

SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF FIRE SERVICE LEADERSHIP

There are many things fire leadership does right but there are times the department simply goes sideways due to some glaring leadership errors either incidental or intentional on the part of the Fire Chief and the remainder of the departments leadership team responsible for the direction, management and leadership of the fire service organization.

Many of us has read or heard about the Seven Deadly Sins as there is a religious nexus and many media portrayals and management articles written relating to the Seven Deadly Sins.

The modern concept of the seven deadly sins is linked to the works of the 4th century monk Evagrius Ponticus, who listed *evil thoughts* in Greek from the Catholic teachings. The original Seven Deadly Sins are: **Envy, Gluttony, Greed, Lust, Pride, Sloth and Wrath**. The more modern version according to some business writers is: **Bitterness, Insecurity, Egoism, Hubris, Dishonesty, Isolationism and Fear**.

Leadership is a shared responsibility with the fire officers on your staff and those you lead. Your fire department has all of the characteristics of a large navy vessel. The course and direction of that ship depends on the leadership of the “Captain”, the training and expertise of the “crew” and the integrity of the ship. A “leaky ship”, taking on water, will soon sink. A “tight ship” will carry out the mission with ease and efficiency. The success of a fire department begins and ends with the leadership. If leadership fails in their role of communication, budgeting, planning, personal encouragement, long term vision, a supportive and knowledgeable staff, then the leader and the leadership team fails: as does the department.

There are many more comparative descriptors of the Seven Deadly Sins of Fire Service Management but for this article I chose these seven based on my leadership experience and working at the national level observing other fire service leaders and offering my version of the Seven Deadly Sins for Fire Service Leadership.

Lack of Courage of Leadership – leading from the rear

I have worked with seven different fire Chief’s in my career. They all had different personality and I learned from all of them. The worst chiefs were the ones who were never present either mentally or physically and they engage in the blame game. I had one Chief whose whole job consisted of working with the politicians at the local, state and national level and was never in the department. The Assistant Chief ran the department and he was not an effective leader as he had no power to make change or to enforce any aspect of management required for this position. I have had Chief’s who were in the office every day, but were working on their pet projects, which did not effectively benefit the department, it’s strategic needs and resources required to advance the services provided. There was no growth in the department or services delivered to the community.

I also worked for a couple of amazing Chiefs who were fully engaged in the process, politics, the firefighters and staff and we made unbelievable progress in growth, staffing, services, and delivery of those services. There are not enough of those personalities around in the Fire Service. In many cases we have leadership from the rear with the Chief not physically or mentally present in the department and possessing weak management and leadership styles with ineffective delegation to the lower ranks. Consequently the department's goals and mission are not being accomplished. This leads me to believe the Chief has no idea of how to get those goals accomplished. Strong leaders must take courage in facts, strategies, the team and its tactics and act on that information. Sometimes they fail, but if they learn from that failure we are all better off. That's how fire service leaders win the charge and avoid a deadly sin of reactive and crisis management.

Parochialism – focus on unimportant issues

Parochialism is the state of mind, whereby one focuses on small sections of an issue rather than considering its wider context. I cannot tell you of the number of meetings I have attended to discuss the minutiae of topics previously discussed while not actively discussing the big problematic issues facing the department. Ineffective leadership becomes involved in and focuses on parochial matters losing the sense of the greater picture that led to the discussion and planning session in the first place. What a waste of time, energy and talent. Strong and effective leaders will frame the big picture and assign the details to small committees to iron out the implementation of a particular program. As is often stated, “The devil is in the details.” However, let's not let the “devil” slow down or stop other programs on the drawing board. At times we fail to multitask and assume or delegate other important programs to other capable people on your staff to include interested firefighters. Poor leaders like to focus on the parochial issues in the department as it provides an avenue for the Chief to avoid other pressing problems of the department. The reality is it makes them look busy while accomplishing nothing.

