

FIRE RESCUE 1

WHAT FIREFIGHTERS WANTTM 2024

STRONG LEADERSHIP

More than 1,300 firefighters speak up about the impact of poor agency leadership on staffing, morale and more.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Three years into the What Firefighters Want project, surveying firefighters across the United States and Canada, one issue continues to emerge as a pain point: poor agency leadership.

FireRescue1's 2024 state-of-the-industry survey revealed some alarming statistics related to fire department leadership:

- **76%** of respondents reported concerns about their fire department leadership
- **49%** indicated that poor agency leadership has a high impact on retention
- **33%** have considered leaving their department because of the fire chief

But it's certainly not all bad news. Respondents also highlighted how their fire chiefs and other officers alike excel, providing a roadmap for leaders to emulate.

I encourage you to review this special edition exploring respondents' perceptions of their leaders' values, priorities, competencies, leadership and interpersonal skills, always with an eye toward continuous improvement, not only for yourself but the members who look to you for guidance and mentorship. And visit the [What Firefighters Want resource page](#) for additional analysis, including first-person perspectives on how fire chiefs and other supervisors can better serve their agencies, guidance for seeking professional development, and much more.

Lastly, to those of you who completed the survey, a heartfelt thank you for sharing your perspective. This survey will help inform leaders about how best to support their members.

Stay safe and take care.

— Janelle Foskett,
Editor-in-Chief, FireRescue1

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A silhouette of a firefighter in full gear, including a helmet and jacket, stands with their back to the camera. They are positioned in front of a bright, intense fire that fills the background with orange and yellow flames. The firefighter's figure is dark against the glowing fire.

POOR LEADERSHIP:

THE

**DRIVING
FACTOR**

IN RETENTION CHALLENGES

‘People don’t leave
bad jobs, they leave
bad bosses’
– and the fire service
is no exception

WRITTEN BY
John Oates

When was the last time you chatted with your fire service friends or coworkers and recruitment and retention wasn’t part of the conversation? It was probably pre-pandemic. This hot-button issue was a constant topic of conversation during hallway gatherings and seminars at this year’s FDIC, the Women in Fire’s Leadership Conference and CFSI’s annual symposium. While there are pockets of success that we should learn from, most fire departments are still struggling to get and keep members.

The results of the recent FireRescue1 What Firefighters Want survey show that this issue isn’t going away any time soon, and the problem is becoming more and more pressing, as too many departments are rapidly losing members.

Problematic leadership is everywhere

When asked to identify the key factors impacting retention of experienced members, **49%** of the more than 1,300 active firefighters who responded to the survey signaled poor agency leadership as a driving factor. Furthermore, nearly **33%** of survey respondents reported that they have considered leaving the fire department. What’s important to note here is that they aren’t considering leaving because of their age, the work, the calls or grouchy coworkers; they are leaving because of their bosses, specifically their fire chief’s personal values or leadership skills.

And **20%** reported that they have considered leaving due to their feelings about their direct supervisor, which includes company and chief officer positions.

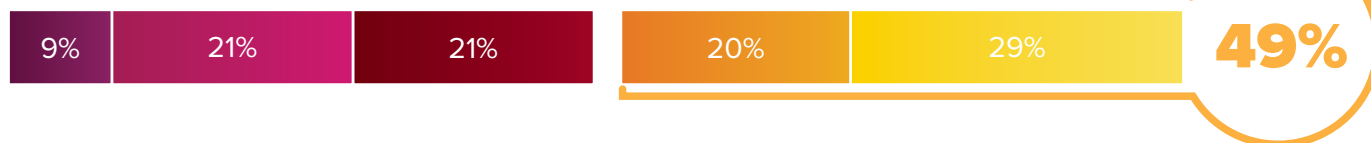
We routinely say the fire service is the best job in the world, yet members are willing to leave because so many of the leaders whom we entrust to improve and maintain the fire service are simply terrible at what they do – sometimes at their own hands and sometimes because they were set up to fail. If you’re wondering, the data was clear that the problem exists across volunteer, career and combination departments. In other words, no, your organization is not immune or somehow special. Organizations of all shapes and sizes are affected by bad leadership that damages their reputation and ability to attract and keep talent. That damage then affects the department’s ability to provide service to their community.

Variations of the quote “people don’t leave bad jobs, they leave bad bosses” abound in the discourse around corporate culture. While not everyone agrees with this sentiment, this much is known: It is destabilizing, expensive and time-consuming to continually replace people that leave. One of the contrarian views posits that people leave their jobs because they find the work uninteresting or boring. This is likely not the case for the fire service but should be a caution. Do we challenge our employees

How much of an impact do you feel the following issues are having on your fire department's retention of experienced members?

No impact
Low impact
Moderate impact
High impact
Very high impact

Poor agency leadership



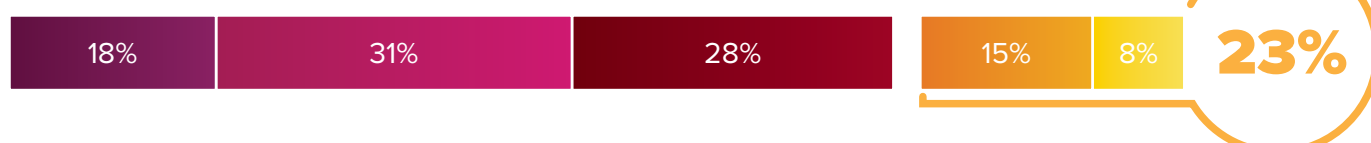
Staffing challenges



Compensation



EMS calls



Personal health risks



Compensation

Paperwork/writing reports



Fireground dangers





Photo/Keith Cullom

with new and meaningful change, or are we simply doing the same thing the same way every day/month/year? Do we create systems that allow us to leverage the talent of our members on special projects or tasks?

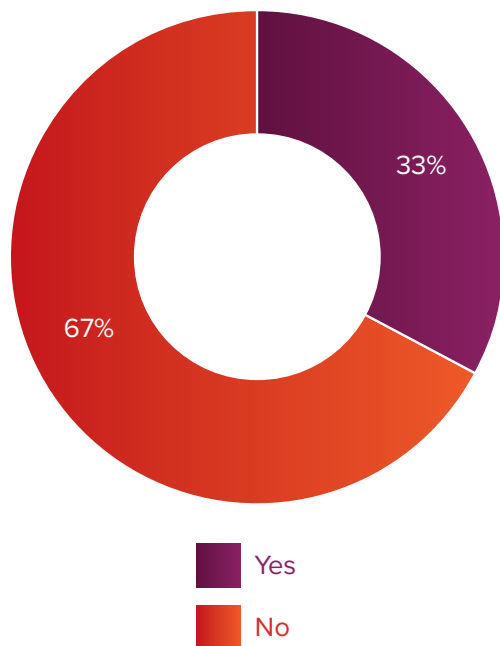
This is one of the foundational roles of a strong leader – ensuring that people are challenged and connected to the service they provide. And yet, the very people entrusted to fix the problem are potentially a huge part of the problem.

For the career fire service, bad bosses are often created because we didn't prepare them to be bosses, particularly in the places where it matters – solid fireground operations and solid fire station (people) operations. This is often based in lousy or non-existent promotional processes, poor preparation of candidates (preparing to take a test is not the same as preparing to do the work), or systems where promotions are based on

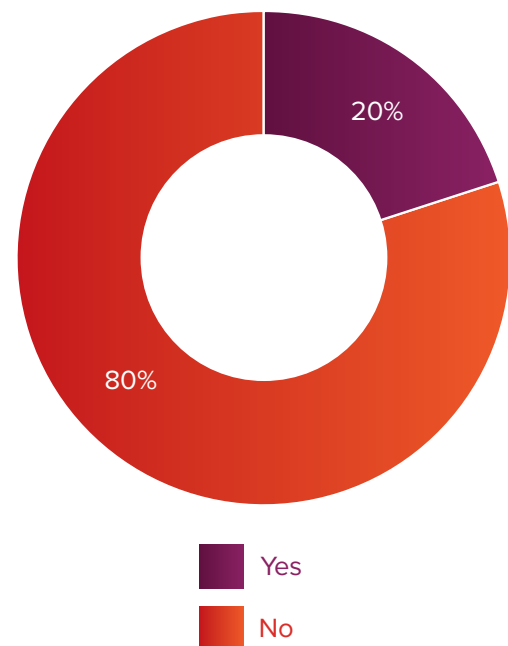
favoritism, poor agency politics or even seniority. In volunteer systems, the problems are often similar – people are thrust into positions where they are unprepared or ill-equipped to execute.

