

## SILVERBACK LEADERSHIP

**Added value is cheap, easy & impactful, so empower your people to do what's right for the customer.**

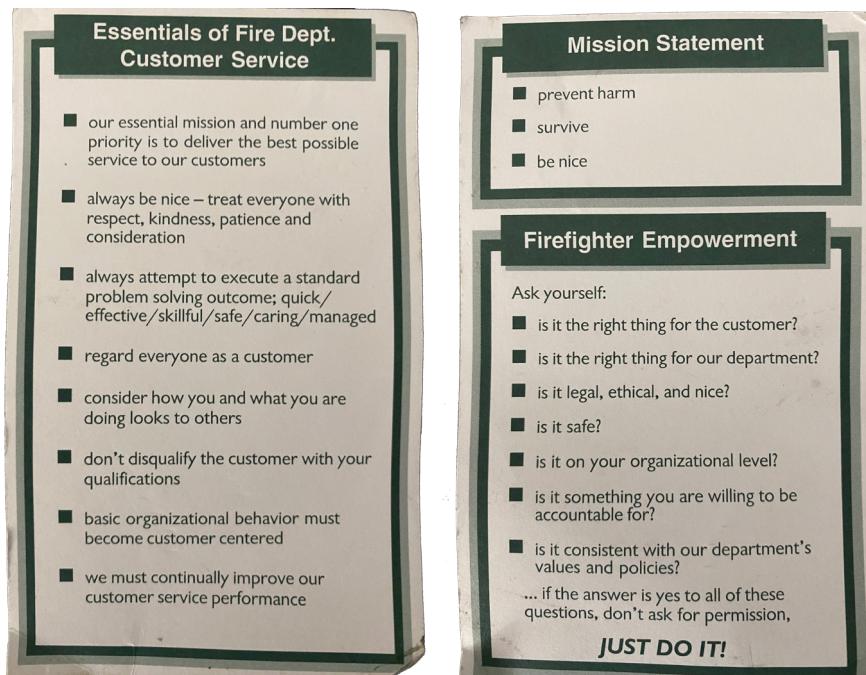
**BY TERRY GARRISON WITH NICK BRUNACINI**

*B Shifter Buckslip, Feb. 27, 2024*

**O**ur first two Silverback Leadership articles covered Function 2: Inside/Outside Customer Service. We discussed that firefighters treat our citizens the way they are treated within the organizations and shared a brief history of Mrs. Smith. We also introduced the concept of providing added value, a concept we will look at more closely in this edition.

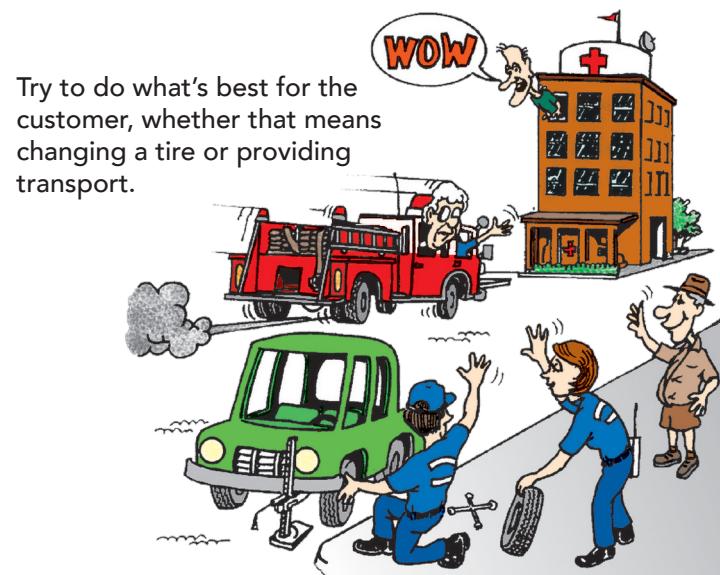
### **Don't Ask for Permission—Just Do It!**

Added value starts at the top. Leaders should continually beat the added-value drum, ensuring the entire system directs everyone toward supporting the firefighters who serve our customers. Bosses don't have to do the work of creating added value; they simply have to authorize it. Added value cannot be delivered from headquarters, but our firefighters can provide it any time they have direct contact with our customers—right then and right there. Chief Brunacini not only expected us to deliver added value but also gave us the authority to do so by providing departmental training on customer service. He even developed the Tenants of Empowerment. Each of us carried an "Essentials of Fire Dept. Customer Service" card with us, and on the back was a list of empowerment questions to ask ourselves while providing our service. See the card below:



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Firefighters who could answer yes to all seven empowerment questions could not only deliver the added-value service but also knew their fire chief had their backs and would support their decisions. Often, inadequate leadership support is a primary barrier to going above and beyond. In one organization where I served as fire chief, a chief officer complained that one of our fire companies allowed a patient to ride in the engine, and he wanted to discipline the captain. But what we learned as we asked just a few questions is that the patient, a young boy, had a severe laceration, and the bleeding could not be controlled.