Lack of Direction – Fuzzy Leadership

One of the worst leadership traits is fuzzy leadership with no clear direction provided to the remainder of the organization or its staff. When I was hired by a department, I was the only other chief officer. We were a department in a rapid change state, transitioning from a predominately volunteer organization to a combination department. There was no direction from the Chief as to how he defined the scope of work and my role in this transition. There was even less direction to the other staff members as well. It appeared that the goal was set by the Chief to transition the department with no details attached, apparently thinking the department would transition itself. When I approached the Chief and asked what he wanted me to do to ensure the success of the transition, his response was, “if I have to tell you that, I'll fire you and hire someone else.” I left that extremely short meeting with the goal of ensuring the success of the transition with the other staff, setting the direction and providing the details necessary for a five year transition period as outlined by the Chief. This lack of detailed direction by the Chief could have ended in disaster as

without a clear plan; people's best efforts to accomplish the goal may have cancel each other's best efforts causing the organization to spiral downward toward chaos. Clear concise direction is what the department needs for success and it is up to the Chief and staff to provide that direction

Failure of Effective Communication

Our industry does not communicate very well in our daily communication. As odd as it sounds, we have too much useless or meaningless communication with Email, Notices, Memos, Policies, Directives, phone calls, face time, and other forms of communication. We generally do well on the fire ground as we need to be specific in our command and control models which are specific in communication as it is a life safety form of communication. In the non emergency situation, we have many forms of "interpretations" of the verbal direction from the leadership as our minds will "filter" the message and meaning. In my experience if the leadership desires to be effective, a well written communication with a formal meeting will send the message in a "crystal clear" format so those responsible for carrying out the intention of the Chief will all be on the same page. Communication becomes filtered by our own desires, ego, experiences and/or interpretation whereas it should be "this is what I hear you saying, is that correct?" and we move on with clear and concise direction. Too many times the Chief communicates his desires to one group or another, a lot like throwing chicken feed (aka, information) down in the pen and the fire officers pecking at the tidbits of information and formulating their own ideas of what the goal of the Chief's communications really mean. Clear concise communication between the Chief and the leadership will ensure the success of your organization outlining the goals and objectives and end results desired will ensure success of the organization.

Failure to use your staff effectively

One of the best resources a Chief has is the people on your staff. Many staff members are capable of leading the organization on their own as they have worked hard to become the Assistant Chief or Deputy Chief or other levels of chief officers; are bright, educated, have vision and possess the wherewithal to work effectively as a leader and as a follower. These individuals are a tremendous resource for the Chief to effectively place the Chief's goals, visions and strategies in place ensuring the success of the organizations. Unfortunately all too many times and mostly due to the Chief's own ignorance, insecurities, lack of experience or a bad experience; the Chief fails to use this talent effectively. Many times it is because the Chief fears that someone in the organization will know more than they do. The Chief believes their power is based on their knowledge. While that is true in most instances, sharing that knowledge and power makes the organization stronger while holding that knowledge "close to the vest" will eventually weaken the organization. Some Chiefs fear that sharing that knowledge will usurp the Chief's position as the leader of the organization and the politicians and firefighters will look to the staff for direction and not the Chief. Other times the Chief in fact delegates to staff but does not provide the authority to carry out the task or will divide the responsibility for a particular task among the staff. Divided responsibility is a danger to the successful development or

implementation of a program occurring when it is unclear who owns the process. It is the surest way to ensure that a necessary action will either not be completed or will not be performed in a predictable fashion. The Department cannot win when the responsibility for a procedure is divided among the staff. Once ownership is assigned, the owner must be provided with the means and methods for running and assessing the procedure in order to determine if the process, procedure and its outcomes conform to the department's desires, designs and its desired outcomes. It is imperative that in order to ensure success of the organization the Chief must take the time to educate the staff as the people making up an organization are its greatest asset and potentially its greatest liability. Everyone in the organization must participate in an ongoing, coherent, and controlled, top-down educational process by which they learn the department's goals; the system by which the programs are created and services to the citizens are delivered. It is also imperative the methods used in the processes in which they participate are clear and concise.

