

Growing Leaders Using E.M.P.O.W.E.R.ment

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BY LARRY C. CONLEY

Even before 9/11, fire service personnel were viewed as heroes. Firefighters are a special breed that dare to run into a fire while everyone else is running out. Armed with great technical training; equipment; and, in most cases, experience forged in [furnace](#) after furnace, firefighters for generations have been our first and last line of defense against fire. With the landscape constantly changing and the threat of terrorism, firefighters find their responsibilities growing. Fire is not the only responsibility of these courageous men and women. The paradigm has shifted. That shift involves the type of fire [service professional](#) needed to meet the new demand. The demands facing today's first responders necessitate solutions rooted in an *empowerment leadership paradigm*. Today's leaders cannot simply be promoted to positions of authority. Today's fire service leaders must be *grown*.

There are seven leadership principles that can be instilled in firefighters at all levels of rank and experience. These principles, once internalized, will enhance the performance of the individual firefighter, engine houses, departments, and ultimately the fire service. These principles, which make up the **E.M.P.O.W.E.R.** model, are Endvision, Mutual Victory, be Proactive, Organize priorities, Working together, Empathetic listening, and Recharge. Let's examine each of these principles individually and collectively to illustrate their potential benefit to individual firefighters and the entire fire service.

LEADERSHIP DEFINED

First, it is important to define leadership. Like most organizations dedicated to emergency response, the fire service is based on a military model because in extremely intense or critical situations such as war, it is important that orders are given and followed quickly, efficiently, and without question. People need to know who is in charge and what their assignments are. They need to synthesize this information and implement it at hyper speed. Lives depend on it.

Because of the efficiency of this model, which has been tested in extreme circumstances, civilian emergency organizations have wisely adopted it. The characteristics are the same as or similar to those for the military. There is a clear

chain of command; [training](#) and readiness are emphasized; and personnel are grouped in smaller subgroups, such as engine houses, to easily mobilize the appropriate response to a given situation. In the middle of the emergency, the military model is clearly effective. In this model, positions of leadership are awarded based largely on the ability to exhibit a technical aptitude required for a given position. If a candidate passes certain tests, has certain experiences, and positions are available, the firefighter will find himself in one or many (over time) leadership positions. Still, is that person a leader? Is a leader truly defined by the office to which he is appointed? I like to think that leadership is defined by something more, that "Leadership is action, not a position," as it is defined by Donald H. McGannon, businessman.

There has been a continuing debate as to whether leaders are born or made. To me, the debate seems moot because both points are true. We all have within us the traits, the raw materials for principle-centered leadership. These traits must, of course, be developed and conditioned over time and through experience. As they develop, a leader emerges. The **E.M.P.O.W.E.R.** model isolates and develops these traits through seven key principles. These principles mature and grow through consistent daily exercise. The result is a principle-centered leader who is not defined by position or status within the department but by his decisions, actions, bearing, respect for himself and others, as well as his effectiveness.

Efficiency is commonly confused with effectiveness. Efficiency is the ability to do things right. Effectiveness is doing the right thing. The principle-centered firefighter has the right balance of the two. The emphasis is more on efficiency in most organizations operating on the military model. This is where the technical prowess of the firefighter is honed through constant training on skill and procedure. Everyone essentially knows the various aspects of fighting the fire and carries out whichever duties they are assigned. Often, effectiveness is lost or diminished. Unwise decisions are made in the heat of the moment. Team members are not assigned the position in which they would be most effective. Various small things like this coalesce into a greater, life-threatening error in some cases. We see these instances more often than we should. The **E.M.P.O.W.E.R.** model is an attempt to regain the balance between efficiency and effectiveness, thus improving the profession as a whole from within.

THE E.M.P.O.W.E.R. PRINCIPLES

Endvision. This is the art of beginning any task with the end or outcome clearly defined. This is beyond simple planning. Being able to do this necessitates that you create a complete three-dimensional mental picture of your objective. Everything that is created is created twice. Every house has a clear blueprint with all the features and characteristics drawn with precision and in great detail. Sculptors will often draw a picture of their piece before molding transforming clay into a work of art. The art of molding your vision, goal, or objective from the clay of your creativity is no different.

A young man stopped by my firehouse a few years back. He expressed his vision to be a firefighter/paramedic. He was starting from scratch, so I had to map out a clear endvision for him. I explained that getting to his goal would be similar to following a road map to a destination and, if we charted his course, we would be sure to reach the destination. This process has had its detours, but I'm proud to say that as of today, he has completed paramedic school, has his firefighter 1 and 2 certification, and will be in the next academy class. He claims the key to his focus was my asking him to constantly imagine and speak of being a firefighter/paramedic in the present tense. This initially felt odd and uncomfortable to him. I constantly expressed that by walking and speaking in his endvision, the evidence would soon follow. Today, he is a believer because he continues to become what he has envisioned.

