THE NEED FOR FIRE SERVICE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The importance of fire and emergency services professional development standards has never been more apparent than during the last few years. With the events of September 11, 2001, the need for improved leadership in the emergency services has become evident. The International Association of Fire Chiefs has introduced a professional development standards model, based on a definition of professional development, which is “the planned, progressive life-long process of education, training, self-development, and experience” (IAFC, 2003). Their standard recognizes that emergency response training activities are more prevalent in the early stages of a career and that organizational skills grow with a shift to an education emphasis.

This article will introduce a new leadership model along with the International Association of Fire Chiefs’ standard and discuss their relevance and importance in the fire and emergency services arena. By adopting this new model as an accepted industry standard and raising the level of expectation for those working in the field, a safer community, state and nation may be assured, improving the standard of living for all citizens.

INTRODUCTION

The fire service in America has a long history. The first organized volunteer fire department was formed in 1736, by Benjamin Franklin and was called the Union Fire Company. Some of the famous Americans who also served as volunteer firefighters were: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Paul Revere, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, John Barry, Aaron Burr, Benedict Arnold, James Buchanan and Millard Fillmore (Collins, 1982; Smith, 1978; Ditzel, 1976). This seems apparent that respected community leaders have participated in an “ideal of public service.”

Through the years, the folklore and perception of the firefighter has been one of a macho, brave, and brawny man. This perception prevailed for a number of centuries. However, it began to make a slow change in the 1970s. Early in the decade of the 1970s, an exciting development entered the fire service—emergency medical services delivery. With the assistance of a popular television show called Emergency, the nation was introduced to the concept of advanced life support delivered at the scene of an illness or injury by paramedics and emergency medical technicians. Suddenly, the firefighter had taken on a new role and with it the start of a new way of thinking about the fire services.

Shortly thereafter, changing social norms opened a male-only occupation to the female. The macho image could no longer exist. Along with this came the need for a more professional approach to leadership and administration.
THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

September 11, 2001 and subsequent events have underscored the importance of Fire Service professional development standards. With the renewed emphasis on preparedness and response, the need for improved leadership in the emergency services has become evident. When the environment changes and the changes affect the public sector, the public sector must initiate organizational change (Yang, Wu, Chang & Chien, 2011). However, this is not a particularly recent identified need. As early as 1966, the first Wingspread Conference—Statements of National Significance to the Fire Problem in the United States drew international attention to the need for organizational change. This conference convened top fire service leaders four times at ten-year intervals. Each one of these conferences continued to identify the need for effective leadership through development of professional standards. In fact, the following statement from the report relays the need well: “…success is largely dependent on the caliber of leadership of the individual fire chiefs, and there is no assurance that this progress will continue…when there is a change of leadership…” (The Johnson Foundation, 1966, p. 5). With the increased responsibilities that have been added to our nation’s first responders, the need for transformational leadership appears to be vital and urgent.

Later, in statement #9 of the report, the following is presented: “The career of the fire executive must be systematic and deliberate” (The Johnson Foundation, 1966, p. 13). The reason for this statement can be traced to the traditional method of appointing fire executives by promoting personnel into higher ranks and then trying to train them. The practice of on-the-job-training rather than having a systematic methodology of building skills and preparing succession of leadership with qualified candidates is contradictory to most all other identified methodologies within other professions.

This leads to an interesting question. Are fire and emergency service leaders (chief officers) considered professionals? To be able to answer this question, a look at what constitutes “professional” needs to be explored. Tradition can be a guide to assist in this pursuit.

The original “professions” were law, medicine, ministry and the professoriate (educators of higher learning). This tradition has a 750 year history and was developed around three characteristics: 1) the pursuit of a learned art through training and education; 2) commitment to an ideal of public service demanding a higher ethical obligation than the common citizen; and 3) professional autonomy through self-regulation and peer review (Hamilton, 2000). Looking at the fire service, characteristics numbers one and two are very apropos to the mission. What appears to have been lacking until recently is professional autonomy and peer-review.

The International Association of Fire Chiefs has recently introduced a Professional Development Standards Model. This model was created on the association’s definition of professional development, which is “the planned, progressive life-long process of education, training, self-development, and experience” (IAFC, 2003). Their standard’s foundation is the importance of both education and training. It recognizes the fact that emergency response training activities are more prevalent in the early stages of a career, and that organizational and leadership skills grow with a shift to an education emphasis.
A MODEL OF LEADERSHIP FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES

As the reason to seek professional designation is to assure development of leaders within the discipline, a review of some of the leadership theories may be appropriate. While leadership theories are numerous and varied, for this article we will explore just a few relevant theories, i.e., transactional leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, and perspectives on ethical leadership.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership refers to the bulk of leadership models and centers on the exchanges that occur between leader and follower (Northouse, 2010). In simplistic terms it centers around the “quid pro quo” idea of “if you will do this, I will reward you with that.” This transactional exchange can be observed in almost any organization and can be effective in moving the goals of the organization forward.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders are those who use and work with the motives of the followers to achieve the goals of the leader and followers (Burns, 1978). Northouse (2010) states:

[T]ransformational leadership is the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower (p. 172).