Notable in the survey is the correlation between wanting to leave the department due to poor agency leadership and the systems where the fire chief is elected. Popularity contests are a lousy way to select the person who will lead your emergency service organization, particularly when there aren't thresholds for education, experience or other measurable knowledge, skills and abilities for the position. We cannot scream about the need to increase the professionalization of the service, demand better support from our local, state and national leaders, and then treat the selection of our leadership like it was a superlatives category for the middle school yearbook (assuming yearbooks are still a thing).

Have you considered leaving your department primarily due to your feelings about your fire chief?



Have you considered leaving your department primarily due to your feelings about your direct supervisor?



The mirror and measuring tape

How do I know if I am the bad boss? First, ask yourself if you have enabled a culture or environment of honest feedback. When someone indicates your performance wasn't 100% meeting expectations, do you listen, pivot and improve, or do you revert to a position of defensiveness?

Understanding the rigid rank structure of the department, it is difficult to enable honest and accurate feedback across the organization. It's simply unheard of in some organizations for anyone to question or even offer the idea (in person, to their face or even in a memo) that the chief (or other officer) isn't 100% correct all of the time. The result is the fire service equivalent of "the emperor has no clothes" from the Hans Christian Andersen parable from 1837. If you haven't read it or your grade school memories are failing you, take a minute and review it. The lesson for fire chiefs and supervisors of any rank is that when you surround yourself with "yes-people," it often leads to absurd and embarrassing results. Creating a culture of honest, sound feedback and an open exchange of ideas is vital for success. Think of it as the in-

station equivalent of crew resource management. We don't want the chief/officer to fly the plane (fire department) into the ground if there is information or efforts that can prevent it.

Every fire chief or fire service leader should have a mirror and a tape measure.

- The purpose of the mirror is not to impress yourself when you look at your bling. Rather, it is to see behind you to understand who is following you. You are not leading if no one is willingly following.
- The tape measure is useful to gauge your success. Have we improved the department's ability to serve the community? Note that I did not say simply improve the department, as everything we do must have a tangible benefit to the people we serve.

Speaking up

Not surprisingly, survey respondents highlighted poor agency leadership as one of the least-satisfying aspects of working in the fire service. When asked why they selected poor agency

leadership as their #1 least-satisfying aspect of the job, survey respondents offered important insights into their experiences. A few quotes stood out.

“Leadership cares more about themselves than their personnel.”

There is a simple order of priority within our organizations that must be crystal clear: First, the fire department exists to provide service to our citizens. Second, the members (firefighters, officers, trainers, CRR personnel, etc.) exist to ensure that service is delivered to the citizens in an effective, equitable, safe and sensible manner. Bosses exist to ensure that the members have everything they need to do both. Period. It's not about your ego, your status, your big office, or your fire SUV. If you are uncertain whether this describes you, try this: If you spend more time agonizing about what important decisions mean to you personally than what they mean to the department and community, you're doing it wrong.

“Antiquated administration.”

It's not your job for life, you have no divine right to that position, it's not ordained in the company/ community charter, and you shouldn't be doing it the same way you did when you started in that role.

When was the last time you attended training? Challenged yourself with something new? Attended a conference? Refreshed something that you hadn't done in a while?

If you can't recall the last time you tested your brain with something new, it's time for a change. This is particularly critical for key issues impacting your department and the greater fire service – issues like recruitment and retention. The universe, for both career and volunteer fire departments, has changed dramatically. Applying the same approaches your department used in 1984 to your approach in 2024 will predictably fail. Understand that this is not ageism but rather an acknowledgement that all of us have a tactical and technical obsolescence that is rapidly approaching. It approaches faster if you



do not remain invested in education, training and personal professional development. If that sounds like too much work, or if you're just not interested in changing, that's OK; the fire service still has a role for you to fill as the angry old guy that sits in the back of the room during the monthly meeting and gripes about how it isn't "the good old days" (whatever that was) as more and more members join the ranks, looking over their shoulders at you and shaking their heads.

"Expectation of leadership without formal training."

One of the worst things the fire service (or any group) can do is place people in leadership positions without training them for what they are actually going to do. How well do we train our new officers to discharge the duties of their new position? Do we simply give them a login to do fire reports and a new helmet and send them on their way?

We also have an often-misplaced expectation that those members who are good firefighters will automatically (and without training) be good officers. Expecting this transformation to occur without the same level of preparation that went into them becoming good firefighters is irrational. Using Malcom Gladwell's 10,000-hour threshold, it takes over 5 years to get "good" at something. There's no magic in fire officer and leader development, so we should assume that the same developmental time is needed to become effective in their role.

Final thoughts

Myriad reasons contribute to the decision to join the fire service. Be it family, friends, the nature of the work, support for or from the community, or simply the desire to do something meaningful, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to choose to be a member of the fire service. Similarly, there are myriad reasons people leave: demands on

time, poor compensation, change in community location, retirement or the emotionally draining nature of the job. What shouldn't be on that list: poor fire department leadership.

If you see your department in any of the examples above, it's time to start making changes. Even if you don't feel like this applies to you, carefully contemplate the impact your officers (from chief of department down to lieutenants/first line supervisors) have on the conduct, contribution and cohesion of the department and their company. If you wouldn't want them as a supervisor or leader of your daughter, son, niece, nephew, favorite neighbor – really anyone important to you – then it's time to make a change.

If you see yourself as part of the problem, then you're already on your way to finding a solution. Take a deep dive into why people aren't productive, contributing or sticking around. Once you find the problem, get to work fixing it. Don't know where to start? That's OK, the survey analysis ahead continues to dissect and offer lessons about what firefighters want (and need) in 2024. [**1**](#))

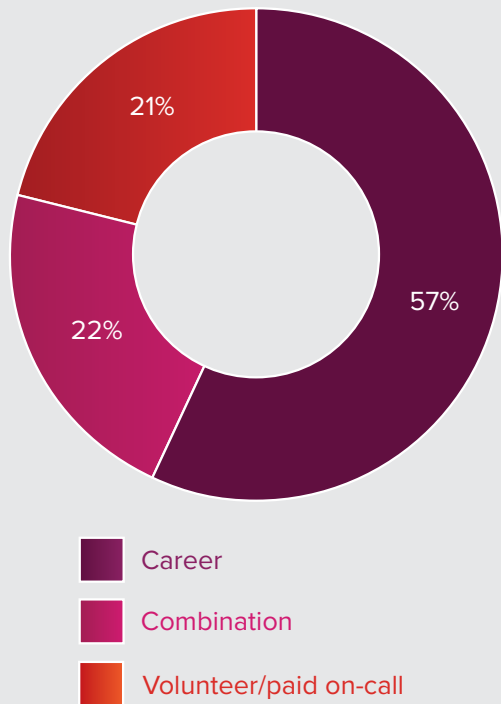
About the author

John Oates is the CEO of the International Public Safety Data Institute. Prior to being appointed as CEO, he served as chief of the East Hartford (Connecticut) Fire Department. He has a bachelor's degree from Franklin Pierce University, a master's degree from Oklahoma State University and is a graduate of the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program. Chief Oates is a longtime contributor to the NFFF's Everyone Goes Home Program and serves as a member of the Behavioral Health Advisory Committee created by the First Responder Center for Excellence.

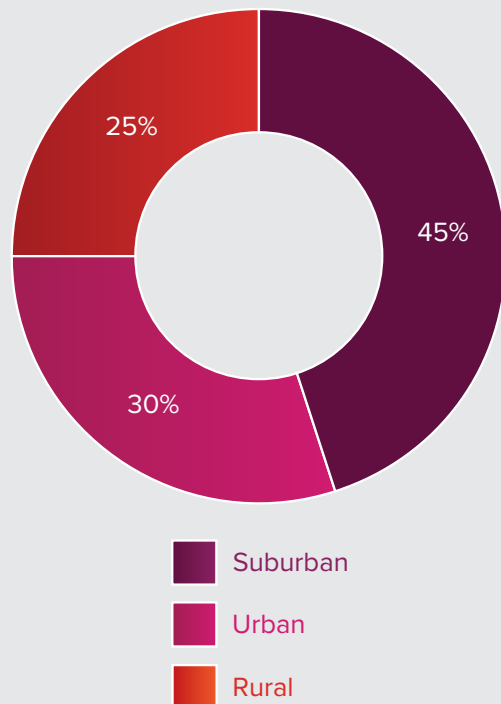
BY THE NUMBERS

The second-annual What Firefighters Want survey saw great engagement, with more than 1,300 active firefighters completing the survey. Here’s a snapshot of who shared their insights on their fire department leadership.

