

Excellence on Fire

Ben May, a board director with the Center for Excellence in Public Safety, offers a list of things corporations can learn from the American fire service.

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The most trusted brand in America

Imagine a professional organization, driven by a tradition and an active, living mission of excellence, poised for service delivery 24/7. Now, think of a brand so pervasive that it is in every neighborhood in this country almost four times more ubiquitous than Starbucks' stores.*

Consider that this organization has no market segmentation because every customer in the nation receives the highest quality of service based on one phone call day or night. Now consider that this organization's corporate brand is so well known and popular that its physical shape is immediately recognizable and understood. This brand evokes such trust that the men and women representing it are co-opted for any number of commercial products advertised in the media hoping to grasp just a tiny piece of its halo effect. The brand is also so pervasive that children play with toys representing it, dressing up in costumes of the men and women who engage in its work, many aspiring to become one when he or she grows up. Consider that this brand also has so much equity and confidence that Americans trust the organization second only to their families.**

It's no surprise that it's the American Fire Service. Walk into the local firehouse, and you will understand. As you walk past the shiny, immaculately clean apparatus, you are greeted by smiles and a searching look that signifies a sincere desire to help. Just try it and see the personification of true customer service. This is a mission-driven philosophy that works because its very existence is based on continuous improvement for the protection of life and property.

The philosophy of 'no choice'

There are no lack of philosophies and prescriptions from corporate, non-profit and military leaders, scholars, practitioners and theorists about how organizations, especially corporations and businesses, should be run to better serve their customers and members. Whether it's the "knowledge worker" management philosophies of Peter Drucker, W. Edwards Deming's Total Quality Management or Motorola's Six Sigma, it seems there are more ideas, observations and strategies than there are companies and organizations to implement them. Regardless of mission, vision and "triple bottom line," corporations exist for one underlying goal: profit. Certainly, that is as it should be to contribute to our

national economy. Creating and maintaining customers are the lifeblood of the enterprise. CEOs and executives lead their organizations to fulfill the corporate mission: a profitable mission.

The high ground of leadership

Leadership in the fire service is on a vastly different plane than that of corporations. Fire officers operate from a unique set of principles. Their mission is driven from the heart. There is no profit motive. They adhere to the need for high touch in a disinterested, high-tech society. That need is compassion in action.

There is no choice or compromise in the fire service's mission. Leadership and service excellence are bred into the organization at every level, from firefighter to fire chief. Every member is a leader from the day he or she takes the oath. There are no gradations of leadership except one: the finest possible. There is no choice. Consider a mission of no choice. There is a saying in Israel about that country's origin and place in a constantly hostile neighborhood: "en brera" or "no choice." It's no wonder that the incentive of "no choice" has made Israel one of the most innovative countries in the world.

It is the same with the fire service. Regardless of the situation, whether a medical emergency, wildfire inferno or the tragedy of 9/11. No choice but to be excellent in order to achieve one of the most noble callings on earth: saving lives. Walt Disney said, "Courage is the main quality of leadership." Courage is the difference. Think of how this concept can be transferred to your corporation or organization. It may not be an emergency service, but think how any enterprise business, non-profit or government service could gain such clarity and focus for every member of the organization with the courage to imagine a better future for your product or service and to follow through on your conviction as if lives depended on it; certainly, in many industries they do.

'First Right'

Firefighters protect our citizens' first right as written in the Constitution: life, so that we can enjoy the other two, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The history of this country is intertwined with firefighters. It is no coincidence that Ben Franklin founded the first fire department in America, Friendship Fire Co. in Philadelphia, or that the first five presidents of the U.S. were volunteer firefighters.

Firefighters love being firefighters. Most of the hundreds I have known always wanted to be firefighters since they were small children. I remember a young lieutenant who told me during a difficult time in our department that the only real regret he had in his life was that he could not live two lives so that he could be a firefighter twice. Many of the 1.5 million firefighters in this country are paid firefighters in one jurisdiction and volunteers in another one close by. The reason for this is because they love what they do so much.

Who become a fire service leader?

Who are these people? They are not so much your blue-collar workers anymore. Most now have college degrees at the minimum, with a growing number receiving advanced degrees. An individual doesn't become a firefighter by accident or on a whim. There can easily be as many as 200 applicants for every available position in a metropolitan department. All-night vigils to apply and take the examination are not unusual. If they do pass the entrance test, it is not unusual to be on a waiting list, sometimes for years.

