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What Would a Company Officer Do?

Leadership in the Fire Service from the Company Officer's Perspective

This essay is intended for the selection committee evaluating entries to the Darley Leadership Essay Competition, discussing how a company officer can exhibit exceptional leadership that transcends the fire station.

It is uniquely challenging to write an essay that is informal enough to be relevant and accessible to the target audience while also academic enough to provide credibility, which is essential for such an important topic. This essay aims to explore the traits and attitudes that define an exemplary contemporary company officer as well as to establish the context in which a new breed of company officer has become necessary.

First, we will examine the desperate need for innovation and progression from the fire service as a whole when contrasted with comparable industries. Next, we'll notice that leadership throughout the fire service is already aware of the need for radical culture shifts and we will discuss the concept that the company officer is the single most potent change agent in an organization. Further, we'll consider the idea that a major function of company officers is to prevent negative change to ensure high-performance environments and combat entropy. Finally, we will examine the case that contemporary company officers need to be educated, trained,

mentored, and intentionally groomed to transcend the historical limits of the first-line supervisor, giving them the tools to understand and advocate for the strategic direction of the fire service.

Now and in the future, we will find that the leaders who stand out from the rest are those with the courage, grit, and initiative to serve as change agents in local, regional, and national arenas. The truly exceptional company officer is a paradigm breaker. There is an urgent need for transformational growth within the fire service and the company officer is the key catalyst for that evolution.

The fire service is facing an identity crisis. Daily utterances such as “we have a culture problem” and “we just need better leadership” plague organizations nationwide, and still we struggle to articulate and quantify the underlying dysfunction that generates those sentiments. The fire service is in terrible danger of becoming irrelevant and obsolete as other public safety agencies pivot, adjust, and adapt to the evolving needs of their communities while much of the fire service continues to cling to anachronistic views about organizational management, risk analysis, and leadership (Wieczorek, 2022); (NFPA, 2022); (NFFF, 2022).

While the US Forest Service shifts its educational requirements from an emphasis on criminal justice to a desire for applicants with education in natural sciences, (Service, 2021) and law enforcement pivots towards a preventative “proactive policing” model based on evidence (Weisburd, 2021), the fire service is, in many cases, staunchly hanging on to antiquated paradigms revolving around reactive hazard mitigation. The profession of nursing engaged in a centuries-long uphill battle to transform from simple caretakers to the most trusted of medical clinicians (University, 2022), largely by seeking increased education and professional standards. As the modern public safety environment evolves into a litigious, polarized political minefield,

the fire service is left with the need to rapidly develop an inclusive culture in a historically exclusive industry (Bendersky, 2021), and to modernize the methods and processes that improve the safety of the citizens paying the bills (Semuels, 2021).

It's clear that leaders in the fire service are aware of the need for cultural evolution. It's useful to address the topic via the lexicon of the eight critical issues outlined in the 21st Century Fire and Emergency Services White Paper, published by the ICMA and CPSE in 2020 (ICMA/CPSE, 2021), which is just one of many papers published expressing nearly identical notions about the future of the fire service.

The first issue listed is that of re-identification, namely the concept that a reactive fire department approach is no longer appropriate in a national environment that requires proactive risk reduction and all-hazards mitigation. The initiative is careful to outline the need to celebrate fire department heritage and establish messaging strategies to manage this emotional evolution. Who will be the champions of this evolution? Company officers. The only way for them to be capable of this task is through development and succession planning that stretches the boundaries of what is typically considered within the scope of a first or second-line supervisor. Company officers who are well educated, well developed, and aware of the broader function of the fire service through mentorship and exposure to high-order thinking will be positioned to understand and authentically advocate for the necessary adjustments that the fire service will need to make to survive.