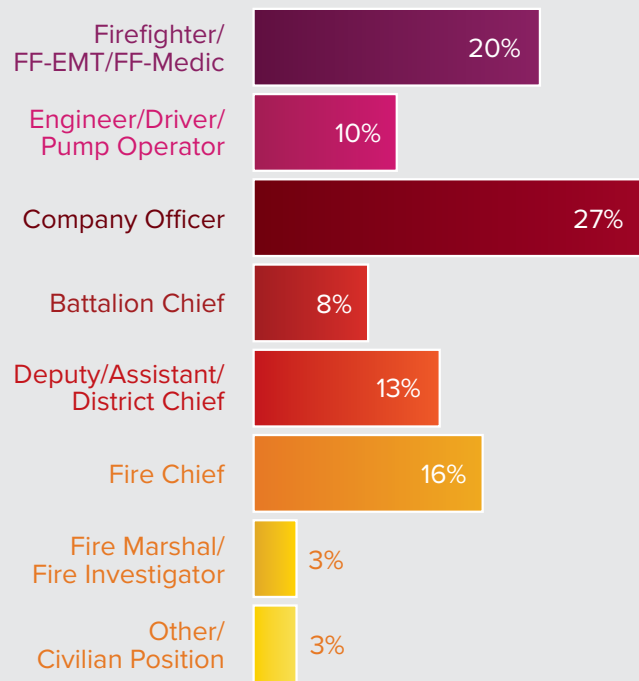
Agency Type



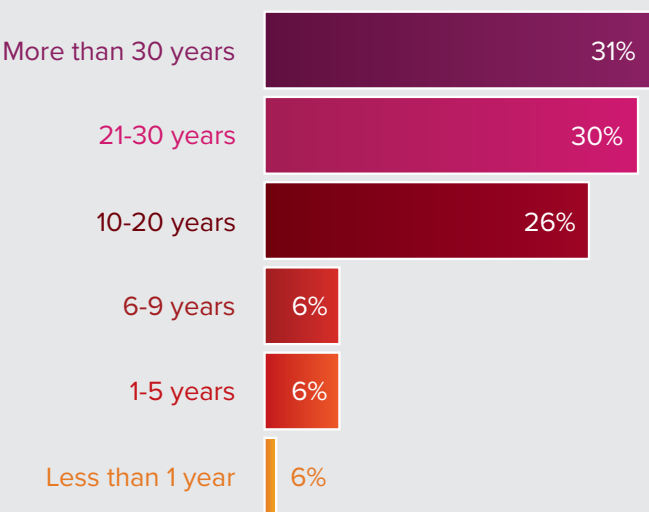
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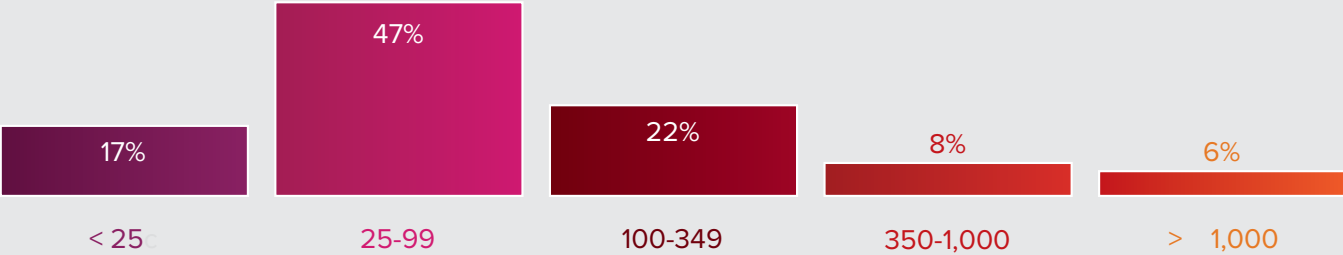
Highest-Ranking Current Title



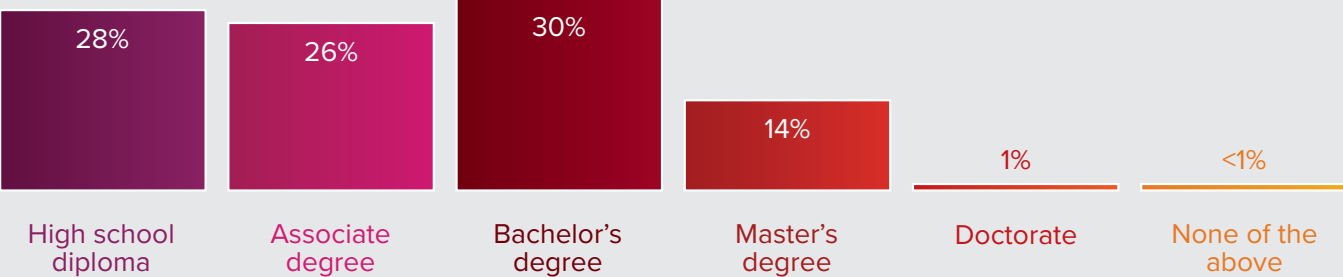
Years in the Fire Service



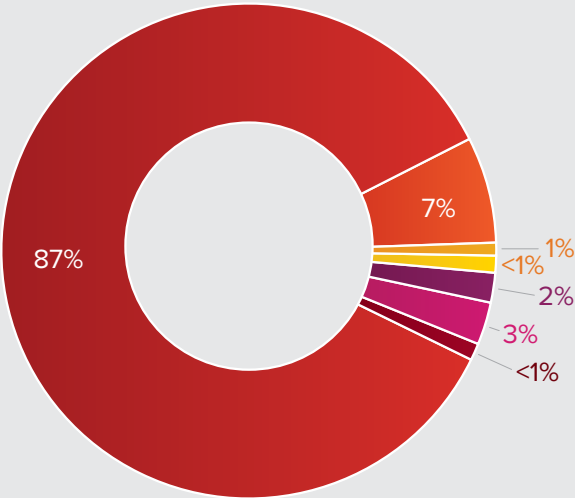
Number of Firefighters at Department



Highest Level of Education

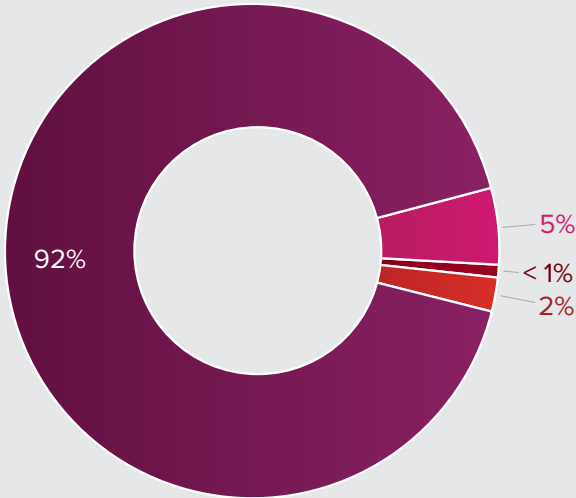


Ethnicity



- Black/African American
- Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- White/Caucasian
- Prefer not to answer
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian

Gender



- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to answer



ARE WE, AS FIRE SERVICE LEADERS, **FAILING** OUR MEMBERS?

WRITTEN BY

Fire Chief Darryl Jones

A good leader accepts that they may not have created the problem, but they are responsible for fixing it

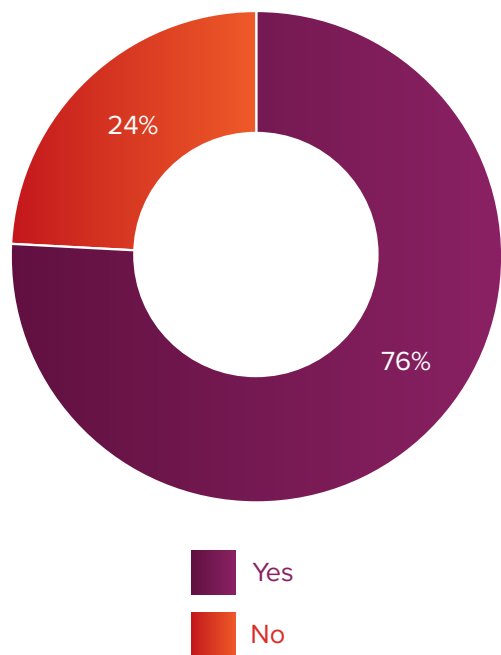
Are you worried about the leadership at your department at any level? If so, at what level do you see poor leadership in your department?

Big questions with worrisome answers from the respondents to FireRescue1's newest What Firefighters Want survey.

More than three-quarters of respondents **(76%)** answered yes – they are worried about leadership in their departments. And where the respondents identified leadership issues might surprise you: Nearly **62%** reported poor leadership at the company officer level, over **64%** highlighted the chief officer level, **57%** selected the fire chief position, and **43%** pointed to poor leadership at a political level. (Let's pause to take that in for a moment: Our firefighters are seeing better leadership from politicians than they are from those of us entrusted to lead our organizations. Are you kidding me?)

I am going to lead with my chin here. If you are a fire chief, mid-level officer (deputy chief, assistant chief, battalion chief), company officer (lieutenant,

Are you worried about the leadership at your department at any level?