Firefighting has become a diverse profession as well with many women, black Americans and Hispanic Americans in leadership positions; many as fire chief in major cities in the US. Passing this battery of tests allows a successful applicant to become a rookie, which has its own complex curriculum. After that, it's constant training and study for the rest of one's career. The result is an extremely intelligent individual in superb physical condition responsible for our citizens' safety day and night.

This is especially true for senior fire officers and chiefs. Some of this country's finest leaders are fire chiefs and fire administrators bedecked with any number of advanced degrees. Most receive a master's degree in Public Administration, Chemistry, Engineering, Emergency Management or Education. Many receive the much sought-after Chief Fire Officer designation from the Center for Excellence in Public Safety, the organization that accredits fire departments across the nation.

Being a leader in public safety in a metropolitan fire and emergency services department is every bit as challenging as that of a CEO in private enterprise. Leaders in local public service are under constant scrutiny from a wide range of constituents, living in a fishbowl day and night. There is no room for "adequate" leadership in the fire service. No "market segmentation" for emergency service means every citizen in this country receives the highest quality service whether living in an elegant apartment building on Park Avenue or in a cardboard box under a bridge.

A pinnacle of brand equity in creative action

Any good corporate marketing officer knows that trust is the key criterion of brand development. Study any marketing text of the attributes of an irresistible brand and you will find every box with a check for the fire service. Brand trust and relevancy do not just appear in the marketplace. It is earned through millions of actions and certainly interactions—some large and some small—everyday.

In the case of the fire service, it is around the clock in every city and neighborhood, in every wilderness area where wildfire threatens. These expectations are the result of strategies each fire department develops and modifies based on potential hazards in the community. There is no "one size fits all." Every jurisdiction has its own risk characteristics. This kind of responsibility requires a kind of dedication, intelligence and leadership that any corporation and business can learn to emulate.

The US Fire Service is replete with such lessons. The very nature of emergency services demands strategies and tactics designed for the challenges of rapidly changing situations. These strategies are based on very short timelines. This is a concept known as incident command. Think of a strategic plan in which the tactics are changing minute to minute, or customer service in which the client's worst day is met by professionals whose quality of actions represent their best day, especially and individually for you. And every situation is as different as the customers they serve.

Training for these professionals is so critical because the unknown is the nature of the business. Most of the training in the fire service is by definition instinctual or second nature. This allows for the creativity and innovation so necessary when facing mostly unexpected, dangerous situations. However, there is a rapidly growing number of the most necessary and heart-rending situations that are not emergencies. I have seen many calls for service from emotionally disturbed people who literally needed to see that someone just cared in our ever-growing, alienated society. The Lebanese philosopher Kahlil Gibran said that "work is love made visible." Surely, the fire service is one of the purest forms of this philosophy.

The global landscape for courageous, intelligent leadership in a challenging world

The fire service has continued to grow as the market for its services has expanded. Originally developed reactively to the need for fire emergencies, the fire service has broadened to fulfill the needs of its markets, whether its emergency medical services for an aging population, the opioid epidemic, increased severe weather destruction, the perilous growth of wildfires in the wildland/urban interface, or now, sadly, live shooter situations.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, in 2017 every 24 seconds a fire department responded to a fire somewhere in the United States. Fire departments responded to 26,880,800 incidents, according to the US Fire Administration, in that same year, and 64% of those calls were medical and 4% fire related.

However, many buildings and houses are now composed of materials that burn faster and hotter. There were still 1,319,500 fires in the US in 2017 with 3,400 deaths, 14,670 injuries and \$23 billion in property loss. These are only direct costs. Wildfires alone accounted for \$8 billion in that time. The U.S. still very much has a fire problem, especially compared to other first world countries. Most people would agree that when they turn on the local news or scan their favorite media source, there is usually a story about a house fire. This is not the norm in other Western countries.

The growing use of fast-burning materials in new home construction also has a carcinogenic element, leading to an uptick in cancer-related diseases for firefighters, and offers less time for people to leave a burning building. Confronting these problems has led to a much more granular analysis of local hazards through detailed data analysis, initiating proactive risk reduction programs expanding across the country. In 2018, there were 1,216,600 firefighters serving in 27,228 fire departments nationwide and responding to emergencies from 51,150 fire stations. Only 31% (346,150) of the firefighting force are career and 788,250 are volunteers. Considering return on investment, the fire service continues to grow its value in the community.