The second issue presented in the white paper is culture, and it is known both colloquially and through extensive research that first-line supervisors and managers possess tremendous power to influence employee engagement, trust, and commitment (Berger, 2022). The fire service in general seems to know which aspects of its nature need to grow in order to meet the

challenges of the future, and yet company officers are consistently under-prepared for their crucial role in the change process, inevitably resulting in failure. In many cases, the vision of the future is undermined and eventually completely destroyed by company officers who believe they are protecting their beloved vocation. It's important to understand that the act of maintaining the status quo is a crucial role of leaders designed to retain the gains made by the organization through past growth. Staunch resistance to negative change is part of a company officer's job. After all, normalization of deviance, skill degradation, and entropy are all types of change with the potential for catastrophe (Price, 2022). Too often, company officers will impede positive change and progress by creating an environment where all change is avoided in order to maintain service standards. We learn from Dan Coyle's "The Culture Code" that high proficiency environments are culturally very different from high creativity environments (Coyle, 2022), and that the former is very useful to create highly reliable, consistent results while the latter generates an environment of innovation, progression, and growth. Kurt Lewin's change model (Hussain, 2022) describes the process of "unfreezing" organizational culture in order to make changes and "freezing" the culture into permanent adoption of those changes. Key activities to manage change include motivating change, creating a vision, developing political support, and sustaining momentum. All of these activities are performed by company officers on a daily basis. As fire departments attempt to transform into the proactive public safety agencies of tomorrow, the company officers are the only soldiers in the battle facing direct employee resistance, and the only group who can employ transformational leadership methods to increase employee openness via employee involvement and knowledge sharing (Hussain, 2022). Part of a culture is the shared set of assumptions regarding the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to problems, as well as the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that are rewarded and supported

(Taylor, 2022). Simply put, culture is the shared pattern of beliefs, values, behaviors, customs, and attitudes of a group (Livermore, 2016). The leadership ability of the executive manager (the fire chief) is irrelevant because they lack the proximity and influence to “unfreeze” the vast majority, while the company officer is both close enough and influential enough to make an impact.

Cultural agents for change must operate in the realm of the abstract and possess the high-order thinking skills to bring abstract concepts into being through relationships, navigating the formal and informal organization to lead into the future (Katzenbach, 2021), and those skills reside in the top of Bloom’s taxonomy (Armstrong, 2021). Often, fire officers excel in the fields of firefighting and EMS because of their low-order thinking abilities such as process memorization, mechanical/spatial aptitudes, and rapid puzzle-solving abilities. As they work within the bottom of the taxonomy, technical competencies reign, as firefighters and EMTs are always working with tangible products.

Once an officer reaches the company supervisor and executive level, they are faced with increasingly abstract, high-order problems that require nuanced solutions, strategic and critical thinking skills, collaborative methods, and a global approach. Unfortunately, we often see upper-level executives, informed by decades of success fighting fires or leading at the company level, attempting to solve organizational problems with the same skillsets that solved problems on a fire scene. This is a square peg and a round hole.

How can we provide our company officers with the ability to see what chief officers can see? How can we bring them higher up on the professional development pyramid (NFA, 2022) so that they can see and understand the scope and impact of their leadership?

First, high-order thinking skills don't develop overnight. There isn't a week-long seminar that will imbue a leader with the mental aptitude to understand and solve complex, complicated problems (Kinni, 2017). The process of developing officers for our future must begin as early as possible, or else we will find that we have no capable, qualified lieutenants, captains, battalion chiefs, division chiefs, deputy chiefs, or chiefs. The fire service is in the midst of that epidemic, as leaders with the desired requisite skillset are sought after in all levels of leadership and rarely obtained. If we are to provide the future with officers of quality, we must begin developing them early and often, with comprehensive, holistic programs that address the experiential, training, and educational needs of a qualified officer.

Succession planning is a key vehicle to this end, as mentorship is the only meaningful route to making the kind of personal investments required to develop high-order thinking skills. We learn from Dr. Henry Cloud that constructive relationships are the only way to level up your "brain hardware" and expand your intellectual ability (Cheng, 2022). Within the context of mentorship and succession planning, mentors can have courageous conversations, provide resources, and encourage in a manner that is more than simply transient. The completion of an educational degree, for instance, requires years of mentorship and encouragement, rather than an occasional check-in. Formal succession planning necessitates this kind of enduring relationship and further passes on crucial institutional knowledge.

