer lived up to that standard, and not all earned the respect of their peers, the expectation was clear: leadership came first. Training may have sharpened their craft, but leadership was the reason they were chosen.

In today's fire service, the process feels reversed. We promote firefighters into the company officer role and then scramble to teach them what leadership means after the fact. The cost of that reversal exposes the leadership gap that we have created.

Across the country, firefighters talk about their departments going through generational rebuilds, with a large percentage of their workforce carrying less than ten years on the job. You can look at almost any department and see the same story. The result is a vacuum at the company officer level, now filled by individuals stepping up with far less time on the job than generations before them.

I know this because I am one of them. Less time on the job means fewer fireground repetitions, fewer kitchen table lessons, and fewer morning conversations where knowledge and culture were once passed down. Stepping into leadership earlier than expected takes courage, but it must be done for the right reasons because the responsibilities are monumental. Young officers need to push harder, learn faster, and become the leaders this moment requires.

The problem is clear, but the opportunity is just as powerful.

Before you promote, or even while considering the process, you should take every opportunity to experience the fireground through as many operational lenses as your department makes available. Ride different rigs, shadow different officers, and see the job from every angle you can. And if those opportunities are not available, there are endless resources waiting to be tapped into. Mentors in this profession will often guide you at no cost. The only payment they expect is your willingness to learn. Maintain a growth mindset. It does not matter where you are on the promotional list, or if you are preparing for the exam, you must maintain a consistent growth mindset.

Study leadership and human behavior beyond the fire service. The private sector is full of books that have shaped the business world, just as the military has produced timeless lessons on discipline, strategy, and command. There are endless resources on human emotion, critical thinking, and decision-making. The possibilities are limitless. The fireground may test your tactics, but leadership will test something deeper in your ability to understand people, influence them, and guide them when it matters most.

Learn to listen. Some of the most valuable lessons you will ever receive will come from senior firefighters who may have no interest in promoting but carry decades of knowledge and

credibility. Do not fight to be the loudest in the room. Sit down, keep quiet, and pay attention to the stories, the side comments, and the nuggets of wisdom that surface in everyday conversation. The people you take the time to hear now will become your advocates later. They will speak on your behalf when you are in the room, and more importantly, when you are not. That is the kind of advocacy that carries weight in a firehouse.

Seek feedback relentlessly. Too many future officers wait until the badge is pinned on before asking how they are doing. The best leaders start long before promotion. Feedback needs to be universal. Ask for honest evaluations on how you make decisions, how you communicate under pressure, how you carry yourself in the firehouse, and how you perform on the fireground. Do not just wait for praise. Ask for the hard truths, the uncomfortable observations, and the things others might notice but not say unless you invite it. That feedback will expose blind spots and give you a chance to correct them now, before those weaknesses are magnified when you step into the front seat. More importantly, it shows humility. It shows a willingness to seek out criticism and use it to grow.

At the end of the day, the most important step you can take before promotion is knowing your “why” and living it every single day. Exams, lists, and study guides might put you in the seat, but they will not make you a leader. When the tones drop and the crew turns to you, they are not looking for the perfect answer from a manual. They are looking for your leadership. That comes from having a clear sense of who you are, what you value, and the standard you refuse to compromise. Define that now, before the badge is pinned on your chest. The fire service has too many people simply filling positions. What it needs are officers ready to carry the weight of leadership and to do it with purpose. If you are willing to put in the work, seek opportunities, study beyond the basics, ask for feedback, and know your “why,” you will redefine leadership for the next generation.