A great exercise for this principle is to write a personal manifesto, which is more detailed than a personal mission statement. A personal mission statement is a written crystallized statement of the goal for your life. A manifesto would be the expansion of that statement. It not only states the mission, but it also describes it in minute detail. The manifesto gives insight into paths to reach the goal. It lays out the pros and cons of reaching or not reaching the goal. It defines and cements the philosophy that guides you. It will be your compass as you strive toward your leadership goals. Try it, and you will be one step closer to a 20/20 endvision.

Mutual victory. This principle is about finding solutions or outcomes that have a benefit or a *win* for all parties involved in an exchange. Some people find this concept difficult to wrap their minds around. We have the notion of win/lose instilled in us from an early age. It is difficult to train ourselves to have a win/win *default* mentality, where we are automatically thinking of ways for everyone to come out on top. The win/lose paradigm most often becomes about ego, about control and dominion of one's point of view. The alternate or win/win paradigm is more about solving the problem, reaching an objective, and sharing control of a nonthreatening environment. This does require all parties to shift their focus.

If we learn to shift our focus from the need to win and collectively focus on establishing and accomplishing a mutual goal, there are no losers, and the team wins anyway. This model of thinking incrementally builds trusting, productive relationships, and teams that perform better when circumstances become extreme. This thought process has to be continually honed and perfected. It requires creative thinking. It requires the bravery, selflessness, and commitment inherent in all firefighters.

An adjunct who works with me teaching the firefighter 1 and 2 courses at the community college had a challenge teaching according to the current curriculum. She's an excellent teacher and very passionate about instructing the students. It seemed we were not able to get past the difference of what I required vs. what she needed to be an effective instructor. She expressed this concern during one of our

orientation sessions. During this session, a few other instructors agreed with her concerns. This presented a challenge because I was set on teaching the objectives the way they had worked for me. When I got out of my way, I realized it didn't have to be my way or her way and that there was the potential for a mutual victory. What would be better for the quality of the program? She, with the input of the instructors, developed a more streamlined way to deliver the practicals. This system incorporated the critical objectives of the curriculum along with the points I felt were important. The combination created a third alternative in which both sides won. I'm happy. The adjuncts are happy. The program wins. This model we teach now hits the bull's-eye for us all.

Proactive. Proactive is defined as creating or controlling a situation by causing something to happen as opposed to reacting to it. To the untrained, firefighting seems like a reactionary pursuit. A fire or another emergency is the catalyst for fire service personnel to mobilize and neutralize the situation. The real work of a proactive department happens when there is no fire burning, when no threat is imminent. The real work of readiness happens in the *downtime*. Proactive individuals create and improve their readiness on a constant basis. These individuals stay informed on the latest techniques and work at maintaining excellent working relationships with other team members. They take definitive steps to advance themselves and their organization. Proactive individuals make proactive teams. Proactive teams create a more efficient and effective force when they arrive on the scene.

I work at being proactive by doing little things. I used to be under the impression that being proactive was just proper planning; however, incorporating and accumulating small victories naturally cycle into keeping the proactive wheel turning. Shift starts at 0800. I'm at work at 0700. This guarantees proper relief. When I'm not on shift, getting proper rest is a priority so I can have the endurance to handle the crazy sleep hours of the shift. Regular exercises, especially endurance-type workouts, help me to maintain the stamina required when it becomes necessary to go that extra mile. The right food and portions supply the proper fuel to keep the body running smoothly. Proper fuel will also give me the edge I need. Old and new fire service books as well as anything else that complements our profession are the heart of my consistent input of knowledge. This keeps me fresh and current on details that will ensure proficiency. Investing in things that strengthen my family at home results in fewer personal distractions, which helps sharpen my focus when dealing with the fire service family. I find quiet time at home and at the firehouse to consistently identify where I'm most effective and can execute accordingly.

Life, personal or professional, can seem a lot like a fire seems to civilians. Things seem chaotic and devoid of control. The truth of the matter is, fire service training clearly defines the priorities for all teams arriving at a given emergency. Many times when our lives seem to have several things that demand our immediate attention, it can be overwhelming. We can feel as if we are in a flashover. As our training teaches us in

those emergency situations, setting priorities increases our chances of successfully conquering all the challenges we face.

Organizing priorities. This trait allows us to identify and tackle tasks in order of importance. This helps us not to lose sight of our individual and collective endvision. It keeps me on task to give my life the quality needed to lead personally and at the firehouse. I purposely spend time preparing the day; week; month; and, in some cases, the year regarding my crew. I consistently spend designated time assessing their strengths and areas of opportunity. This designated time allows me to make adjustments that will optimize our performance. Roll call is where I reinforce our shared values as a team. Our values of safety, professionalism, teamwork, and respect help strengthen our endvision to produce the fire company the citizens and department expect. The great thing about our team is that the members are all *E.M.P.O.W.E.R.*ed members. This means the ownership is not on me alone as the officer. I talk with them collectively as well as individually. They not only build relationships personally but also find value investing in each other. Everything else I deal with or we deal with as a team gets handled well because I purposely invest in the organizing priorities principle.