Servant Leadership

In the early 1970s, Robert Greenleaf introduced an interesting approach to leadership. He called his approach servant leadership. Greenleaf (1970, 1977) posited that leadership was given to a person who was by nature a servant. In other words, Greenleaf suggests that the way a person emerges as a leader is to first become a servant, who is concerned with the needs of followers and assists them in becoming more knowledgeable, autonomous, free, and more like servants themselves (Northouse, 2010).

Ethical Perspective

Ronald Heifetz (1994) created a unique approach to ethical leadership. Heifetz asserts that leaders help followers confront and address conflict by effecting change. Northouse (2010) gives the following with regard to Heifetz’s perspective:

According to Heifetz, leadership involves the use of authority to help followers deal with the conflicting values that emerge in rapidly changing work environments and social cultures. It is an ethical perspective because it speaks directly to the values of workers (p. 383).
L.E.A.P. Model

In light of the above information, we feel it relevant here to introduce a new leadership model. This model, designated by the acronym LEAP, provides a guide for developing and assessing leadership and can be an effective tool in professionalizing fire and emergency service leadership (or for that matter, any other discipline). The LEAP model is comprised of the four leader traits or characteristics we believe to be most important. Therefore, a leader is: 1) **Legitimate**—a leader has legitimate power, knowledge, skill and ability developed through his or her work, experience, education, and attention to detail; 2) **Ethical**—a good leader has strong character, strong values, and makes ethical decisions when confronted with choices and/or dilemmas; 3) **Affective**—a good leader has the ability to instill, trust, confidence, emotion, passion, and create vision with others; and, 4) **Persistent**—a good leader does not give up when times are tough or there is resistance to a righteous idea or plan, but shows determination in achieving goals and objectives.

PROFESSIONAL FIRE OFFICER DEVELOPMENT

For several years now, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA, 2011) has developed and maintained standards with regard to fire protection. This has included standards for construction, use or occupancy, sprinklers, and standards for firefighter safety. These standards have developed to the point that most every fire department in the nation complies with most or all of these safety guidelines. These standards have also evolved to include the training and development of the firefighter. Certifications based on cognitive and psychomotor skill proficiency have been implemented and are basically the industry standard for every state in the nation. However, very little has been done with respect to the development and maintenance of the leadership positions in the service.

Recognizing this lack, the International Association of Fire Chiefs created a Professional Fire Officer Development Standard. The intent is for the fire and emergency services to become recognized as a profession rather than an occupation or vocation. As stated earlier, the component lacking from the characteristics of a profession was autonomy and peer review. In order for this to be implemented, a recognized curriculum and code of behavior was created.

First, four levels or categories of the profession were identified. They are: supervising officer, managing officer, administrative officer, and executive officer. Each of these categories has requirements for levels of education, training, experience, and self-development.

Training

All training requirements were developed with respect to the NFPA’s Standard 1021, Fire Officer. Each category of the Professional Standard has specific certifications denoted and required for its respective level. For example, for the Supervising Officer level, the candidate must demonstrate or present documentation of certification at the following levels: Fire Officer I (NFPA 1021), Instructor I (NFPA 1041), Incident Safety Officer (NFPA 1521), Inspector I (NFPA 1031), Hazmat Operations Level (NFPA 472), and Emergency Medical Technician (EMT-B). Each progressive level then builds upon these requirements.
Education

The educational requirement for this professional standard builds upon itself with each increasing level as well. For the educational component to be considered valid, it must be undertaken at an accredited institution of higher education. As an example, for the Supervising Officer level, the following courses at the (1000 to 2000 levels) must be taken: English Composition, Public Speaking, Business Communications, Biology, Chemistry, Psychology, Sociology, Intro to Finite Math--Algebra, Business Computer Systems, Health and Wellness, American Government, Human Resource Management, Fire Behavior & Combustion, Building Construction, and Fire/Public Administration.

