Building a Better Leader: Empathy Improves Engagement

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By BENJAMIN MARTIN and STEPHEN MARSAR

A firefighter sits bewildered in his lieutenant's office watching what amounts to a three-ring circus of activity. The lieutenant has called him into the office to deliver the firefighter's annual performance review; but, for some reason, the lieutenant had also chosen that moment to call his wife, which leaves the firefighter sitting awkwardly on the other side on the desk waiting to be told what to do next. He uses the delay to reflect on what he might expect to hear from his boss. A lot had happened over the past year, and he is eager to discuss all the improvements that he had informally led across the team. The lieutenant he worked for was the "hands-off" type, perhaps a little too much so. He seldom organized training or spent any time mentoring the newest probationary team member and, quite frankly, he wasn't very present at work except for being in the predictable recliner position come evenings and weekends. As a result, it left a leadership void, one that this firefighter was all too happy to fill.

At Least I Carry a Standard

As the lieutenant remains on the phone, he slides a piece of paper across his desk to the firefighter that contains the specific narrative comments of his performance review. While the lieutenant chats eagerly on the phone with his wife about that weekend's planned activities, the firefighter begins to read the summary of his work for the past year. His excitement soon fades as he realizes that the comments were strikingly similar to last year's evaluation—so much so that the lieutenant had forgotten to change the date on the top of the form. He supposed that he shouldn't be surprised about the duplication since his appraisal last year had the wrong employee's name on it! And, after comparing similar faux pas with coworkers over the years, it is evident that the lieutenant had made full use of the "cut and paste" features. Holding out hope, the firefighter then flipped to the second page hoping to find any original comments about his performance, especially anything related to how much of a help he had been to the lieutenant.

Unfortunately, he found none. The only aspect of the narrative that addressed his actual performance was limited to the past month, ignoring pretty much the rest of the year. At this moment, the firefighter feels incredibly disconnected from his officer. Compounding the disappointment of this lukewarm and mindless narrative was the subtle jab that the lieutenant had inserted right before the end, "Employee has leadership potential, but his primary weakness at this time is that he carries too high of a standard." The firefighter thought to himself, "At least I carry a standard," instantly reverting to images of the lieutenant falling asleep during duty hours. As he began speaking, his lieutenant, putting one hand over the telephone mouthpiece, interrupted him and said, "Let's talk about this

sometime in the next cycle. The firefighter left with his mouth agape, stunned at the sheer laziness of and lack of engagement from his boss.

Effective Engagement or Not?

Does this story sound familiar? Unfortunately, despite great strides in leadership training and development, the fire service as a whole still struggles with preparing its leaders for effective employee engagement. Let's be clear on this: Neither screaming at employees to put them in their place nor deriding them in front of their peers counts as productive employee engagement. Although both actions are storied in the fire service, the days of saying whatever you want without regard for how others might receive it are over. Developing empathetic leaders who can deliver quality feedback is the key to more effectively connecting with and motivating today's fire service.

"People hunger for feedback, yet too many managers, supervisors, and executives are inept at giving it or are disinclined to provide any. Empathy represents the foundation skill for all the social competencies important to work," says Dr. Daniel Goleman in the book *Working with Emotional Intelligence.*1

Working with Emotional Intelligence

This discussion builds on our article, "Avoid Leading Under the Influence of Emotions" (*Fire Engineering*, April 2018).2 We highlighted how to use Dr. Daniel Goleman's five principles of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills to build a better rapport with team members to enable more comfortable conversations, especially with difficult employees. We strongly encourage you read it; it will help you gain a better understanding of a topic that could be instrumental in improving your effectiveness as a leader. This article focuses more specifically on the importance of developing empathy as a leader.