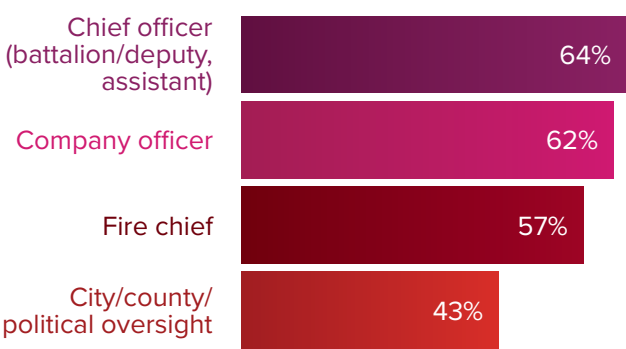
captain) or a member of a fire or emergency services organization, then you are partly to blame for these dismal leadership conditions. Hear me out.

Are leaders born or made?

There are myriad leadership styles, everything from autocratic leadership and servant leadership to situational leadership and beyond. However, there are two opposing positions when it comes to delineating the necessary qualifications or characteristics of the individual leader. Each of the two opposing positions are founded on the answer to the question, “Are leaders born or are they made?” We can chase the answer to this question so far down the rabbit hole that we will experience decompression sickness trying to climb out. So why mention it? Because I believe leaders are created, and I want to remove the argument of not being born with leadership traits as an excuse for failure.

The truth of the matter is this: Whether we were born with leadership traits or developed into leaders, we were either forced into or sought after and accepted a leadership position within our organizations. With the position of

At what level do you see poor leadership in your department? (Select all that apply.)



leader, at any level, comes responsibilities and expectations. And based on the responses in the most recent What Firefighters Want survey, we are clearly failing as leaders in all capacities.

But misery loves company. We are not failures alone. Our constituency, our team, our subordinates, those with whom we serve as leaders must accept some of the blame as well.

Hold on, Chief! What do you mean I share in the blame? I am just a black hat; I ride backwards. How do I hold any responsibility for this mess?!

Patience, Grasshopper, allow me to explain.

Leadership is not a noun. It is not a person, place or thing. Although we often use it as such, leadership is not an adjective either. It does not provide a description of a person, place or thing. Leadership is a verb. It is used to describe an action, state or occurrence. Going one step further, for our purposes, leadership is an action verb. It is something we do, like running, swimming and learning. And action verbs necessitate a process. As a process, being born with the traits of good leadership, or acquiring the traits through training, education and experience, becomes inconsequential. The process of leadership is the same.

Leaders talk leadership

As Jocko Willink and Leif Babin explain in [“Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win,”](#) for there to be leadership, there



Photo/Seth Lasko

must be followers. There can be no leadership without followers. Therefore, leadership is a transaction between leader and follower. Leaders who are part of the process affect followers, and followers who are part of the process affect leaders. As you can see, leadership is clearly interactive. Moreover, as Peter Northouse explains in [“Leadership: Theory and Practice,”](#) in the leadership process, the responsibility to lead belongs to everyone, not just the formal leader.

As leaders, we must accept the responsibility for this failure. President Harry Truman is credited with the phrase “The buck stops here.” This implies he was exposed to leaders who did not want to accept responsibility, who shifted blame. Truman understood that as the leader of the country, he was ultimately responsible for every problem. The leader is responsible for all problems and all failures, and therefore must be prepared to suffer all consequences ([Willink & Babin](#)). With this in mind, if you are unable or unwilling to accept this prerequisite of leadership, please pass on seeking and/or accepting a leadership position.

I am hopeful that by now you are willing to accept the responsibility for this failure in leadership and are willing to address it. This problem did not pop up overnight. The results of the What Firefighters Want survey are not part of an ambush. There were warning signs – signs we either did not clearly see or that we chose to ignore.

In his book [“Upstream: How to Solve Problems Before They Happen,”](#) Dan Heath describes a phenomenon he calls problem blindness. With problem blindness, we accept a situation or hazard as we would the weather. We recognize it, we may not like it, but accept it as being beyond our control. Problem blindness can cause a leader to fail to recognize a looming disaster, and this failure can have a catastrophic impact on an organization.

Problem blindness aligns with Michele Wucker’s perspective on a leader’s failure to respond to an urgent problem. As Wucker describes in her book [“The Gray Rhino: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Dangers We Ignore,”](#) there are multiple reasons leaders fail to respond to the

warning signals of an impending problem. These include, but are not limited to:

- Procrastination – leaders put off taking action, hoping the problem goes away;
- Not wanting to be an alarmist – the leader does not want to appear in a panic or out of control;
- Internal bias – the leader feels the situation is not an issue;
- Groupthink – the leader wants to go with the flow and does not want to rock the boat. No one wants to tell the emperor he is naked; and
- Normalization of deviance – the leader knows there is a problem, but since the problem has not produced any immediate consequences, the problem is ignored.

Furthermore, we live and operate within a social, political and economic system that incentivizes inaction. As Wucker explains, many leaders are only interested in making it through the next election cycle, the next fiscal year or the end of their current term. As such, they become solely focused on short-term gains and, therefore, kick the can down the road.

Difficult conversations

A critical first step is taking ownership of the problem. We should explain/define the problem as if we are 100% responsible for the problem. Leaders who accept a problem as “unsolvable,” “not my fault” or “just the way it is” are suffering from problem blindness. Whether they accept it or not, the leader holds the ultimate responsibility for everything. A good leader accepts that they may not have created the problem, but they are responsible for fixing the problem.



Where do we start? Communication. As a leader, you are going to have to initiate a conversation, likely a “difficult conversation,” as defined by authors Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila in their book, [“Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most.”](#) Difficult conversations are those that make us feel uncomfortable, where we risk our self-esteem or there is concern about the outcome – conversations that are difficult because we fear the outcome. Are we going to be rejected or embarrassed? Will a relationship end? Will people be angry with me? Bottom line: There is no way to avoid the consequences of a difficult

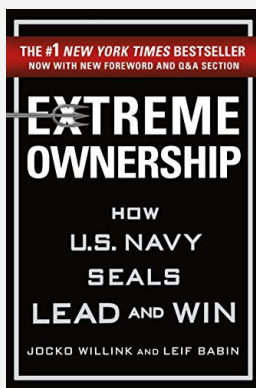
conversation, and forgoing the conversation is simply not an option.

It takes guts to lead – and to have difficult conversations. It is best to meet with your subordinates in small groups. This is not difficult for company officers; however, higher ranks may have to make special accommodations.

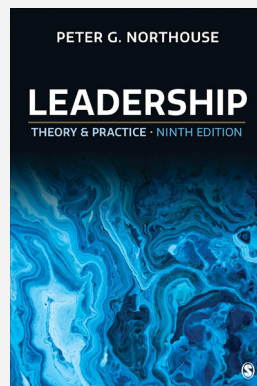
Follow this process – and these rules – during your difficult conversations ahead:

1. Check rank at the door: To make everyone feel comfortable and to inspire an honest dialogue, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky

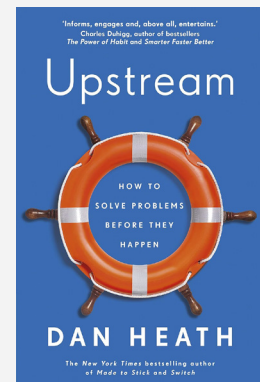
Leaders, **get these books** – today



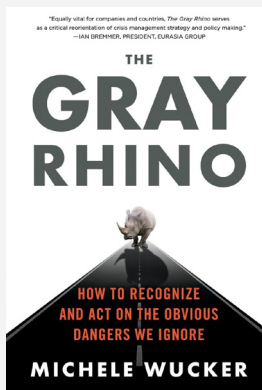
[“Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win”](#)
by Jocko Willink and Leif Babin



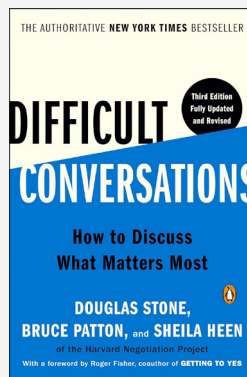
[“Leadership: Theory and Practice”](#)
(9th Edition)
by Peter Northouse



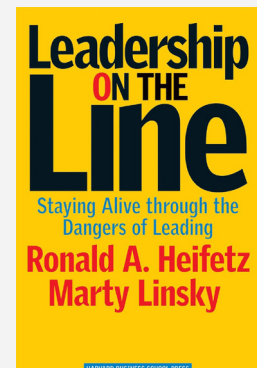
[“Upstream: How to Solve Problems Before They Happen”](#)
by Dan Heath



[“The Gray Rhino: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Dangers We Ignore”](#)
by Michele Wucker



[“Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most”](#)
by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen



[“Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading.”](#)
by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky

recommend establishing a “holding environment” ([“Leadership on the Line”](#)). This means there is no rank. People can feel safe expressing views that may be emotional and controversial, with a guarantee that there will be no retribution for what is said, thus allowing honesty.

