

CORNERSTONE

FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

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**Practical Strategies
for Leaders**

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**Leadership:
Individual or Organiza-
tionally Based?**

Now that you are a leader getting work done through others, are you finding the role challenging? In all probability, yes! Most likely, no one on your way up the organizational ladder really confided to you that leadership is hard work, not an autonomous nervous system function! Many non-military sector organizations find good people, competent at the technical side of the operation, and gradually give them more responsibility. At some

point, the system decides to grant the mantle of leadership. But, did you or the organization ever really train at the skills and needed personality traits to get work done through others?

In most cases, the answer is no. Typical leadership selection and development processes are not really good at producing good leaders, or more importantly, weeding out along the way individuals that for various reasons should not be leaders. The assumptive flaw is that when selected, new leaders really know how to get work done *with and through* others whom all work *together in a system*.

Effective leaders are part of effective systems. They are molded by an effective system and operate within an effective system. Effective and well thought of leaders focus their time on a systems approach, not just on one or two issues and a few trusted inner circle members.

Where to study effective systems of leadership? Emergency services have a lot to learn from the military. The

most direct comparator is that both have to operate two different organizations seamlessly – the quick reaction, chain-of command (think ICS) system and the day-to-day normal bureaucracy system. One of, if not the best at leadership development in a very strong systems approach, is that of the United States Marine Corps. They focus on developing leadership at all levels, with rigorous training, feedback and support. Along the way, upward mobility is based on a variety of experiences and the feedback is strong with the result being that not everyone moves up.

In fact the Marines of today are a lot like fire and EMS – they are an organization that must flexibly respond to almost any threat that the nation throws its way. So while the Marines have always understood that molding character and developing capable leaders is critical, so too has been their transformation to a matrix organization that uses agility and cross functional teams to quickly transform parts of units into a new team that can accomplish an objective.

You might be surprised at their perspectives on forging leaders and how their system continues to adapt and support their core purpose and values, just like any successful and long-term (decades) private or public sector organization. Author David H. Freedman reviewed what the Marines do and how it can translate to any organization. In his book, Corps Business (Harper Business; 2000) he identifies 30 management principals that comprise their systemic approach to leadership.

For example, the Marines could be tasked with a humanitarian relief effort on short notice. They will plan quickly; use only those parts of various units' necessary, combining them into a revised command structure. Then, knowing plans are never perfect, they plan for the 70 percent solution and depend on the capability of their leaders (down to the squad level) to make quick adjustments to the plan, knowing those adjustments will advance the plans overall goals, within the missions' and the Corps values.

They train for this by placing authority on demand into the hierarchy, not expecting in a fast paced situation that every decision goes all the way to the top. Leadership focuses on the small team and manages by end state and intent. Some surprising leadership tenants

of the Marines is to reward failure (trying hard enough means some failure), that leaders demand to be questioned, to experiment obsessively and to get outside perspectives.

So pick up a copy of Corps Business, it might just give you a different perspective on organizational leadership!

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