When a leader lacks social competence skills such as empathy, it can result in an inability to create and maintain trust among his team. This lack of empathy can also compound leadership problems if the leader comes across as a robot, seemingly indifferent to employees' problems, or lacks the ability to control emotional outbursts—especially when frustrated. Such disastrous results may very well be a limiting factor in the promotion process or, on promotion, to your effectiveness as a leader. In *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman highlights five areas where employing empathy is essential to avoid an impression of social awkwardness, disingenuousness, or untrustworthiness with the respective leadership trait, as follows:

- Sensing the feelings and perspectives of others—**Understanding Others.**

- Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting the employee's needs—**Service Orientation.**

- Sensing development needs and bolstering the abilities of others—**Developing Others.**

- Cultivating opportunities through diverse thinking—**Leverage Diversity.**

- Reading political and social currents in an organization—**Political Awareness.**

Of these five traits, the most important—in terms of leadership effectiveness—is the ability to develop others. Goleman explains that in a study, college students completing their master in business administration degrees received an assignment followed by a positive, negative, or no-feedback response. The group that received no feedback suffered the same decrease in self-confidence and efficacy as the group that received negative feedback. Goleman continues, "The report cautions that when organizations deprive employees of specific job-related information, they may unknowingly inhibit their performance in a negative way." Far too many leaders put themselves and their comfort first rather than facing the potentially challenging task of delivering negative feedback to a teammate.

"People these days need to have the sense they are getting increasingly competent as they go on—or they won't stay," says Goleman.

The Politics of Empathy

Other considerations on the use of empathy are worth exploring. Goleman highlights a tendency exhibited mostly by hierarchal organizations from the 1970s into the early 2000s to have their leaders mostly withhold empathy toward their teams to create a visible divide in power. Specifically, individuals at the bottom of the hierarchy were culturally expected to be sensitive to how their bosses felt about things and cater to keeping them happy—e.g., caving on important issues if it could potentially challenge the bosses' status. In turn, bosses seldom reciprocated in regard to the subordinates. Thus, those with more power used empathy and feelings as leverage over those perceived to have less power.

Tempering Empathy and Distress: Establishing Shared Accountability

Sometimes limiting empathy in professional relationships remains the best course of action. For instance, if an employee violates a community standard that makes it impossible to maintain employment, it remains the mission of the leader to discharge the employee of his duties respectfully. Despite the inevitable display of emotion from the employee, the leader cannot allow any shared feelings of remorse to bully him into concessions that will enable the employee to stay. However, during the investigation, it certainly is appropriate to

The use of empathy also allows for more in-depth reflection to help determine if the punishment fits the offense. In many instances, the use of empathy reveals the underlying system or organizational processes that set the employee up for failure, such as inappropriate training or faulty equipment. Goleman provides this caveat: "Managers who go overboard in focusing on relationships or catering to people's emotional needs at the expense of organizational requirements perform poorly." Put another way, leaders cannot merely exist as "buddies" to their team. A professional standard, a requirement of leadership, has to exist and be adhered to.

Empathy distress is a phenomenon in which a highly empathic individual is exposed to someone in crisis and starts adopting the distress rather than having the self-regulation skills to keep calm. The ability to stay calm has obvious value on the fireground; no one wants to follow someone who flips out when faced with a challenging emergency medical services or fire response. This doesn't mean you can't feel what the patient or employee is feeling; it means you have to have the courage to overcome any negative feelings to accomplish the mission. When 911 is called, whether it's an actual emergency or not, the person who dialed thinks it's a crisis—an event that he no longer has the faculties or resources to handle; our job is to stabilize and resolve that crisis to the best of our abilities. Our oath demands professionalism, a dedication to training, and an adherence to community standards.

Evaluation Exasperation Is Widespread

"Annual employee evaluations are virtually a joke," reports a supervisor from a large urban department. He explains, "They do not correlate raises, promotions, transfers, or any other obvious valuable reason for being in existence." The supervisor relates that as a firefighter, he remembers being called into the office and asked to sign his evaluation—not asked to read it, mind you, just to sign it so it could be filed away. He vividly remembers when one of his old-school lieutenants, whom he admires very much, told him that he was doing well and to keep up with what he was doing. From the firefighter's perspective, this was a glowing endorsement from that officer.