Experience

Like any other position, experience is a key factor for professional success in the fire and emergency services. For this reason, each category in the professional standard has incremental experience requirements. Table 1 demonstrates the requirements for the first level, Supervising Officer (IAFC, 2003, p. S-6).

| TABLE 1. INCREMENTAL EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS FOR FIRST LEVEL FIRE SERVICE PERSONNEL |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| **Element**                                     | **Application**                                 |
| Agency Operations                               | Qualified Responder 3-5 years                   |
| Coaching                                        | Peer coaching, e.g., recruits and other organizational workgroups, Small group leadership, sports teams, youth groups, etc. |
| Directing Resources                             | Acting Officer 200 hours. Include emergency response and non-emergency activities |
| Incident Management                             | Function as the supervisor of a single resource unit |
| Planning                                       | Participate in a planning process               |
| Instruction                                    | Develop and deliver training classes           |
| Human Resource Management                       | Develop Teamwork skills                        |
| Financial Resource Management                   | Participate in or contribute to a station, project, or small project budget |
| Project Management                              | Participate in an organizational work project   |
| Emergency Management                            | Participate in Mass Casualty training, exercises, and incidents |
| Community Involvement                           | Interact with homeowners associations, service clubs, etc. |
| Professional Associations                       | Network with others in the service, involvement in local, state and/or regional professional association(s); e.g., instructors, EMS, inspectors, investigators, safety officers |

Self-Development

An interesting component of the Professional Fire Officer Development Standard is the requirement for self-development. This area is more subjective and deals with the individual’s awareness, personal attributes, and attitudes, which are developed and refined individually. Basically, it measures how one has grown, matured and evolved over a period of time. The expectations listed are based on key indicators demonstrating that activities and experiences of
one’s self-development are at a place where one is prepared to assume the challenges of supervision and leadership. Table 2 details these indicators (IAFC, 2003, p. S-7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health/Fitness</td>
<td>On-going Health &amp; Wellness Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Ability</td>
<td>Maintain according to job requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Mapping</td>
<td>Personal &amp; Professional Inventory; Identify personal traits, strengths and areas for development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Written &amp; oral communication; Listening; giving/receiving constructive feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Dynamics/Skills</td>
<td>Customer Service Skills; teamwork; Conflict Resolutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Understanding the value/importance of organizational and community diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Understand, demonstrate, and promote ethical behavior for the individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Issues</td>
<td>Understanding the value/importance of law in its application to the organizational work unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Awareness of the importance and value of technology in the work unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local and/or Contemporary Hazards/Issues</td>
<td>Develop a current awareness and understanding of unique local hazards and emerging issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**DISCUSSION**

The LEAP model appears to fit when applied to the desired proficiencies/outcomes of the Professional Fire Officer Development Standard. The education, training, and experience components of the professional standard seek to demonstrate the individual’s legitimate expertise in the discipline by assessing the demonstrative outcomes of the taxonomies of learning, e.g., cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (Bloom, Krathwhol, & Masia, 1964).

The self-development section of the proposed standard assesses the individual’s growth and understanding of inter-personal skills, values, ethics, communication and efficacy in creating/promoting vision, emotion, passion, etc. It can be posited that self efficacy, or the belief that one has the knowledge and skills to produce creative solutions and outcomes seems to demonstrate or reflect intrinsic motivation to engage in ethical development and affective or creative activities such as vision building (Gong, Huang, & Fahr, 2009).

Finally, implied as is the intended outcome of the professional development model, an individual demonstrates a certain amount of persistence in completing the process and portfolio requirements of the standard. No empirical evidence exists (yet) that this fire and emergency services standard’s process completely develops an individual’s leadership ability. However, considerable anecdotal evidence shows the correlation between education, training, experience and leadership success.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

While the traditional perception of the firefighter has a long history and this perception seems pervasive throughout our society, the recent events and expectations of our nation have brought to light the need for “professional standards.” For this career, in which the citizens of our nation bequeath their trust and faith, to not require a level of professional standard and oversight,
borders on negligence. We expect lawyers, doctors, the clergy, engineers, and educators to meet certain standards and we hold their professions in high esteem. Why do we not then expect the same form the public servants charged with our immediate welfare and safety?

The industry itself has recognized this need and has taken action to rectify the problem. We believe it is time for the public to not only support this, but to demand it. Every day the public places more trust and reliance on its safety workers, even though they are usually taken for granted unless needed. In demanding their “professionalism” by a systematic and recognized application of standards, as a nation we will enhance not only our safety and security but also, our standard of living. We also encourage more research be done in this discipline to deal with the scarcity of empirical data available. Maybe in this way, we will be able to recognize the firefighters’ contributions to society and elevate their level of respect and compensation commensurate with society’s expectations.

REFERENCES