

Pride and Ownership: The Love for the Job Part 4

THE CHIEF

By Rick Lasky

From as far back as I can remember, I've wanted to be a firefighter just like my dad. As I got older it really didn't change even while I was a cop waiting to get hired as a firefighter. I guess I've just always wanted to make a difference. When I finally made it into the firehouse on a full-time basis, I was like a lot of young firefighters, thinking about, dreaming a little, about where I wanted to go in the fire service, this great profession. And I would constantly asked myself just how far I wanted to go and just how far I wanted to take this whole "wanting to make a difference" thing. As I moved forward, again I was like many and realized that every time I moved up there was more responsibility and more to do. But it also hit me that each step that I took forward, I got to make more of a difference and have more of an impact, often on a lot of good things and once in a while on some not so good things. Being human is also making mistakes and I've made my share. But as I traveled along I got to a point where I decided that if I ever got to sit in the "big" chair that I would do all that I could to not turn out to be the chief that I hated working for. I asked a friend of mine early on how to avoid that trap and he said it was easy. He said take a look at that guy that no one wants to work for, and do everything the opposite of what he is doing. So far it's worked! But I was blessed early in my career to have worked for several good chiefs. Really good "bosses." Like Dick Vachata, Ron Szarzynski and Bob Rubel, all good fire chiefs. Chief Vachata was easy to figure out. Just love the job and take care of each other and you were gold in his book. Chief Szarzynski was along that same way of thinking. If you were good and did your job he was there for you. You knew all along what lines not to cross but he was there for you all of the time. And Chief Rubel, who just flat out was a good chief. As a matter of fact, the kind of chief who didn't mind giving you a kick in your "Sector C" when you were screwing up. Hey, I have no problem admitting that he saved my career with some very strong advice when I was going through a very bad time and I

am indebted to him. I wrote him a letter years later thanking him for what he did for me only to learn that the chief that had replaced him when he retired had tossed it out. I heard they have a good boss now. But my goal was to never get to that point, the point where I lost focus or touch with what it is all about. I went to a chief's conference a few years ago and was startled to see and hear how so many had lost their grip on what it's all about. I came away from there hating chiefs more than ever. It seemed like most of the chiefs I ran into could only talk about how rotten their guys were, and how they wish they could get rid of them and privatize and that damn union and blah, blah, blah. I thought to myself, "my God where did these guys come from?" I just had to look a little harder because on the other hand there were a lot of chiefs at the conference and there are a lot of chiefs nationally, that do care and do realize how important their people are and do support their people. They understand it. With that in mind, I really truly believe that there are a whole lot more on the good side than there are on the "dark side." It's just like anything else; the negative ones tend to stand out.

My Favorite Saying: Egos Eat Brains

It seems like everything rolls along just fine until someone's ego runs amuck. There have been several chiefs that started out with good intentions and then after a few years they allowed their egos to grow out of control and to a size that prohibited good things from happening. You see it often where someone lets their ego get out of control and it ends up costing them relationships, friends and in some cases their job. I know one individual that could have had the cure for cancer and the city administration was in no way going to listen to him. He had let his ego get so out of whack that it forced them into a position where they just didn't trust him or listen to him. The best choice, keep yourself humble, poke fun at yourself once in a while and stop taking yourself so seriously. It isn't about you! Sometimes you're just not as smart as you think you are!

Attitude: The Only Thing In Life That You Have Absolute Control Over Is Your *Attitude*

How very true. Anger, happiness, sadness, etc. are all emotions, but it's your attitude that can make you or break you. They can steal your car, say things about you or whatever, but it's your attitude that can provide you with the right path to take. Remember, decisions made on emotions have hurt and killed people. It's the decisions that are made on good solid ground and common sense that go far. Your attitude is about the only thing that they can't take away from you or at least without a good fight! We discussed in an earlier issue your circle of influence and how it can affect those around you. Remember that it can go both ways, good and bad. When you're attitude is on the downward slope it can be catchy and rub off on those around you, especially the newer guys. But when it's going in a good direction, it's no telling how far you can take it and with who. Your circle of influence when going in a positive way can have a tremendous impact on your organization and more importantly, your own life!