Another firefighter reports that one day while looking through his employee file in the firehouse, he came across his latest evaluation, which he was not given to read. The evaluator wrote, "Informed and declined to sign." The firefighter said, "That really bothered me. Not only wasn't I informed (or even given the opportunity to see the evaluation),[but] I never would decline to sign something that had to do with my firefighting career."

Stories like this one are unfortunate because modeling is one of the primary means of learning. If the employees experience such situations as described above, they learn to put little value on providing feedback and can carry this destructive behavior forward when it's their turn to lead. Leaders should always have at the forefront of their minds their team's development and growth and how to accomplish it. This can mean challenging the existing status quo and culture. For every three employees who could care less about feedback as long as they get their raises, there are two who will go the extra mile and make a difference

Moving Up and Moving Forward

By Stephen Marsar

As I started moving up the ranks in my department, I saw how evaluations were generally handled: change the date, change the number of years on the job, sign and print "Informed and declined to sign" in the space for the firefighter's signature, file one copy, and forward another through the chain of command. No one even knew where they ended up! I decided not to take that same road.

Today, the process has been updated and has made evaluations more relevant; back then, I decided to go through each evaluation I was expected to complete and rated my individual firefighters up or down for each category, depending on their performance over the past year. Not all firefighters are "average" or "above average" in every category. It's a fact that all of us are better at some things than others, so why not be honest?

When I became a company commander, I took it one step further. I took my company firefighter roster and divided it among the lieutenants and me. Each would evaluate five or six firefighters based on our shift assignments and which firefighters we worked with most often. I insisted that my lieutenants complete the categories truthfully and, most importantly, write an honest critique of the firefighter's performance on the evaluator's comment line. Additionally, I forbade them from putting down the proverbial and obligatory "informed and declined to sign." I asked them to sit down for five minutes with each firefighter; allow each to read his evaluation and add a comment if he wanted; and, most importantly, sign the document.

Luckily, in all of my companies as in the rest of the department, most evaluations were easy to write. Most firefighters were step-up individuals; team players; and, through training and experience, good, effective, and knowledgeable firefighters. For these firefighters, having them read the evaluation and the officer's comments was an opportunity to pat them on the back and tell them (and the department) how they were doing as a firefighter, and how we —the officers—felt about them as individuals.

This had a tremendous effect on the firefighters. The first year, they were unsure, uncomfortable, and even surprised that they were evaluated (most of them had never seen an evaluation—even after years on the job). The officers were responsible for rating them, and they were allowed to read, discuss, comment, and sign the form. In the ensuing years, the firefighters looked forward to this practice, and they welcomed the evaluation process as a pat on the back and the positive reinforcement that the majority of them deserved. After all, for most of us, being called a "good firefighter" by our peers is a badge of honor and a vestige to be proud of.

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

better. Still, others don't seem to get it or even care. They have a poor attitude, work ethic, and so on. The evaluation policy instituted above, again, allows the officers to give credit where it is due for these individuals and to document where they are deficient. Whether it is interpersonal skills, personal hygiene, firehouse routine, emergency knowledge, or skills performance, the weak points can be documented; discussed in the open; and perhaps, more importantly, offer a basis for developing a plan to overcome those deficiencies and give the firefighter a chance to explain (or at least think about) what were identified as areas needing improvement. Additionally, if the firefighters disagree with the officer's assessment, they get to talk about it. There's even a place on the form for them to document it.

Positively using evaluations meets each of the five areas of empathy discussed above—understanding, service, development, leverage, and politics. Officers must take them seriously, use them to their and the firefighters' advantage, and improve performance through the power of empathy. Remember, if you think your employees need to hear something, either good or bad, chances are they do. It's easier to laud praise, but it is equally as important to challenge and hold yourself accountable to increasingly higher standards.

References

1. Goleman, Daniel. *Working with Emotional Intelligence.* (2000). Bantam Dell.

2. Martin, B and Marsar, S. (April 2018) "Avoid Leading Under the Influence of Emotions." *Fire Engineering*, 149-152.

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