2. Have an open mind: Seek to understand before being understood. Listen with the intent to understand the other person’s point of view, not to respond to or refute what they are saying.
3. Control your emotions: Do not get angry. I am sure some of what is being said will be painful. Do not take it personally, no matter how personal you perceive the attack to be.
4. Be prepared for multiple meetings with the same group: There is always a meeting after the meeting. The group will get together without you. Here they will think of things they forgot to say or wish they had said, or consider new ideas that come to mind.
5. Find common ground: Finally, find connection. You listened to them and made an effort to understand. Hopefully, they extended you the same courtesy. Where you have found common ground is your leverage point to make change. Common ground is really the key step in solving problems.

Start the conversation with a question. Here are several suggestions related to leadership:

- What are your expectations of me as a leader?
- Where am I falling short of your expectations?
- How do you assess the current status of the unit (or the company, the battalion, the department)?
- How can it be better?

- Where would you like to see the department in five years?
- How do we get there?
- What in the unit (or company, battalion, department) is going well?

This list of questions is certainly not all inclusive. These questions may spark additional questions as the conversation proceeds. Allow the conversation to go where it needs to go to get the important questions answered, but always remember the overarching goal to improve leadership for the greater good of the department and the service to your community.

Time to step up

The answers to our lead questions – *Are you worried about the leadership at your department at any level? If so, at what level do you see poor leadership in your department?* – are not necessarily the problem in and of themselves. These answers are most likely signs and symptoms of a bigger problem, one that must be addressed now to stave off a larger, more catastrophic problem down the road. There are no shortcuts, no hacks, no easy ways out. We as leaders must step up, own the problem, assume responsibility and take action. **1)**

About the author







Darryl Jones is the fire chief for the City of Pittsburgh Fire Bureau, responsible for the leadership over all personnel and oversees the daily operations of the Fire Bureau. Chief Jones began his career with the city in 2007 after serving 20 years with the Aliquippa (Pennsylvania) Fire Department. Jones is a graduate of Carlow University, Carnegie Mellon University and Capella University.

HOW DOES YOUR FIRE CHIEF EXCEL?

Survey respondents shared outlooks about the top chief

-  “He lets those around him lead in their positions, doesn’t get involved where he isn’t needed”
-  “Getting the proper funding to further the department’s goals”
-  “Fireground command skills
Explaining decisions to the company officers who are directly affected”
-  “Great personal vision and values for the organization; mission-driven and focused on how we deliver service”
-  “Connects well with field personnel and does a great job advocating for our members”
-  “Innovates and brings new ideas to the organization, while continuing to pursue the highest level of performance, training and output from the workforce”
-  “Being honest and holding members accountable”
-  “Good strategic planner and communicator”
-  “Looks for alternative ways to address problems and applying a scientific approach to problem-solving”
-  “Treats everyone fairly”
-  “Calm and intelligent during emergency events”
-  “Empathy”
-  “Not stuck in tradition”
-  “Always know that he has our backs”
-  “Consistent, clear expectations”
-  “Loves everyone like family, wants to keep pushing people to take classes and be great”
-  “Leadership, setting the example, integrity and commitment to department”
-  “Ability to understand most problems and prioritize them”

Excelling at the wrong things:

-  “Climbing the career ladder”
-  “Looking out for himself”
-  “Kissing ass”
-  “Taking vacation”
-  “Looks”
-  “Golf”



WHAT DO FIRE SERVICE LEADERS VALUE AND PRIORITIZE?

WRITTEN BY

Dr. Reginald D. Freeman, CFO, FIFireE

While safety and training serve as the linchpins of operational efficacy, problems persist around recruitment and retention, succession planning and the sense of family once so central to fire service culture

While firefighters are the ones battling the flames, their successes often hinge on their leaders' values and priorities. The fire chief stands as the beacon of guidance, steering the department through the tumultuous seas of emergency response. Within this hierarchical structure, the

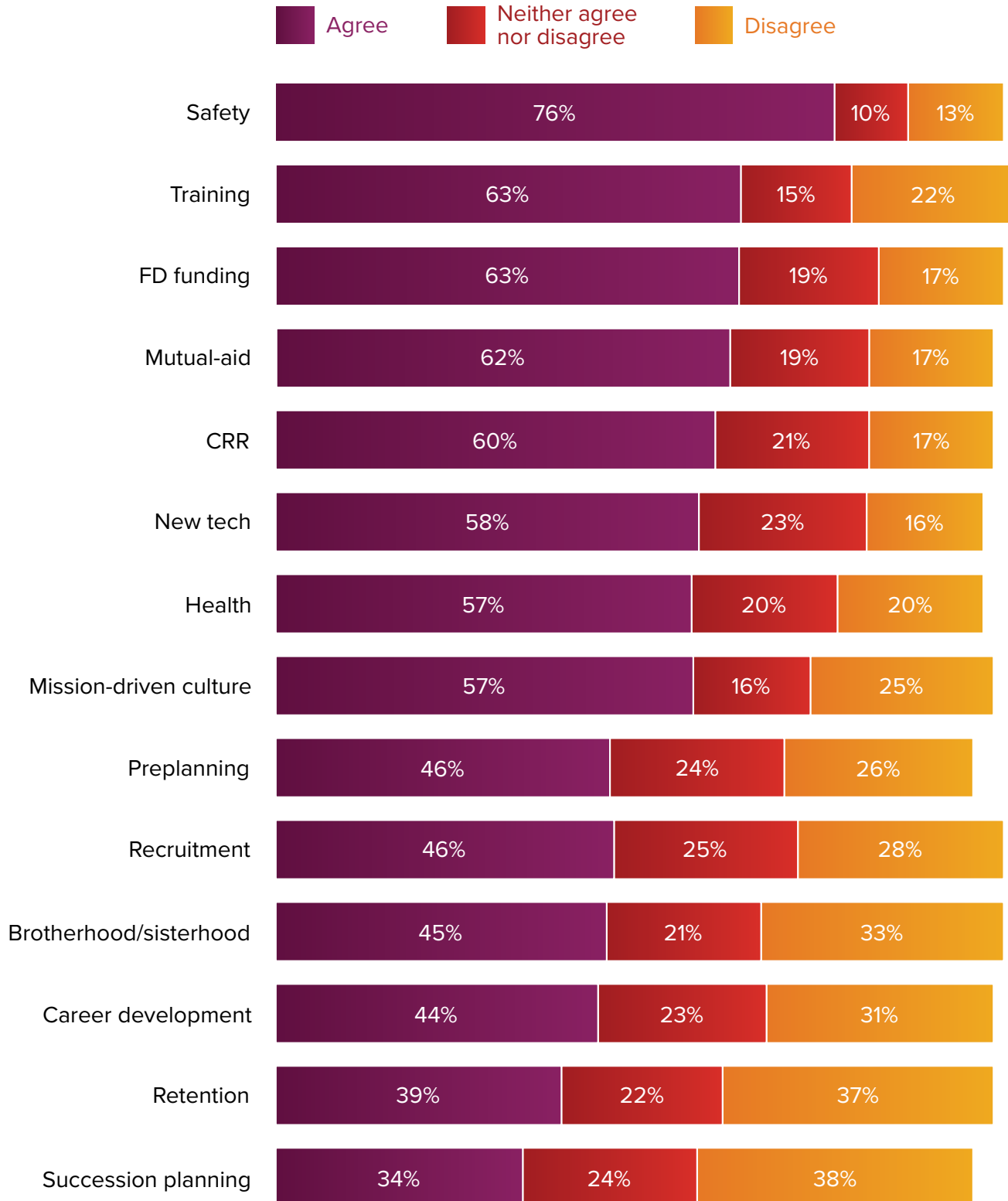
alignment of values and priorities between the fire chief and other department supervisors (company and chief officers) can shape the fabric of the firefighting community.

As we delve into the results of the third-annual What Firefighters Want survey, it becomes evident that while safety and training find unanimous favor, discord persists in the areas of recruitment, retention and even the cherished brotherhood/sisterhood/sense of family within the ranks.

The fire chief's mandate

A fire chief's role extends beyond mere administrative duties; they safeguard their firefighters' lives while ensuring the department's efficient operation. A resounding consensus emerges on survey respondents' perception of their fire chiefs' values and priorities. The safety of firefighters rises to the top, with **76%**

What is your perception of your **FIRE CHIEF'S** priorities and values?



**Balance represents those who responded "I don't know" (all under 5%).*

of respondents noting that their chiefs prioritize this fundamental element of the job. This unwavering commitment to safety lays the foundation for effective emergency response in a profession fraught with peril and uncertainty.

