

## Life is a Leadership Laboratory



By Paul Strong

If a lab was studying a person to determine their leadership abilities and they wanted you to be the researcher on this project, who would you pick as your subject to be studied? I know you can think of many people in history who were successful leaders, i.e. Patton, Martin Luther King Jr., or Gandhi. But those people shouldn't be the first choice for you. If you're studying leadership with a goal to learn as much as you can about this topic, then start by studying yourself. This is even truer if you plan to take action to develop your personal leadership skills. Your life is full of data on this topic, good examples as well as bad ones. Life data not only comes from within yourself, but those around you.

If you have no interest in being a capable leader or developing quality leadership skills, then put this article down because it's not for you. But the truth is that most people do want to be good leaders. They want to be thought of as someone who has the right stuff. The reality is that only a small percentage of people will take action to make this happen. The rest of the people are content with the way things are going, don't want to put in the effort, or more times than not, don't know how to do it.

How do you become a leader? When you decide to get on the road to fire service leadership, one of your first research projects is to take an in-depth look at your own self. Look back as far as you can at all that data and find out what makes you tick. This can't be taken lightly because you have to filter through your own biases. It's hard to observe and judge yourself with an objective mind. Know your strength's and write them down. Ask people to tell you what they think your strengths are. Compare them. More importantly, know your weaknesses. If you can't come up with much in this category I guarantee your spouse can, your supervisor can, and your peers will definitely oblige in helping you with your research by telling you about your weaknesses. You may not like what you hear, but listen anyway, especially if a common message comes from more than one source. After you have identified areas of weaknesses, take action to improve in those areas. Make a plan, set goals and be persistent in your pursuit of improvement. If you don't take action then you're wasting your time. Leadership *is* action. Know yourself.

The best part of leadership is that you don't have to be in charge of people or in a position of power to be a true leader. Everyone in your department (yes, even the rookie) has the potential to be a successful leader for your organization. There seems to be a gap that's occurring in our fire service as generations of leadership retire and move on. How do we fill the gap? With so many potential leadership candidates, why is this gap occurring? Sometimes it's because people are keeping it all to themselves and not using their skills to develop the up and coming generation. Other times its because a culture within fire departments has been established that

deems a person of elevated title to be a leader by the very nature of their rank. Remember that leadership is action, not position. There are many more reasons for the leadership gap but, regardless, we need to break the cycle and learn how to be successful leaders. More importantly, the leadership succession has to continue. Leaders develop more leaders. That's part of the deal.

The fire service is good at providing certificates showing all the classes and training we complete. These certificates display our attendance, define proficiency, or show that we met a minimum standard. We even get certificates for taking a leadership class. So with your leadership certificate, can you translate that to your resume' and add a bullet point that states "*2013 – Leader.*" I think not. The leadership classes that you take are a small part of the big picture, albeit an important part. Reading books and taking classes is where the bulk of the information comes from, but what you do with the information is what's most important. Taking action and applying what you have learned is the most difficult part of getting on the road, or staying on the road to leadership. This road travels with you from cradle to grave and it's your choice whether or not you're going to jump on, stay on, or get back on the road. Leadership is the ability to influence others; it is something you do. Leadership is manufactured through a process of personal growth cultivated through consistent and humble actions. It takes time and perseverance. You will climb, make progress, and have successes. You will also fail. What you chose to do after a failure is what will define your journey. If you're serious about leadership and setting the example for others to follow, you'll pick yourself up and stay the course. Keep in mind that leadership is a process that never ends.

Anytime you're on the "road," be prepared to answer one question; "Why should I be led by you?" This is a question that you should be able to answer in 30 seconds or less but is not likely to be asked of you, ever. So, then, why be prepared to answer this question? Being able to answer this question regardless of who may ask means that you have put thought, time, and effort, into your leadership journey. There is no right or wrong answer, it's just you forming thought and putting effort into knowing why you are doing what you are doing.

When it comes to the qualities, or essentials, that make a good leader the list can be long. But that doesn't mean a successful leader has to obtain every one of the essentials. Your ability to lead people is really held in the eye of the person you think you're leading. One of the most powerful things a leader can do is influence people. Top qualities of leadership in one person's eyes may be honesty and Integrity, while in another persons eyes could be commitment and passion. It's all very subjective. Nonetheless, if you are serious about leadership and developing your skills, you should, at minimum, identify what is important to you in a leader and study those essentials.

How do you think personality plays into this leadership stuff? Some people are more charismatic than others. Other people internalize more and don't seem to

be as outgoing or personable. Either way, these people can all be successful leaders. Effective communication and relationship building are keys to success on your road to leadership. No matter what your personality type is, be passionate, be humble, and be persistent. Your ability to change minds and influence people largely depends on the amount of consistent action you will take on your journey.

If you're concerned about the leadership in your department then do something about it. Massive overhaul isn't going to take place over night. Start with your personal leadership development, even if you're the rookie. Of course we hope and somewhat expect that company officers and chief officers have more ability to effectively lead people as they rise up through the ranks. But remember leadership is action, not position. The fire chief has the biggest responsibility when it comes to leadership. This person has the most eyes watching, learning, and emulating the message that is given off. If the fire chief wants to see organizational change and more effective leadership within their department, then the mirror is the first place for them to go. But regardless of your title, make a commitment to change, develop a plan, and be consistent in your actions. Give your time, effort, and energy to personal development and the development of others. It is up to you whether or not this topic holds enough importance for your devoted efforts, but this is your fire service, your department, your shift, and your crew. If you don't take action, then who will?

The leadership gap that's occurring can be bridged with some effort and persistence. Anyone can decide to get on the road to leadership. Maybe you were there for some time and took an exit a while back. If so, get back on the road. Regardless of time or grade, we all have a lifetime of data from our personal laboratories ready to be put to use and get us on the road to fire service leadership. It's all just a matter of taking action.

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Be sure to attend his classroom session:

### **RIC for Real: Learning from Our Mistakes**

*Captain Paul Strong, Valley (WA) Regional Fire Authority*

This presentation focuses on how to better prepare for a rapid intervention crew (RIC) deployment. The lessons learned from 400 firefighters participating in the hands-on RIC for REAL training will be the focus. The three main learning objectives are crew integrity and safety, communication, and air management. Students will learn how ineffectiveness in leadership, individual skills, and crew efficiency were magnified even among solid performers because of RIC preparation misconceptions. ALL LEVELS