

Understanding Leadership Through the Eyes of a 17-Year-Old

I didn't learn this lesson in a classroom or from a leadership book. I saw it at a funeral. My 17-year-old nephew passed away, and like most, I walked in expecting grief, sadness, and closure. What I didn't expect was a demonstration of connection and leadership from a group of teenagers. After the service ended and the adults began to leave, the 17-year-olds stayed. They stayed while the dirt was placed, while the grave was finished, and while the workers packed up. When everyone else was gone, they stayed. They sat together, holding hands in silence for over an hour. It was the same the night before at the funeral home. They did not want to leave. But they stayed because they were connected to something bigger than themselves. In that moment, I realized we may be completely misunderstanding this generation.

In the fire service, we often describe Gen Z as disengaged, distracted, or lacking commitment. What I witnessed challenged that narrative. Research continues to show that Gen Z prioritizes purpose, connection, and impact over traditional motivators like salary or benefits. They are not avoiding hard work. They are avoiding work that lacks meaning. They are a generation raised in a digitally connected world but often deprived of real-world community. Because of that, they crave belonging in a way that is deeper and more immediate than generations before them. Two consistent themes show up in the data. A lack of purpose. A lack of community. Both drive dissatisfaction. If that is true, we need to ask hard questions. Are we providing either of those in the firehouse?

We pride ourselves on calling the fire service a brotherhood. A family. Something bigger than ourselves. Yet when a probationary firefighter walks through the door, we often do the opposite of what we claim to value. We isolate them. We tell them to earn their place before they can belong. We assign them tasks like coffee, dishes, and chores. Those have their place. But let's be clear. Chores are not empowerment. They are responsibilities. They are not leadership. Somewhere along the line, we convinced ourselves that withholding connection builds toughness. What it often builds is disconnection. We are excellent at enforcing standards. We are not always intentional about creating purpose.

Every action in this job carries weight. How a firefighter pulls a line matters. How they force a door matters. How they interact with the public matters. Lives are influenced by small decisions. But are we telling them that? Are we giving them the why behind the expectation? Or are we just correcting performance without connecting it to purpose? When a firefighter only hears what they are doing wrong and never hears why it matters, engagement fades. The issue is not always capability. It is clarity and connection.

What those 17-year-olds showed me is simple. Connection does not require rank, time, or permission. It requires intentional leadership. They stayed because they felt responsible to each other. They stayed because they were part of something meaningful. That is the environment we claim to have in the fire service. Too often, we delay that experience for our newest members. We take individuals who are searching for belonging and place them into a system that withholds it. Sometimes for 12 to 18 months. Then we question why they struggle to engage.

This is not a call to lower standards or eliminate probation. Standards matter. Training matters. Accountability matters. Leadership also requires evolution. We must find a balance between discipline and connection. Between earning your place and understanding your purpose. We can demand excellence while still building inclusion. We can train hard while still reinforcing meaning. Most importantly, we can ensure that from day one, every firefighter understands that what they do matters. Not someday. Not after probation. Immediately.

We often say the next generation needs to adapt to the fire service. That may be true. Leadership demands a harder question. Are we adapting enough to lead them? If a group of 17-year-olds can demonstrate a level of connection that surpasses what we claim as a brotherhood, then maybe the issue is not their willingness to belong. Maybe it is our willingness to bring them in.