The tepid acknowledgment of brotherhood/sisterhood/family raises questions about the cohesion and camaraderie within the fire service.

planning and career development, respectively – a worrisome trend related to feelings around the future of their organizations. This highlights a critical gap in nurturing future leaders and fostering professional growth among firefighters, both on the line and in staff positions.

Training emerges as another cornerstone of the fire chief's mandate, per **63%** of respondents to the survey. Training sharpens firefighters' skills and enhances their preparedness to tackle diverse challenges on the line.

Furthermore, **63%** of respondents agree that their fire chief prioritizes fire department funding – a more pragmatic aspect of the fire chief's responsibilities, ensuring that resources are allocated judiciously to meet operational needs. Fire department budgets are consistently being cut in city halls across the United States. Firefighters want to know and, more importantly, feel that their chief and department leadership are advocating for them. Regular engagement and communication from administration to personnel on the line will assist with minimizing ambiguity and give much-needed assurances.

However, the picture is not entirely rosy. In recent years, the fire service has grappled with certain deficiencies that cast a shadow over its future resilience. Recruitment, retention, succession planning, career development, and the cherished brotherhood/sisterhood within the ranks present notable areas of concern. For example, **28%** of survey respondents reported that their fire chiefs do not prioritize recruitment, with **37%** reporting retention as a non-priority. The looming specter of staffing shortages threatens the operational efficacy of fire departments nationwide.

Moreover, **38%** and **31%** of respondents do not believe their fire chiefs prioritize succession

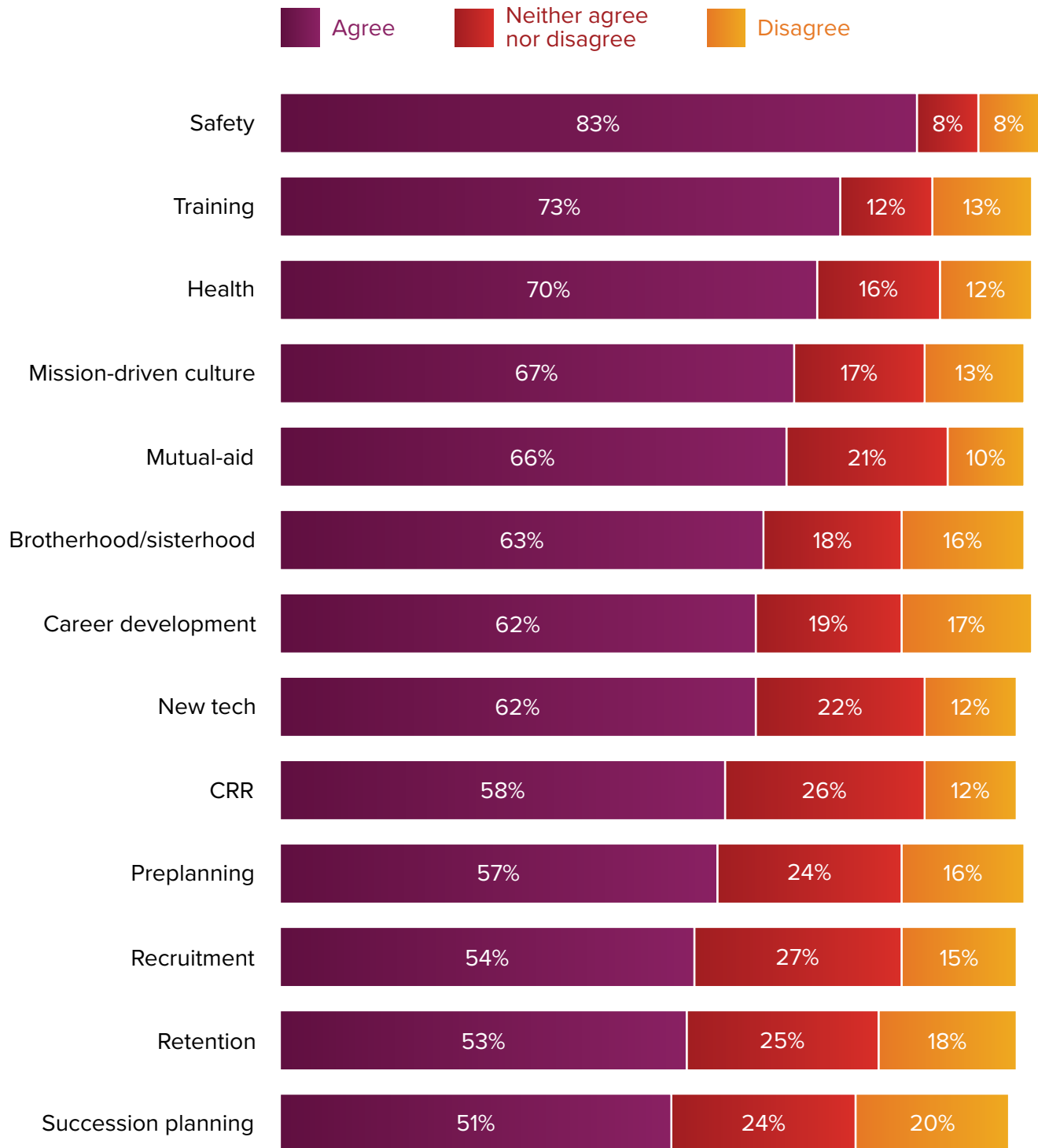
The tepid acknowledgment of brotherhood/sisterhood/family raises questions about the cohesion and camaraderie within the fire service, with **33%** reporting that it is not prioritized. This statistic is concerning on multiple levels. We've all had disagreements with folks in the firehouse; however, one thing was always crystal clear: When those tones hit, we knew we could count on one another to get the job done. Is that still the case today? Do we still have high levels of trust in our firehouses? That question can only be answered by one firefighter at a time, one firehouse at a time, and one shift at a time. I'm sure the question would be answered with a resounding yes, but that is the problem – the data doesn't back this up. The climate today (in some instances) is starkly different when compared to the climate in a firehouse just 10 years ago. Ten years ago, we wouldn't be having this conversation. The challenge is finding the answer to this elusive question. A lot of our collateral issues revolve around this anomaly.

The company officer's charge

In the intricate hierarchy of the fire service, direct supervisors occupy a pivotal position, acting as the conduits between the fire chief's mandates and the frontline firefighters. While their priorities often align with the fire chief's, subtle nuances emerge upon closer inspection.

An impressive **83%** of survey respondents highlighted safety as the top priority of company officers. This unwavering commitment

What is your perception of your **DIRECT SUPERVISOR'S** priorities and values?



**Balance represents those who responded "I don't know" (all under 5%).*

underscores the frontline perspective, where the realities of firefighting demand utmost vigilance and adherence to health and safety protocols. We risk our health and livelihoods to take care of total strangers. There should never be scenarios where a fire service member must fight for basic health and safety accommodations.

Similarly, training garners significant attention, with **73%** of survey participants stating that company officers recognize their indispensable role in equipping firefighters with the requisite skills and knowledge to execute their sworn duties and responsibilities adequately. Furthermore, **70%** of respondents highlighted that company officers prioritize firefighter health.

However, challenges persist, albeit to a lesser extent when compared to expectations of the fire chief's domain. Recruitment and retention efforts and succession planning emerged in the data as the areas where respondents

perceived less attention from supervisors. While it was highlighted that approximately **54%** of supervisors prioritize recruitment and retention, the figure represents an improvement compared to perceptions about fire chiefs. Similarly, only **51%** of respondents noted that direct supervisors prioritize succession planning.

Navigating the crossroads

The comparison of values and priorities between fire chiefs and direct supervisors offers a nuanced understanding of some of the challenges facing the fire service. While unanimity prevails in safety and training, the disparities in recruitment, retention, succession planning and brotherhood/sisterhood/family underscore the need for concerted efforts to bridge the divide. The only way this will occur is through the establishment of an inclusive culture where all members and stakeholders know and feel that they have a voice to share their proposed solutions to real or perceived problems. These stakeholders include



but are not limited to equity groups/associations and labor. Whether there is a recognized collective bargaining agreement or not, union leadership should be engaged and invited to offer their input. We should reject “us vs. them” scenarios and take care of the most essential element of a fire department – personnel.

The tension between operational imperatives and the human element inherent in firefighting lies at the heart of these disparities. While safety and training constitute the bedrock of operational efficacy, recruitment, retention and fostering a sense of brotherhood/sisterhood/family are essential for nurturing a resilient and cohesive fire service. We must remember where we have come from so that we are crystal clear about where we should be focused as an organization in the future.

Persistent problem-solving

A multifaceted approach is imperative to address all these challenges. First, fire chiefs must prioritize recruitment and retention initiatives, offering competitive incentives and fostering a supportive work environment to attract and retain talent. I know, the incentive aspect is easier said than done! However, the supportive work environment doesn't cost a penny.


