SILVERBACK LEADERSHIP

Fixing the plane while flying: Simple models for continual performance management & positive change.

BY TERRY GARRISON
B Shifter Buckslip, *Dec. 3, 2024*

As we continue with the Silverback Leadership Program, we will begin discussing Leadership Function 5: Performance Management. This includes introducing practical processes to help move organizations, groups or individuals forward and create sustainable change. Here, I want to share the steps of the Performance Management Model and the Accountability Model. While we won't have enough time in this article to explore each step in detail, Silverback Leadership's online leadership program will provide all the information you need and examples of how these models have been successfully applied in large and small fire departments.

We've all seen organizations hire experts and consultants to identify areas for improvement and provide a list of strategies, goals and objectives. The problem with this practice is that the experts eventually leave, and we are left with the same cast of characters, issues, and communication problems we originally had. Bruno used to say all it takes to be an expert is a plane ticket and a briefcase, and I couldn't agree more. The Accountability and Performance Management Models give us the ability to fix ourselves.

For these models to be effective, everyone must be trained in their purpose and application. This includes all firefighters, leaders and even ancillary staff because they will eventually be involved in the process. In fact, workers should not only know their roles within the model but also what step of the model they are working in as they perform their responsibilities. This is why the models are simple and easy to follow.

Speaking of the need for simplicity, I am reminded of a story Nick shared with me. One multi-company fire station made it a practice to cook brunch every Sunday morning on B Shift. One crew would shop for the groceries and cook, and another would take care of dishes and clean up. Because there were always about 12 firefighters on duty, shopping was pretty much the same each Sunday: three dozen eggs, three pounds of bacon, and five pounds of potatoes for hash browns. One particular Sunday, Firefighter Jones, who was not the brightest guy, returned for seconds on the hash browns. The cook informed him there were none left. Firefighter Jones was pissed and accused them of not buying enough potatoes. The cook

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told him they got the five pounds, just like always. Firefighter Jones said, "Well, they must have been smaller potatoes." The point of the story is that not all firefighters are A students, which is why we need to keep our models and processes simple. I am not saying we should dumb things down; we just benefit from keeping things simple. To ensure continuous improvement, we must use simple models everyone can understand.

Leaders must remember that change is about people, not process. Models and processes are tools meant to support people as they navigate change. Many processes look good on paper, but they often fail to account for the fact that the people undergoing the changes are also managing their everyday work and responsibilities. In other words, we are attempting to fix the plane while they are flying it. When I arrived at the Houston Fire Department (HFD), I was the first outside fire chief in over 20 years—and only the second in the department's history. HFD was the third-largest municipal fire department in the United States, with more than 4,200 members at that time. I knew change was essential. Luckily, I encountered an amazing group of people who deeply cared for each other and their community. To my surprise, they weren't opposed to change—as long as it helped them improve at their jobs, better serve their community and stay safe. It was equally important to them that they had input into the changes and that their own leaders guided the process. They didn't want an outsider coming in to dictate changes without genuinely caring about them. (Who would?) One concern I heard early on was that I might try to turn the HFD into another Phoenix Fire Department (PFD). When I mentioned this to Bruno over breakfast one morning, he offered priceless advice: "Tell them the PFD is the best fire department Phoenix has, and the HFD should be the best fire department Houston has."



Implementing change while the workers also manage their routine responsibilities is a bit like trying to fix a plane midflight.

The first step we took in Houston was learning the Accountability Model. I developed and used this model during my time as fire chief in Oceanside, Calif., where it proved highly effective in driving change. To this day, the original model remains unchanged:

1. Set expectations.
2. Train to those expectations.
3. Monitor performance.
4. Hold members accountable, both positive and negative.

I have written about the Accountability Model before, so I will not go into the details here, but please know it is as simple as it looks and can be used for an entire organization or an individual firefighter in creating continuous improvement. The Accountability Model is extremely useful for managing

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individual performance because it eliminates excuses like, "You never told me," "You never taught me," "Nobody else has to do it this way," and "I've been doing it this way for years, and you never corrected me."

The second model I want to share was introduced by Bruno in the 1980s and used throughout my PFD career. This model is the foundation for Blue Card's After-Action Review process. The steps of the Performance Management Model are:

1. Establish SOPs and guidelines.
2. Train on those SOPs and guidelines.
3. Do the work.
4. Critique performance.
5. Revise SOPs and guidelines as needed.

The key to both models is they are continuous processes that leaders must follow step by step. Skipping a step can lead to confusion and disrupt service delivery internally and externally. We "fix ourselves" by consistently applying the steps in both models repeatedly. Our system will always encounter new challenges, problems and opportunities. To address these effectively, we must remain committed to using the models as straightforward outlines for managing performance and driving continuous improvement.

In our next article, we will move to Silverback Leadership Function 6: Behavioral Management, focusing on the leader's role in developing, implementing and managing organizational rules and regulations. Meanwhile, please reflect on this Tactical Truth from Bruno: "Too much college and not enough kindergarten" as it relates to the essential role of a leader. 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.*