Remember to really place some emphasis on your values. We also discussed earlier, with good solid core values, and *reasonable* and *realistic* vision and mission statements, you can create the foundation for success. So many people and organizations struggle because they lack foundation. They forget to establish those values and then if they do, forget to follow the system. Just take a look at corporate America and all of the CEOs, COOs, and people making a whole lot of money and you one after another being fired or going to jail. It all comes together pretty easy if you remember to treat people like family. There are so many stories about people compromising their integrity or treating people like garbage and at times some seem so unbelievable that they get you thinking that, no way, did someone treat someone like that or do that. And then you find out that it was true and in some cases even worse. A lot of it seems to fall right on that accountability thing and I'm not talking about a "Passport" or a "PAR," but who you are accountable to and for. You're accountable to your boss, your guys, the public and your family. To your boss to do what your suppose to do, your job. To your guys to train them, look out

after them and most of all for their safety and ultimately to their families. Before you let them do something you'll regret later, think about how you'd explain it to their family if they got hurt. And probably the one that is most important, your family. It's like when you tell someone that getting into an accident on the way to a call doesn't help the victim at all when you don't get there, when you don't take care of yourself both emotionally and physically or take the steps necessary to be safe, you're not doing your own family any good and no matter how you put it, it all starts there. Think about your decisions and who and what they affect. At what point in your life do you realize that you need to make decisions that will protect your family and your people first, before you decide what's best for you in the way of a *good* time.

Remember Where You Came From Chief!

It really helps to have a leader that knows what it's like to work shifts, sleep in a firehouse or if you volunteer, what it's like to get up in the middle of the night knowing that you have to go to your regular job soon, *and* one that can find the fireground without the use of a compass and a flashlight. Where did it all start for you boss? Do you remember when? Or is it kind of cloudy way back when. Maybe if a couple of those wearing "5" on their collars remembered where it all started we wouldn't have ridiculous rules like "No loitering or congregating in front or rear of the firehouse." Decent, comfortable furniture to sit on instead of sandbags and we would no longer have rules that tell you when to turn the television on and off and one of my favorites, "You can't go to the grocery store while on-duty." What's funny and even somewhat amazing is the guys that are coming out with these rules are the same guys that would have been screaming about them years ago when they were on shift!! I'm not saying to give away the store, just try to be a little more understanding and flexible. Maybe if we all worked a little harder on this one the whole labor relations thing would work better and we could all work together. There are some departments doing really well with this area already. There are good

folks on both sides of the table. Everyone just needs to remember where we all started. Help educate and inform our newer members what it's like in the upper ranks and those at the upper ranks remember what it was like when you started out and do what ever you can to not become a "Desk Commander."

Learn About People

Years ago one of my goals was to teach for the University of Illinois Fire Service Institute. There were few field staff positions and getting in the door was tough. I had waited for a few years and had just about given up when Jack MacCastland called me and said how do you like the Instructor I program? I told Mac that it was all right but I really wanted to get into the Tactics and Strategy program, live burns and the "fun" stuff. Mac reminded me that this was an opportunity to get in the door and start teaching and not to blow it. He also reminded me of a story of when John Hojek, an FDIC instructor and great chief officer, had his opportunity to teach with the Institute and when he was informed that it would be in the Fire Prevention program, Johnny said, "fire prevention, I don't want to teach fire prevention, are you kidding me?" I laugh when I think about that story but it was John's way in and think about how many firefighter's lives would have been affected if they hadn't had the opportunity to have been taught by Johnny who by the way is one of the best fire service instructors in the country. But it was through teaching the Instructor I through IV series that had the greatest impact on my career and my life when it came to understanding what made people tick. When you have to teach people how to teach to others, how adults learn differently than children, what motivates people and when you have to really look at what's going on in people's lives and why they do the things they do, you become pretty good at "people size-up." We talk all the time about reading the smoke and what it tells you, like what's burning, how much, where it's going, our progress with the attack and so on. We know how tremendously important that is. Maybe we should be reading people the same way. Just like the smoke is talking to us and telling things about itself, so should we look at what people are telling

us about themselves. Take some time to understand people and try to understand where they're coming from. My wife gets a little frustrated when we have a bad waitress and I remind her that maybe she had a bad day, problems at home or maybe she works for a bad boss or has a couple of bad tables with some nasty people. She's probably just trying to put food on her family's table and pay the bills. She usually agrees and I really feel good because I'm usually wrong and she's right. I tell people all of the time she's the smart one in the family and thank God our kids take after her. Maybe if we took a little time to understand what's going on in our people's lives, things might make sense a little more. You definitely end up with a whole lot more patience. *Read smoke, read people!*