Lessons from a noble calling

There are philosophies and strategies corporate America can learn from the leaders of our nation's fire departments. The US Fire Service is quietly transforming itself in line with its core mission to protect the life and property of every citizen, day and night. In fact, the progression and expansion of the fire service exemplifies a Blue Ocean Strategy of development. Created as a reactive, necessary service since before the founding of the Republic, it has expanded to a proactive, data-driven, all-hazards agency replete with constantly modified preventative plans called Community Risk Reduction, involving multiple agencies modified to the needs of the communities they protect.

Considering the plethora of leadership lessons in the many handbooks, from every profession imaginable, consider these key points of difference from the fire service model to be useful for men and women leading organizations and companies:

1. Every Member a Leader

From the first day of rookie school, every firefighter is a leader. Think not? Consider a volunteer fire department where a building fire is reported in its area. Now, consider that the first person arriving at the station to drive the engine is not an officer, but a first-year firefighter. He or she is now responsible for driving the engine to the fire, assessing the situation, reporting status, checking for people hurt or trapped, getting water on the fire and establishing incident command. Yes, this is an unusual situation. Aren't all emergencies? Leadership is built into the educational curriculum of the fire service. Every member studies it as a separate discipline, applying it in every aspect of the job. It is a fabric in the culture of the fire service.

2. Pervasive Training and Education; Constant Preparation; Perfecting the Basics

The necessity to remain calm in as many situations as possible demands training so pervasive that most actions and thoughts must be instinctual. This kind of instruction means reacting to a plethora of unusual incidents so there is no time wasted on trying to figure out what to do when confronted with the emergency. This does not just apply to emergencies. Fire officers are constantly creating and updating detailed pre-fire plans which outline every action necessary should a particular building have an emergency. Fire prevention officers' duties are to maintain commercial and institutional building safety through constant inspections and enforcement evaluation. This kind of data-driven analysis and preparation ensure creativity and innovation when confronted with unexpected, complex situations.

3. A Tradition of Heartfelt Care

One of the true points of difference between the fire service and other organizations is the strength of heart and personal care that define the spirit of each member. The idea of family is paramount. Being prepared to put one's life on the line creates a very tight knit group of people. Consider that firefighters are really families caring for other families. Some years ago, there was a popular trend in the fire service that customer service should be studied and applied to a public service just like other businesses. But the fire service is not a business. And this is the whole point. If any organization should be studied for excellence and process improvement, wouldn't it be instructive to consider the fire service, which by definition and necessity must improve its processes, especially when lives and safety are the heart of that process?

4. Confidence: Doing What You Fear

Eleanor Roosevelt's prescient quote defines courage and poise: "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do what you fear." On face value, one might assume that, of course, such advice makes sense for an emergency service. In fact, such an assumption is quite simplistic. Consider the words of Emerson that "most men lead lives of quiet desperation." This kind of courage comes from going beyond one's comfort zone. Firefighters are constantly challenged to do just that but intelligently and with constant training and preparation. What reason could any manager or executive have not to go well beyond the comfort zone,

to the dark side of fear? Probably a risk worth taking for any of us in any organization. What could you achieve if you did what you were afraid to face?

5. Pride and Honor

When a firefighter is sworn in, the pride of becoming a member of such a respected organization instills a kind of nobility that imbues each member with a sense of such integrity that the word failure doesn't recognize. Imagine this same sense of pride as you approach your career.

6. No Choice but to Be Excellent

There is a distinct difference in thought, strategy and execution when there is no choice but to succeed. Can you imagine if, by definition, your career depended on the need to perform flawlessly as though lives depended on it? If nothing else, the fire service teaches this clarity of responsibility.

What about You and Your Organization?

Reflect, for a minute, on your position in the organization you represent. Can you say that its culture nurtures its members as part of a family on a mission of excellence to confront the fear of a future you can embrace every day? Do you swell with pride with the nobility of your company's vision, strategies and actions?

Walk into your local firehouse. Soak up the culture, the intelligence and warmth of the place. Ask a few questions and see if you aren't renewed by associating with some men and women whose answers reflect a mission of excellence on fire.

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* 54,000 fire stations vs 14,000 Starbucks Stores in 2018

** Pew Research Center Poll