Working together. They say a team is only as strong as its weakest link. Each individual has strengths in one area and challenges in another. Working together is a way of team building that maximizes the strengths of all team members while using those strengths to minimize the various individual areas that need improvement. The team, identifying its collective endvision, positions itself so tasks are assigned and executed based on each member's strengths. This cuts down on tasks being mishandled by team members who are less talented or qualified for a particular job. It also allows team members to cross-train with each other in different areas of expertise where one firefighter's aptitude is higher than another's. As team members improve the skills of their colleagues, the team grows stronger, relationships grow stronger, and suddenly a synergy is formed. The team now works together in a way and on a level it has never done before. Teams like this are truly optimized units and are virtually unbeatable.

Empathetic listening. One basic human need is the need for expression. Within it is the fundamental need to be heard or understood. Individuals committed to improving relationships with family and coworkers would do well to study and

develop the principle of empathetic listening. Most of us have conversations with others where the minute we stop talking and the other person starts, our minds are working to formulate our next response. We tell ourselves we are listening. Most of us think of ourselves as great listeners. If we are honest though, we will find that in today's society, with all the things competing for our attention, it is difficult for us to truly listen. Good, empathetic listening requires listening with all your senses. Look for body language that suggests one emotion or another. Incorporate that with the words being said and the tone being used. Practice staying as calm as possible, trying to fully understand what the person is saying. It is vitally important that we do not listen to others while filtering their message through our history. Imprinting our story on what we are hearing from the other person is a very powerful way to guarantee a misunderstanding and damage the relationship. Instead, seek to understand the message being presented from the speaker's point of view, from his history. Then, your understanding will go beyond the words, to the messenger. This level of understanding makes the mutual victory principle easier to achieve. It also promotes a healthier environment for everyone and helps healthy teams grow.

We once took **G**rowing **L**eaders **U**sing **E**mpowerment (GLUE) to a city in which a good friend of mine was well known in the circles of the fire service in that area. After our first day of presentation, he approached me with a concern. He wasn't happy with the fact that he wasn't more involved in the presentation. This concern caused a disagreement between us. Initially, I was a bit defensive. The presentation follows the spirit of the audience but is scripted to ensure we hit all objectives and teaching points. Being defensive was counterproductive to a mutual understanding and possibly our friendship. I was guilty of not being empathetic because I was busy being logical. Logically, the co-presenter and I are the authors of the **GLUE** and **EMPOWER** models. Logically, we should do the presentation as planned. Looking at my friend's point empathetically, I could see he had really done a great job of stirring excitement in his hometown. He was really interested in showing the audience his belief in our system and how it worked for him. That's the message I did not hear. I didn't put myself in his shoes. I didn't listen past my defense mechanism. I heard the words but didn't listen.

The next day, we did another presentation. He was given the opportunity to genuinely express his belief and testify from personal experience how the **GLUE** system has helped him personally and professionally. This turned out to be a turning point in our trip and became a great complement to our presentation. Because **WE** listened, the audience listened, and our **GLUE** workshop became one of the best road trips we have had.

Recharge. Fire services are demanding. Over time, all of us will find ourselves feeling worn down. Depleted physical, emotional, and psychological reserves can promote a callous and cynical attitude in our professional and personal lives. It is vitally important that we constantly practice this last principle in the model, recharge. This principle applies to individuals and teams. Recharging a human being takes on many forms. It goes beyond sleep and rest. Truly recharging is a 360° process that includes exercise and feeding the mind with reading and mental exercises to stay sharp. Recharging reaches deeper by identifying and practicing spiritual maintenance (i.e., church membership, meditation, and so on). Teams can design team outings like fishing, bowling, and sporting events. These activities help teams to remember they exist as a unit and that the integrity of that unit is very important. Recharging as a principle applies to all the things that keep you fresh, grounded, and in a constant state of readiness. Do not make the common mistake of overlooking this very important principle.

I sometimes find myself in the trap of thinking that recharging is not important because there is so much to do. However, I find I actually accomplish more when I recharge often. I meditate on my personal as well as my professional spirit and attitude. I not only make time for industry reading but also for books and readings that promote the awareness of endless potential. It is important to make time for physical exercise and rest whenever possible. Spend time studying and adjusting your value system to ensure most things stay on point. A vehicle needs an oil change to get maximum performance. Recharging changes the metaphoric oil so we can be efficient and effective for a long time. In our business, we can't afford to be less than sharp and recharged.

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Mastering this model requires intensive training and relentless practice. If you master each of these principles and use them together as outlined here, you will improve yourself and become the leader you always wanted to be. No one will have to promote you to a position for your leadership to be activated. They may promote you because your leadership has been activated. As you improve yourself, your contribution to the improvement of your team and, consequently, your department will become evident. Hopefully, others will catch on. As this model spreads across the country, we will all be safer and better for it. That is my goal. That is my Endvision. What's yours?

- **LARRY C. CONLEY**