The next part of the solution is a shift in the attitude and self-perception of the company officer. An extraordinary company officer will forsake the attitude of "if it's not on the truck, it's not my problem." Being the company officer of the future requires remarkable discernment, diplomacy, and humility. Very few officers are doing it because it is so demanding. It's easier to say "no" than it is to say "tell me more." What will happen the next time someone mentions

community risk reduction, data-driven decision making, diversity/equity/inclusion, firefighter mental health, residential sprinklers, community paramedicine, the opioid epidemic, or electric fire apparatus? If you are an exceptional company officer, you will have the courage to set aside your propensity for judgment and be curious instead (Ducharme, 2022).

The intent of this essay is not to argue for degree requirements for company officers, which, while certainly part of the equation, are an imprecise intervention that doesn't address all of the multi-faceted dimensions of the issue. Rather, this essay aims to persuade company and chief officers of the value of investing heavily in the development of company officers early in their careers. Chief officers can help by aggressively and formally mentoring, establishing policy that supports the philosophy of professional development, and setting an example of lifelong learning. Company officers can help by getting educated early, exposing themselves to books, reputable journals, lectures, podcasts, seminars, and anything that broadens their worldview, while finding mentors and exploring with a curious mind. They must connect with people who stretch their potential instead of reinforcing their comfort zones. Officers at all levels must let go of the ancient adversarial, transactional relationship between first-line supervisors and upper management in favor of a collaborative, transformational relationship model that keeps us all working toward common goals (Cherry, 2022).

The rest of the future in the vision cast in the 21st Century White paper relies almost completely on the same high-order skillsets developed over time through relationships. In order to leverage data, we must cultivate more than a peripheral awareness of and a cursory understanding of the data available to us. We must emphasize the health and wellness of our workforce through evidence and proactivity. We must work with our community partners locally, regionally, and nationwide to collaborate on a global system that achieves our objectives.

We must find ways to keep our industry sustainable. We must leverage technology. We must demand an inclusive environment that diversifies the cultural makeup of the fire service and therefore improves resiliency.

Without exaggeration or hyperbole, all aspects of the above vision for the future are hopeless without developing company officers into leaders with all the same affective and cognitive abilities that have been historically reserved for executive officers. We must focus on developing high-order thinking skills in our officers by cultivating meaningful mentoring relationships over long periods of time. Without investing in our future, we will find that we don't have one.

So often, a company officer promotes into a Chief level role, ascending the organizational pyramid to a place where they can finally see the metaphorical horizon. This catalyst results in a leap in understanding and vision and often results in the complaint that people "change" when they get promoted. It's because they can see the horizon from their new position. That newly promoted Chief will turn around to his company officers and say something like "Hey! I can see where we're going from here! Follow me!". Inevitably, the company officers will reply, just as the Chief once did "No. I don't see what you see. There's no horizon, only trees. I can only see what's right in front of me." An extraordinary company officer will put in the effort to get a "Chief's Eye" view of the organization and carry that message back to the troops.

To summarize, we've set the stage by describing a fire service on the brink of irrelevance, and learned that leadership throughout the industry is acutely aware of the danger. We've established the tremendous power of the company officer as an agent of change, and we've explored the types of environments and skill sets necessary to generate innovation and

cultural evolution. Finally, we discussed that expanded knowledge and education will be key for company officers to be able to genuinely and intentionally champion this necessary public safety renaissance.

In closing, an entreaty: when an initiative, idea, or progressive program is piloted or launched, crews will always look to their officer. If you don't recognize the future when it crosses your kitchen table, you will kill the seeds that will keep this profession alive. If you are a company officer, the future is in your hands.

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