Bottom line: Where we come up short, we try again. Where we hit a brick wall, we seek and garner more “community capital” by stimulating external stakeholders who have perceived or realized influence in the community.

Simultaneously, succession planning should be embedded within departmental strategies, identifying and grooming future leaders to ensure continuity and organizational resilience. This should be included as a goal within your community-driven five-year strategic plan with proper funding allocated. This funding is minimal because your succession plan will be solely based on your professional development program and or mentoring program. That is where most of your funding should be for “Tri-Advancement Planning” – creating, implementing and synchronizing your professional development

program, strategic plan and succession plan. All three should be interwoven with one another or referenced when executed.

Moreover, cultivating a strong sense of brotherhood/sisterhood/family demands proactive engagement and inclusivity initiatives within fire departments. By fostering a culture of mutual respect, camaraderie and support, firefighters can navigate the inherent challenges of our profession with resilience and solidarity.

What does the future hold?

The fire service is at a crossroads, where the alignment of values and priorities between fire chiefs and company officers holds profound implications for its future trajectory. While safety and training serve as the linchpins of operational efficacy, addressing the disparities in recruitment, retention, succession planning and brotherhood/sisterhood/family is imperative for fostering a resilient and cohesive firefighting culture. Through collaborative efforts and unwavering commitment, the fire service can navigate these challenges and emerge stronger, united by a shared sense of purpose and camaraderie amidst the flames and uncertainty of emergency response. 
















About the author

Dr. Reginald Freeman serves as chief risk officer for the HAI Group, based in Cheshire, Connecticut, and vice-president of the board of directors for the Center for Public Safety Excellence. He previously served as fire chief for the city of Oakland (California) Fire Department, fire chief for the Hartford (Connecticut) Fire Department and fire chief for Lockheed Martin Aeronautics. Freeman is the assistant treasurer on the board of directors for the NFPA and director of training for the Caribbean Association of Fire Chiefs. In addition to serving as an adjunct professor for multiple higher learning institutions, Freeman is a fellow for the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and has a doctorate in emergency and protective services.






HOW DOES YOUR DIRECT SUPERVISOR EXCEL?

(non-fire chief level)

Survey respondents shared outlooks about their next-level supervisor

-  “Leads by example, very hardworking”
-  “He is always available to discuss professional or personal topics or issues”
-  “Does not micromanage his members”
-  “He is approachable and thoughtful”
-  “He has a good vision and idea of what the department needs for the future (succession plans in training division, etc.)”
-  “He is great with budgeting, administration and efficiency”
-  “Passion and commitment to the department”
-  “Supportive leader who empowers and has my back.”
-  “Tactics and strategies are spot on.”
-  “Provides constructive criticism and defends us when needed”
-  “Fairness across all personnel”
-  “He remains calm under any stressful situation.”
-  “Eager to learn and improve”
-  “He actually listens and takes action”
-  “Doesn’t get sucked into fire hall drama.”

Excelling at the wrong things:

-  “Self-advancement”
-  “Good buddy, not a leader”
-  “Micro-management”
-  “Appeasing the chief”
-  “Pencil-pushing”
-  “Still golf”



TOP LEADERS

SHARE

TOP TRAITS

Leaders underscore the importance of organizational mindsets like mission-driven culture and personal traits like humility, among several other critical factors

WRITTEN BY

Dena Ali

The 2024 What Firefighters Want survey clearly highlighted the need for effective leadership as a major concern, with **76%** of the 1,316 respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the leadership in their departments. Furthermore, retention is a widespread issue among fire departments, and when asked about the factors affecting it, poor agency leadership was the most frequently mentioned concern, surpassing issues like compensation, staffing challenges and health risks.

Over the past decade, I have studied first responder mental wellness, peer support and suicide prevention. Among the variables affecting wellness, I have found that effective leadership significantly impacts overall wellness and fire department culture. While available research

has uncovered numerous examples of poor leadership contributing to mental health issues, there was a noticeable gap in research focused on the leadership traits that foster a positive culture in the fire service.

As part of my Executive Fire Officer (EFO) capstone research, titled “Organizational Leadership and Its Impact of on the Mental Wellness of Firefighters,” I sought to identify leaders who exemplify positive leadership traits and to understand their practices. These leaders were nominated by nationally recognized fire service thought leaders. Here we’ll review some of the trends and behaviors identified from their leadership practices, and offer recommendations to inform and enhance fire service leadership.

Psychological safety

Overwhelmingly, the single most important theme identified by these leaders was the willingness to



nurture psychological safety within their sphere of influence. While psychological safety has become a buzzword – even dismissed by some as “soft” leadership – its attributes are fundamental to connection, learning and performance.

Put simply, psychological safety is a shared belief among team members that it’s safe to take risks, express ideas and concerns, speak up, and admit mistakes without fear of negative consequences. As author and organizational psychology expert Adam Grant writes in [“Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know,”](#) psychological safety is not about lowering standards or simply being nice; it’s about creating a climate of respect and trust where people can speak candidly.

Additionally, in his book [“The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups,”](#) Daniel Coyle explained that combining high standards and psychological safety is the “secret sauce” to a healthy culture, as seen in successful groups from Disney’s Pixar to the Navy SEALs. A prime example of this type of culture is the New Zealand All Blacks, the most successful professional sports franchise in history. James Kerr’s book [“Legacy”](#) outlines the elements leading to their success, including my personal favorite, Whanau, which emphasizes their “No Dickheads” policy. This principle underscores the importance of character over talent, highlighting that the strength of the pack is found in the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is found in the pack.

[After-action reviews \(AARs\)](#) are the perfect opportunity for leaders to model behaviors that can increase psychological safety by utilizing them as an opportunity to model humility, admit what they did not know, what they could have done better, and demonstrate the value of asking questions. A few years ago, at the Training Days Conference, Assistant Chief Dan Shaw, Fairfax County (Virginia) Fire Department, explained that during AARs, he always led with his mistakes first as the IC, and shared that he believed the four most important words a leader could say are, “I screwed that up.” Through modeling this sort of humility, the leader effectively creates the atmosphere of learning from the top down.

How could the fire chief better serve your agency? *Psychological Safety*

““ Do not dismiss ideas.”“

““ Listen to ideas and new tactics. Get rid of the good old boy system.”“

““ Acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the team, ensuring that all members feel valued.”“

““ Demonstrate willingness to learn from others, regardless of their rank or experience. This fosters a culture of mutual respect and teamwork.”“

““ Do not bully; show respect for officers and firefighters.”“

Servant leadership

Shifting back to the EFO research, the key question posed was, “What leadership styles dominate your leadership team?” Each of the leaders interviewed discussed the importance of [servant leadership](#) for creating a positive culture in their organization.

FDNY Deputy Assistant Chief Frank Leeb

shared this feedback: “In our organization, our leaders learn the styles based on our personalities and individual traits. Most people don’t fit neatly into one box. However, when you lead with trust and understanding, your leadership style will create space for them to succeed, and they will do anything for you.”

Baltimore City Deputy Chief Khalilah Yancy

shared that her leadership style was built from a combination of “servant leadership, transformational, and leading with love.”

Of course, none of this is easy, as Indianapolis **Battalion Chief Dr. Candace Ashby** underscored: “It’s a grind. It’s not easy. It’s work, day in and day out. Leadership is not a destination that you will ever reach, it’s a grind every single day with how you show up. You have to be the best person you can be every single day.”

Furthermore, [previous research into servant leadership](#) found that culture is best supported when it blends servant leadership with the components of building community and empowerment.

How could the fire chief better serve your agency? *Servant Leadership*

“Open, clear communication about why policies and decisions are made – servant leadership.”

“Trust in our abilities to execute tasks, which empowers us and builds confidence.”

Positive attitude

Each of the leaders interviewed expressed the value of modeling those behaviors they wished to see in their members and the organization. While there is a lot of lip service being paid to leadership, the truth is, leadership is not a catchphrase but rather a practice.

In his book, [“High Road Leadership,”](#) John Maxwell shared, “You can say you stand for integrity while lying and stealing. You can say anything, but what you do shows who you really are. So, the next time you see something you believe to be wrong, don’t make a statement. Do the right thing. And keep doing it. Eventually, anyone who wants to know what you value or believe will realize your life is your statement.”

John Oates, CEO of the International Public Safety Data Institute, explained that the little things go a long way; as a leader, you must model teamwork and respect because when you set the standard, you are better positioned to get buy-in.

Fort Walton Beach (Florida) Fire Department Chief Shannon Stone shared this: “When I make a mistake, I will be humble enough to own it, learn from it, share it and fix it. This is through example. I look for opportunities where I did not make the best decision to say, ‘you know what, guys, I screwed up, let’s talk about what will work better.’”

This modeling behavior helps people lower their guard so they can be open to making both decisions and mistakes. Each of these interviewees also explained the danger of gossip and the steps they take to discourage the behavior.