The ambulance response was delayed, and the hospital was nearby, so the crew decided to transport. I felt like this was an excellent choice and supported the fire company. However, the chief officer still had difficulty with the decision. I remembered the customer service card and empowerment questions. As we walked through them together, the chief officer realized that transporting the customer was the right call. He had been more concerned with legality than doing what was best for the customer. (Today, it would be obvious to most of us to transport. Unfortunately, there are still leaders who worry more about litigation than patient outcome.)

We should always consider legal ramifications while performing our jobs, but it shouldn't keep us from doing what is best for the customer. Bruno identified other organizational barriers to delivering added-value service. These include wimpy and insecure bosses; process and control freaks; too many rules, guidelines and warnings; rewarding workers not taking appropriate risks; punishing for, rather than learning from, added-value misses; and organizational control positions, such as lawyers, HR directors, finance directors and city managers.

Added value looks different at every customer encounter. Usually, it is just a smile or a helping hand. In other cases, it means doing more than

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anyone would expect. Soon after Bruno created the empowerment concept, we had a fire company that happened to work together on their days off pouring concrete. They responded to a medical call where a man who was adding concrete to his driveway had a heart attack. After taking care of the patient and ensuring he was safely in the ambulance, the company finished his concert job—right then and right there. It is important to note they stayed in service, monitored the radio and were ready to respond to another emergency. Finishing concrete is obviously out of the norm, but it's a solid example of providing added value. A more common example is how often firefighters have taken in a customer's groceries, put away their animals or locked the house. People remember these actions because they show we care. The patient becomes a customer, not just a call number.

#### **Instead of "What If?" Ask "Why Not?"**

Organizations must support the delivery of both the manual labor that physically solves the incident problem and the emotional labor that supports Mrs. Smith's personal situation and feelings. The following phrases do the opposite, destroying any opportunity to deliver added value. As you review them, ask whether you have heard these statements from your bosses or if you have said them yourself.

- What about the liability?
- What if we got a fire?
- If we do it for them, everyone else will want it.
- Give 'em an inch, and they will take a mile.
- The boss won't let us.
- The boss doesn't trust us.
- I didn't hire on to do warm and fuzzy stuff. (I ain't their mom.)
- If we let them do this, what's next?
- Where do you draw the line?
- The guys won't like it.
- And this last statement I heard someone say to a customer at about zero dark thirty: "Hey, get up off the street. I gotta work tomorrow." (He sold cars.)

Unfortunately, we don't have to make this stuff up. Perhaps we can't teach empathy, but a boss who holds workers accountable right then and right there can teach them how to behave. Fortunately, I have found that for every firefighter who uses one of the negative phrases above, there are a dozen who want to do the right thing.

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Delivering added value to our customers is free. Usually, all it takes is a little extra kindness and time. But I can't think of a better way to spend our time than doing our best for our customers.

Our next article introduces Silverback Leadership Function 3, Personal Effectiveness. **BS**



*Terry Garrison retired in 2022 after serving 45 years in the fire service, the first 30 of which he spent with the Phoenix Fire Department working for Alan Brunacini. He spent the next 15 years serving as fire chief for Oceanside, Calif., Houston, Texas, and Glendale, Ariz. Terry now lives in Phoenix just a few miles from the AVB CTC, where he remains connected to the fire service by working with Blue Card. His most important role is being the best buddy to his grandson Jack, pictured with him here.*



*Nick Brunacini joined the Phoenix Fire Department (PFD) in 1980. He served seven years as a firefighter on different engine companies before promoting to captain and working nine years on a ladder company. Nick served as a battalion chief for five years before promoting to shift commander in 2001. He then spent the following five years developing and teaching the Blue Card curriculum at the PFD's Command Training Center. His last assignment with the PFD was South Shift commander. Nick retired from the PFD in 2009 after spending the first 26 years of his fire-department career as a B-shifter and the last three on C Shift. Nick is the author of "B-Shifter—A Firefighter's Memoir." He also co-wrote "Command Safety." Today he is the publisher of the B Shifter hazard zone periodical and a Blue Card instructor.*