Trust Your People

This one takes some work but when you get there it's well worth the trip. Trusting your people goes a long way in the attitude department. It's when you don't or you feel you have to micro manage that people lose faith. Train them, give them the stuff they need to do their jobs and let them go. A good avenue is through their performance evaluations. Let them know they're doing a good job. Some officers just leave the comments section blank or keep putting under each category "does a good job" and "Ok." But I guarantee you if you sat down at the kitchen table and discussed that person they would go on for an hour on how great they are so you would think that they could put a couple of sentences together. Nominate them for an award when they deserve one, even if they don't receive one about the worst it can be is they'll have the award nomination in their personnel file. When it's time for an "At-a-boy" give them one and put it in writing maybe by using a Record of Exceptional Performance form. Again stick it in their file. Post the thank yous and letters and place a copy in their file. Why do personnel files have to have just the negative stuff or "Official" stuff in there. Put some good stuff in there. When it's promotion time or some one is being considered for an appointment, wouldn't be nice to see that kind of stuff in some one's file when you're reviewing it? Trust them and show them that

you have confidence in them. You will be surprised how far the troops will take you and the department. They're pretty smart!

Let Go Of The Past – Focus On The Future

Sometimes we get so bogged down with things that went on in the past that we can't even begin to think about the future or see it. Old grudges, hard feelings, past bad times, sometimes need to be let go. Learn from the past, don't live in it. How many times have you witnessed two people not getting along because of something that happened twenty years ago? Or something that if someone outside of it explained it, it would really seem pretty silly, petty and insignificant. I remember when I was a cop, I know, don't hold it against me, but we would respond to a domestic disturbance and when we got things settled down, I would look at the husband and wife and ask them if they really understood what they were arguing about. That this "big issue" had the police in their home and that they were ready to go to jail and when you really looked at it, was it that big of deal? We need to look at some of things that are or have bothered us and ask ourselves the same question. Is it or was it that big of a deal? Most of time it may not seem like much at all. Hey it's worth a try! The job is great already. Could you imagine just how great it would be if when you came into work you didn't have to worry about what the shifts were saying about you. Say nice things!

Build Tomorrow's Leaders And Successors

Build for and set the stage for success and the future. Start a mentoring program, share the knowledge and experiences and develop your people. Are you getting everyone at one rank or level ready to promote to the next one? Share your successes and your failures so they can learn. Enough with "the school of hard knocks." thing. Think about how far we could go if we just laid some groundwork for the next guy. When your department has to go outside for every position that's usually a bad sign. They went outside here for a chief, they hired me and they learned their lesson with that.

All kidding aside, this is a great place with a great group of people, but I have told my boss that I should be the last fire chief that they have to hire from the outside. That is if I'm doing my job. Work towards the future and build for twenty years from now.

This Ones Easy!

Keep the guy's best interest at heart, always. You can ask anyone in a white shirt in Lewisville, what's the number one rule on the administrative side of things and they'll tell you that the guys come first. Period! They come first with our decisions, our budget (budget for what's really needed and for what's best), our programs, and the whole she-bang. Sometimes the troops have a hard time understanding that and don't believe it, hey I didn't earlier in my career, but it has to be that way if you want things to go well. It's kind of hard to screw up if you have your people's best interest at heart. I use to have a hard time understanding where one of my bosses was coming from and how he could always be so suspicious of his guys and paranoid and just plain nasty to them saying things like "they're just going to do this" or "they're just going to do that" and "if this were the private sector I'd fire half of them." The first thing I realized was if he was in the private sector someone would have clobbered him or he'd be in jail. The second thing I realized was that the things he was talking about, the things I couldn't understand where he was coming up with like how they would cheat the system and all of that are all things that he would do. One of my earlier company officers Lieutenant Bill Allen called it "a thief marking his own tools first." The reason that it's so easy for them to come up with all of that nonsense is because that's their "M.O." He told me not to get frustrated and reminded me that with some people it's like yelling at the rain, they just don't get it. It's easy. Just remember the guys come first!