Raleigh (N.C.) Fire Department Division Chief Preston Gaster added: “Gossip does not build good teams. It goes back to leading by example; if they see that I feed into it, it will continue to grow.”

How could the fire chief better serve your agency? *Positivity*

“Step in to make positive changes.”

“Recognize both positive contributions and address negative behaviors constructively.”

Humility

There is often a fear that by admitting mistakes, leaders lose respect, but the research found the opposite. In discussing humility, 100% of the respondents expressed that it is a positive trait that should start with leadership. Chief Leeb



Photo/Seth Lasko

shared that leaders who model humility become more relatable and therefore approachable. Additionally, Chief Gaster shared, “Nobody knows everything. I know I will screw up, and as a leader, I must model the behavior I expect. When I tell people I don’t know something, they become empowered to help me and help our organization. By asking for help, people feel included, respect you more, and know it’s OK to do the same.” **Atlanta Battalion Chief David Rhodes** said it best, though: “If you build a team where you are the dumbest person in the room and capitalize on people’s talents, you will be more successful.”

John Maxwell recently shared a conversation he engaged in while speaking to C-suite leaders. An attendee approached him afterward to challenge his thinking and said that a leader should never show weakness to employees. Maxwell replied: “You’re working under a misconception. You think your people don’t already know your weaknesses and flaws? The purpose of admitting them isn’t to give them new information. It’s to let them know that you know what they are.”

How could the fire chief better serve your agency? *Humility*

“ Show empathy, show humility, show that you care about the rank and file.”

“ Treat people with humility and dignity.”

Effective communication

Previous research has identified gossip as a key indicator of an unhealthy culture and a lack of psychological safety. Effective communication emerged as a significant theme when exploring methods for managing gossip and fostering a positive environment. As Chief Shaw explained: “Gossip comes from not having all the facts. The



way we address it is, number one, transparency, and number two, communication.” Chief Oates, who previously served as fire chief in East Hartford, Connecticut, added: “You defeat gossip by being conversational and intentional. Transparency in communication is key. In times of critical change, be deliberate. Rumor-mongering is like an Olympic sport for the fire service. A steady stream of open communication is the way to nip it in the bud.”

Today, the Fairfax County (Virginia) Fire Department is known for its positive culture, which is a direct result of deliberate leadership. I was fortunate enough to interview **Fire Chief John Butler**, who shared some of his department’s strategies to achieve this positive change. In terms of trust and accountability, effective communication was crucial for increasing information flow while reducing gossip. They have utilized multiple mediums for communication, including a quarterly newsletter, health and wellness newsletter, peer support newsletter, battalion chief roundtable, senior leadership meetings, Fire Chief’s Officer Council, Fire Chiefs Equity Council, monthly firehouse visits, information bulletins, social media, a master calendar, and even a podcast where they share new information.

How could the fire chief better serve your agency? *Communications*

- “ Be more transparent with operational staff. ”
- “ Develop a strong communication strategy. ”
- “ Increased frequency and depth of communication. Communicating goals and expectations. ”

Care for your people

A fascinating finding from my EFO research was the profound level of love these leaders exhibited for their members and the fundamental importance of genuinely caring about people. Chief Leeb stated: “If you’re mindful and truly love your team, it shows in your words and actions. The higher your standard, the higher your bar, the better they will perform, as long as

you show them that you care for them and that you love them, they will do anything for you.” Chief Yancey emphasized: “I try to lead with love and treat others as I would want to be treated. If you love your people, it creates a better work environment, and even if everyone doesn’t always agree, we can still care about them.” **Madison (Alabama) Captain Michael Sedlacek** succinctly added, “You have to care about your people, learn who everyone is as an individual, and you have to want to see their success.”

How could the fire chief better serve your agency?

Care

- “ Care about ALL your personnel. ”
- “ Give the job to someone who cares about the department. ”
- “ Show some respect and truly consider what the line peoples’ concerns are. ”

Mission-driven culture

Mission-driven culture also emerged from the comments by our group of leaders. As **Meridian (Idaho) Fire Chief Kris Blume** [wrote about this approach](#): “This leadership strategy differs from traditional emergency management strategies in which subordinates must obey commands and follow strict policies/procedures or face consequences despite the potential for improved outcomes obtained by deviating from the rules. Therefore, Mission Driven Culture (MDC) focuses on each mission and allows subordinates more freedom to make life-or-death decisions in face of unforeseen and unfamiliar circumstances.”

MDC disrupts the hierarchy by allowing all parts to make critical life-and-death decisions based

on their understanding and commitment to the mission, vision and organizational values. Blume explained that because firefighters make decisions in time-compressed situations with limited information, “we as leaders must focus on reviewing the task, the purpose, and the end state when a decision is made.” Leaders must ask, “what are we doing, why are we doing it, and what is the desired outcome?”

To illustrate MDC in action, Blume shared the story of an officer who decided to damage a community’s security gate to reach a cardiac arrest victim. At the time, the organization had a strict policy regarding apparatus accidents, specifically striking stationary objects. However, reviewing the situation from the lens of MDC, the task (to damage the gate) for the purpose (to reach a cardiac arrest victim) created conditions for the end state (a successful resuscitation). Chief Blume noted that under a policy-driven culture, the decision to damage the gate would have been punished; however, following MDC, “we reward this decision by understanding the task, purpose and end state.”

Chief Yancey shared her perspective on MDC: “If people have not bought into the mission, slamming policy down their throat won’t mean a thing. Because while it’s impossible to remember every policy, you can remember the mission and act decisively based on your understanding of the mission.”

And while Chief Butler did not specifically reference MDC, he underscored that a healthy organization trusts each other and the leadership, and does not check boxes simply for accreditation, but rather to lead through equity and inclusivity, which ultimately breeds trust.

Finally, Chief Leeb shared that leaders will at times give up hard-earned credibility and trust if they enforce all policies to the letter of the law. He explained that sound practices have sound reasoning, and while we have to play by the rules, we must speak up to change bad policy.

How could the fire chief better serve your agency?

Mission-Drive Culture

“ Delegate and empower your command staff. Give them authority to make decisions. ”

“ Defend our decisions. Be an advocate. ”

Leaders must ...

If you're looking to improve the culture within your organization, the only leader you can change is yourself. While we can't transform an entire organization overnight, we can start within our sphere of influence, regardless of our rank. For many of us, this will require patience and allowing our leadership ripples to expand gradually.

Here are a few key recommendations from the leaders involved in this project – leaders who are setting the standard:

- Leaders must demonstrate a visible commitment to developing a positive culture by ensuring they are authentic and reliable in ensuring their daily practices match their words, and consistently modeling positive behaviors.
- Leaders shall foster trust through extending trust, modeling reliability and speaking with candor.
- Leaders must be humble about their capabilities and knowledge. They must admit mistakes, commit to learning from mistakes, and create space for others to contribute.

- Leaders must demonstrate curiosity about others by speaking with candor and maintaining awareness of their own biases. This means they must ask questions, learn the why behind decisions, and practice diligent active listening.
- Leaders must adopt a flexible leadership style focusing on building community and empowering members. They must recognize when to shift into an autocratic leadership style.

Thank you to the leaders who shared their insights: Captain Michael Sedlacek, Assistant Chief Dan Shaw, Chief David Rhodes, Chief John Oates, Division Chief Michael Warmuth, Deputy Chief Khalilah Yancey, Deputy Chief Frank Leeb, Chief John Butler, Battalion Chief Candace Ashby Ph.D., Chief Shannon Stone, and Division Chief Preston Gaster. You are leading the way with better practices and setting a high standard for us all. 1)

About the author

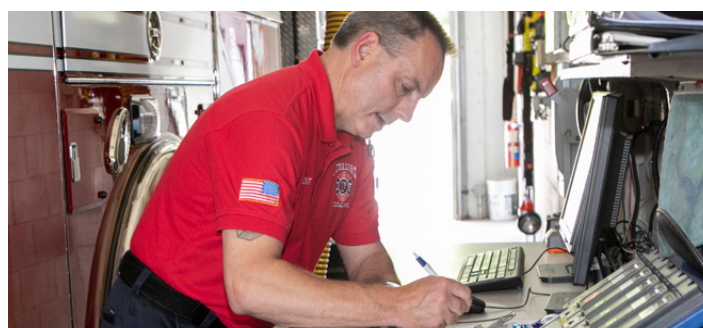
Dena Ali is a battalion chief with the Raleigh (N.C.) Fire Department and the program manager for behavioral health with the First Responder Center For Excellence. Prior to becoming a firefighter, Ali served five years as a police officer. She has a master's degree from the University of North Carolina Pembroke, where her research focused on firefighter suicide. Ali is an adjunct instructor with the NFA and the founder and director of North Carolina Peer Support.

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