Failure to responsibly engage in the political process

Politics are the bread and butter of our profession. Fire Chiefs all have bosses and it is the elected officials who are generally ignorant of the workings of the fire service. It is the responsibility of the Fire Chief and staff to educate the newly elected and incumbent officials as to the capabilities, services and needs of the fire department on a continuous basis. This means constant meetings, lunches, emails, creating reports, budget reviews and other means of connecting to the elected officials. Many times the Chief is not well equipped to engage in this constant contact with their bosses. There are many reasons for this to include: introverted personality, fear of offending the elected officials, poor preparation, intense criticism from prior experiences, unable to answer questions presented by the elected and many other reasons. This will cause the Chief to send others on his/her team to represent the department, possibly someone better at that representation skill. The question most often asked by the elected officials is, "where is the Chief?"

Remember, these are your bosses and it is imperative that you learn to deal with them at their level, become the expert in your profession and be well prepared to answer ALL of their questions. It is the Chief's job to engage the elected officials on a continuous and mostly positive basis. Not all of the news delivered to them will be good especially around budget time, but remember, you are competing for the diminishing budget dollars in your community with other aggressive leaders in your community. Become politically astute and if you are not, look to your peer group on some pointers as to how to deal with the elected officials. Chiefs have to remember, they are the 'constant factor' in the ever changing political world with frequent elections and elected officials staying or going based on a particular election period. The Fire Chief is the one and only consistent factor in the insane world of politics. Learn how to play the game and play it well. At times your department's survival depends on how well you engage in the political process.

Hubris

Hubris is defined as exaggerated pride or self-confidence. We are in a profession where you want your leadership to be strong and self confident. These traits are important in creating a long term goal for the fire service; having the tools to put those goals into place with the appropriate staffing and resources and to place those concepts before the elected officials for approval. At times the leader's hubris becomes all about oneself, losing sight that there is a team behind you supporting your work. When the leader becomes self absorbed then the successful accomplishments becomes his or hers and the failures become everyone else's fault. Failure's primary response by the Chief becomes a "not my fault," scenario and are willing to throw anyone and everyone into the fire in order to avoid blame or consequences. These Chief's end up placing most of their energy and resources into self-protection at any cost and have little to no energy left to do anything positive in their organization. Like the first sin of Lack of Courage in Leadership or leading from the rear, this behavior breeds more of the same. With a Chief constantly focusing on making himself or herself look good, it's almost inevitable that the staff will try to continue moving the bad things downstream: it becomes a gigantic game of hot potato, with no one taking responsibility for mistakes or failures --- which therefore never get addressed and resolved. Hubris is the double edged sword of the fire service. Be aware of its existence and attempt to control the down side of this trait.

As a fire service leader, here are some effective ways to avoid the Seven Deadly Sins.

1. Check your ego at the door.

Remember who you are working for when you take the job as a fire chief. If were brought in from the outside a department you were hired to problem solve or troubleshoot and fix a department in crisis. Sometimes you were hired to advance a department into the next step of a delivery model that is in tune with the desires of your elected officials. Those who were promoted from within, the organization is not looking for the status quo. The organization and your bosses are looking to you to make the necessary improvements and possible a course change to improve the department, create a firm financial footing, eliminate any possible legal challenges caused by theft, embezzlement, discrimination or other high risk activities occurring in the fire service. The testing or promotional process was the easy part and just because you were chosen doesn't mean you are special. The real work now begins when you walk through the door of the fire house on the first day. Ego issues have no place in your management ethos.