Be Careful What You Wish For

Especially when looking for a new chief. Often the troops will ask management for a chief who knows the operational side of things as well as the administrative side and one who will communicate and be available for the guys. Show up in the stations once and while and show up at calls. But when they get it they change their minds or have second thoughts. I know I use to show up at some minor calls or at first reports of structure fires that really weren't much. The question was raised about trust and maybe I was there to watch every detail or didn't trust them. It couldn't be farther from the truth! My wife would ask me "why are you going on that one it's just a sparking electrical outlet" and I would explain that I haven't seen "C" shift in a while. It was a great time to visit with the troops. They have our trust and then some. They don't need a babysitter; it was just a great way to see some of the guys that I hadn't seen in a while. That's all. We have a department nearby looking for a new chief and it was interesting to hear some of their guys saying that they weren't looking for a new chief that was young and going to try and make a name for himself and come in and do a whole lot, and they didn't want an old chief that was coming there just to retire, they wanted, well, believe it or not, someone kind of like their old chief who coincidentally from time to time they disagreed with. And he was a pretty progressive guy that loved the job. I wish them the best!

In closing, the following are just some suggestions and advice I've gotten from some of my mentors over the years that I call very good road maps to follow and might help you side step some land mines.

- 1) Whatever you do, whatever you say, make sure that it all starts with the safety of your people. This is for both *in* and *out* of the firehouse. Provide the safest operation that you can.
- 2) Don't let tradition hinder change and remember that there is a whole lot of tradition in the fire service that is great and should be carried on!

- 3) Be a good leader first. Be their buddy second. They really want someone to lead them. Have the courage to lead. It takes a strong person to make tough decisions and to stand up for what is right. Don't confuse what you think is right for what is really right. Do the right thing!
- 4) Surround yourself with good people. No one can do it alone or at least do it well by them self. Find good people and bring them into your camp. Find people that have the same core values and same foundation as you. It's easy to do good things with great people. Just remember the best thing about having great people is just that they're great, the worst thing is that everyone else wants to steal them away from you. That's why your mentoring program and where your ability to build tomorrows leaders are so important. Start filling your "people staging area" now. Get them ready to move up to the next alarm. Besides you owe it to them.
- 5) Keep it all simple. Try not to make things so complicated that no one can figure it out because all it does is just jumble everything up and you end up with a big mess. Kind of like dropping a bag of marbles on the floor and watching them go in every direction. Sometimes the best way to get it done is right in front of your nose and is easy to grab a hold of.
- 6) Lead by example. With your day-to-day activities, your uniform, your tactics, and in your personal life. Set a good role for those to follow.
- 7) Don't credit grab! Give credit where credit is due. Even when it's your idea and it goes well, tell them it came from the troops. You know, it's always been amazing to me that there are a lot of chiefs out there that think that they're the reason that their department is successful. Not realizing that it's not because of them, but is because of their firefighters. They're the ones making it happen. They're the ones out doing the work. So spread the wealth. It looks good on everybody. Bang on a drum for the troops, don't bang on the troops. Go out and say good things. BRAG ABOUT THEM!
It's Ok, really.

- 8) Focus on what's going right, how good they are and their accomplishments. A good example comes from one of Notre Dame's great football coaches, Lou Holtz. Before some of their toughest games he would get in front of his team in the locker room and ask each player why they were going to win the game. He would write down the reasons given by the players until the board was filled up. All he did was remind them, actually they reminded themselves, that they were good and they could win. Some times we need to remind our people of how good they are and just how special they really are.
- 9) What kind of a chief would you want to work for? Remember what it was like to work for a bad boss. Stay current, stay in touch, constantly re-evaluate how you're doing and look for ways to improve and remember what "open door" really means. Are you listening? And your idea isn't always the best one. They've got some great stuff.
- 10) And when you can't figure out why the troops feel a certain way, why they are saying what they are saying or seem to not understand what you're trying to do especially with the budget, remember you were there once and probably yelling the loudest!

And always keep in mind that "leaders enforce values, managers enforce rules." Good chiefs will just support their people and let them go. Do this and I promise you good things will happen.