

SILVERBACK LEADERSHIP

You don't need to sweat the small stuff. Bruno's Hierarchy of Engagement simplifies where to focus your attention.

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As we continue our focus on Silverback Leadership Function 3: Personal Effectiveness, let's look at *Bruno's Hierarchy of Engagement*. Effective bosses must learn to differentiate the high-risk, big-deal responsibilities from the day-to-day, routine stuff. Bruno created a vertical scale that ranked leadership priorities according to their importance to simplify this process. Below, we see that Bruno used "Ready, Get Set, Go" to identify the critical nature of each focus area. (I added *Review/Critique* to the bullets to ensure we learn from our experiences.)

BRUNO'S HIERARCHY OF ENGAGEMENT

READY

- Attendance
- Appearance
- Readiness

GET SET

- ✓ Adherence to Routine
- ✓ Maintenance
- ✓ Behavior

GO

- ➔ Safety
- ➔ Performance
- ➔ Effectiveness (flawless execution)
- ➔ Excellence (attained through inspiration)
- ➔ Nobility (honesty, integrity, generosity, courage, etc.)
- ➔ Consistent NICE Engagement
- ➔ *Review/Critique*

Ready

Each item on the scale is important, and bosses should be aware of them, but they aren't all equally critical. Consider the **Ready** item, Appearance. Sometimes, we confuse how we look with how we operate. Although both matter, Appearance should not demand a lot of boss creativity and ingenuity. We should decide on the appropriate uniform based on the

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climate and the organization's style, and then allow first-line supervisors to manage within those specs.

I recall a breakfast meeting I had with Bruno when I was a fairly new fire chief. Conversations about uniforms kept coming up in my new department, and it seemed to me the middle managers were overly concerned with Appearance—let's just say they had a very strict uniform policy.

Mrs. Smith doesn't care about our uniforms, only that we are recognizable and NICE.



For example, baseball hats could only be worn outdoors, and scull caps or beanies could only be worn outdoors and when the temperature fell below a certain point. I really wanted Bruno's input, so after we sat down, I brought up the uniform issue. I was somewhat surprised when he said we should eat first because he wanted to cover some other topics. We sat, ate and talked for over an hour. The check came, and, like always, he grabbed it and paid the bill. (I don't think he ever let me buy him a meal. It was like a father-son relationship, where dad always buys.) By then, I had forgotten about uniforms and started to get up.

He said, "Chief G, didn't you want to talk about uniforms?" I nodded, and he asked, "How was your meal? I replied, "Great." He asked, "And how was the service?" I replied, "Awesome." Then he asked, "What was the waitress wearing?" I replied, "I didn't notice." He smiled at me, put his thumb up and said, "Uniforms."

I got his point immediately: The service you deliver and how you are treated are much more important than the clothes you wear. Mrs. Smith cares that we are recognizable and nice. Bruno used to say that maintaining a sensible, standard appearance is an intelligence test for both workers and bosses.

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Always remember that critiques & reviews should focus on performance, not Appearance, unless it has to do with a safety or customer service issue.

The first-line supervisor, lieutenant or captain should manage things on the **Ready** part of Bruno's Hierarchy of Engagement. They are the ones who establish the activities for the day (training, school visits, etc.), and they are right there to correct any issues. We trust them to lead firefighters into the hazard zone, so we should trust them to manage their crews' **Ready** responsibilities. Chief officers shouldn't hang out on that part of the scale for too long. Deciding whether to wear an approved uniform T-shirt or a Class B uniform when out in public is much less important than identifying critical fireground factors and determining risk management for an incident.

Get Set

As another example, effective leaders should move past the **Get Set** activities. Although important, they can easily be managed with inspections and checklists. These front-end activities aren't about delivering service; they prepare us to deliver service. In fact, many systems never get beyond the maintenance level simply because of the boss's personal limitations. When I was a young firefighter, we spent a great deal of time preparing for fire station and apparatus inspections. This was okay at the time because our call volume was much lower, and it brought the team together to perform the work. It did not hamper our training time or interfere with our daily routine. It was the daily routine. But today's fire service is incredibly busy, and spending many hours preparing for an inspection isn't a good use of time. Maintaining the station and apparatus is essential, but it is better to trust that the work will be done properly. It's not necessary for a chief officer to check all the surfaces with a white rag. Creating an agreed-upon schedule for these activities doesn't require a lot of leadership energy.

Go

The **Go** part of our scale defines the actual performance of our work as chief officers. Who hasn't heard, "This is where the rubber meets the road"? The items on the lower part of the scale are the most crucial because they directly affect our service delivery. Things like SOPs, policies, rules and regulations should prepare us for the work and support the workers providing service to our customers. Unfortunately, I have seen leaders who do not spend a great deal of time talking or thinking about their workers and customers. Bruno's success was due to the fact that all conversations led back to supporting our firefighters and serving Mrs. Smith. *Everything* a boss does should support the work and the workers. Bruno demonstrated

this concept when he created our mission statement: Prevent Harm, Survive and Be Nice. The members of our organization adopted these principles through a robust labor/management agreement, and the theme was marketed inside and outside our organization at every opportunity. As I have stated in past articles, the three departments I was fortunate to lead followed suit by adopting a similar mission statement: Be Safe, Be Nice and Be Accountable.

Where Do You Land on Bruno's Hierarchy of Engagement?

Bruno noticed that bosses default to a place on the scale that correlates to their:

- Personal competence (or incompetence)
- Security and self-esteem
- Personality
- Preparedness
- Sensible focus
- Goofy (idiosyncratic) preoccupations

Can you easily identify which leadership priorities matter most to you? Anytime we manage only up to the Ready level's maintenance or appearance issues, we essentially create an organization led by auditors. Determine which part of Bruno's Hierarchy of Engagement gets most of your focus. Does it align with your role within the organization? If you're an upper-level chief anguishing over ball caps, it's time to stop sweating the small stuff and shift your attention to where you can make a bigger impact. **BS**



In 2007, Terry Garrison retired from the Phoenix Fire Department after serving more than 30 years. Working for Alan Brunacini and reaching the rank of assistant chief of operations helped shape Terry's consistent values: firefighter safety and customer service. After a quick retirement, Terry served as the fire chief of the Oceanside (Calif.) Fire Department for almost three years. He then served as the chief of the Houston Fire Department for more than five years. Terry eventually moved back to where he was raised and served as the fire chief for the Glendale (Ariz.) Fire Department for more than six years before officially retiring from government service. Including his two years in the U.S. Army, Terry has worked for the government and worn a nametag and a helmet for more than 47 years. (Thank goodness for helmets.) In addition, he has traveled throughout the world teaching Fire Command, utilizing his master's degree in education. Today, Terry and his wife, Annette, live in Phoenix. He will continue to stay connected to the fire service by working with B SHIFTER. His most important role is being the best buddy to his grandson Jack, pictured with him here.