2. Transparent Communication

Problem solving requires transparent communication where everyone's concerns and points of view are freely expressed. It is impossible to get to the root of a problem in a timely manner when people do not speak up. Communication is a fundamental necessity for the success of your

organization and when those involved in the problem would rather not express themselves, fearing the loss of their job or exposing their own or someone else's wrong-doing, the problem solving process becomes difficult. Effective communication towards problem solving happens because of a Chief's ability to facilitate an open dialogue between people who trust the intentions of the process and feel that they are in a safe environment to share why they believe the problem happened as well as specific solutions. Once all voices have been heard and all points of view accounted for, the Chief and staff can effectively create a path toward a viable and sustainable solution. As basic as communication may sound, never assume that your staff are comfortable sharing what they really think. This is where the Chief must trust his or her intuition enough to challenge the team until accountability can be fairly enforced and a solution can be reached.

3. Remove Silos

Transparent communication requires you to remove silos in your organization and enable an open organization without boundaries and whose organizational culture is focused on the improvement of performance and health of the staff. Silos invite hidden agendas rather than welcome efficient cross-functional collaboration and problem solving. Silos become the root cause of most workplace problems creating difficulty in resolving problems or completing programs. The fire service must emulate the private sector and embrace an entrepreneurial spirit where staff and employees can freely navigate and cross-collaborate to connect the problem solving dots. When you know your workplace dot, you have a greater sense of your role in solving the problem thus creating a solution. This is almost impossible to gauge effectiveness when you operate in silos that potentially keep you from having any influence at all. In a silo ridden workplace, problem solving becomes even more difficult as you are dealing with self centered individuals rather than a team. In a silo environment everyone wants to be the star and problem solving becomes difficult if not impossible to make things better and cause discouragement among the remaining players. Breaking down silos allows a leader to more easily engage their employees and solve problems together making the organization stronger.

4. Hire, promote or train open-minded staff

Effective organizations hire, train and retain open minded individuals. The end goal of problem solving is about your staff working together creating a solution to a particular problem or to create and implement new programs. An organization with close minded individuals drags the organization to their level of negativity making it more difficult to achieve your goals or solve problems. There are many people in the workplace that enjoy creating unnecessary chaos so that their inefficiencies are never exposed and the organization becomes less efficient.

Open minded staff and firefighters see beyond the obvious problems and details and view risk as an ally. They will approach a problem or program head on and move the department's problem solving agenda forward to a successful conclusion. Closed minded can turn things around to make it more about themselves and less about the long term issues and solutions facing the department. Fire Chiefs need to carefully reflect on their own behavior and observe others on

your management team when you are dealt a real problem requiring a team approach for resolutions

5. Create a solid foundational and operational strategy

Without a strategy, change is simply a substitution and not an evolution. When attempting to solve a problem or create a problem many leaders attempt to dissect the issue and not identify the strategy required to resolve a problem by creating a solution. Effective and successful leaders will gather the right people and resources; create a budget, provide sufficient time and provide the foundation for success. Many times the collective brainpower of the team can resolve a problem in relatively short order due to experience with a prior situation; have read or observed others with the same needs to resolve a problem or implement a program or can reach out to other organizations who have had similar needs with a solution. Effective leaders connect the dots and map-out a realistic plan of action in advance. They have a strategy that serves as the foundation for how the problem will be approached and managed. They anticipate the unexpected and utilize the strengths of their people to assure the strategy leads to a sustainable solution. Eliminate the “Ready, Fire, Aim” concept of problem solving. Take the necessary time to step back to assess the entirety of a program or problem before seeking the solution and the opportunities that accompany that assessment time. Remember, each situation has its own nuances that may require a separate and distinct strategy for resolution.

Finally

As the leader of any organization, it is your job to make tough choices and decisions. If your staff is inept or not productive, you will have to make those tough choices which may mean demotions or terminations; if you become ineffective, you may have to step back or step down from your position in the organization. Remember you work for the citizens of your community and committing any one or a combination of the Deadly Sins makes you less effective and does not serve your community in a productive and successful manner.

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