

2024 BLUE CARD HAZARD-ZONE CONFERENCE SPEAKER PREVIEW



Building Character Through Professional Development: Identifying Organizational Values.

BY DEPUTY CHIEF JEFFERY L. KING

B SHIFTER *Buckslip*, Aug. 13, 2024

Our industry has changed dramatically over the years. The fire service has seen significant advancements driven by researchers committed to understanding fire dynamics, enhancing firefighter health and safety, and improving the technology that allows us to work in this profession. Researcher's work, coupled with our thirst for knowledge, has led to the revolutionary changes responsible for moving the industry forward in fascinating ways.

We also have areas where we have not seen as much progress. One of those areas pertains to the professional development of our firefighters. Don't get me wrong: We are good at training firefighters, but in my mind, there is a clear distinction between *training* and *professional development*. Training is an event that primarily focuses on equipping firefighters with the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to perform their duties safely and efficiently. As an industry, we are good at training, and it is easy to deliver. Do you want to practice donning your gear? Assemble your crew in the apparatus bay with all their PPE and start donning and doffing the gear in a fashion that satisfies your department's standards. Simple, right?

Professional development is a little more challenging. It goes beyond the task-level skills associated with firefighting and focuses on the growth and advancement of firefighters throughout their careers. Professional development is a process that includes topics like leadership training and officer development. You can put a member through all four Fire Officer certifications and still not have the leaders or officers your organization desires. It is not because the training is poor or because of the members' shortcomings. It is because the curriculum lacks the character development necessary to produce the leaders and officers we need.

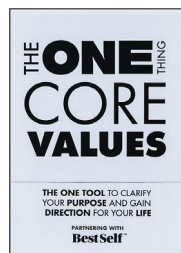
This begs the question: How do you build character through professional development? *It starts with identifying your organizational values.* Every fire department has some version of a mission and/or vision statement that encapsulates what they do and why they do it. These statements are designed to reflect the organization's values in the highest regard, or at

Continued

least the values that represent how the department views itself within the community. The problems come when our *projected values*, the values we put forward in the public forum, do not align with our *actualized values*, those that manifest through our actions and policies.

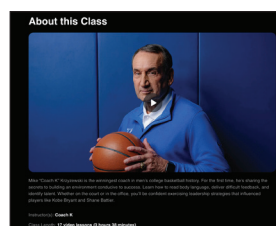
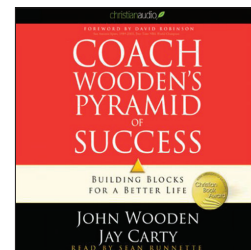
Identifying Your Values

The simplest way to determine your values as an organization is to ask the department members to identify them for you. This can be quite difficult for organizational leaders. When our projected values are not aligned with the actualized values, organizational morale suffers. Learning in real time that you are not “walking the walk” you attempted to cultivate as a department can be painful. At least, it is for those who care. It is worth saying again that our values manifest in our actions. When our actions do not align with our stated values, the members are the ones left holding the bag, and they feel the disconnection. The feeling is palpable for the members and, hopefully, something the members can put into words.



If you struggle with articulating your values, there are many things you can do to help with the identification process. Start by finding sources of inspiration. Do not be afraid to look outside of the fire service. One example of outside-the-box thinking comes in an exceedingly small box. “The One Thing Core Values” box set has 150 cards designed to help you identify core values. This is a great tool to use during small-group, team-building exercises and can help put you on the path to identifying those qualities you prioritize as a department.

Two other sources of inspiration come from legendary basketball coaches John Wooden and Mike Krzyzewski. Coach Wooden developed his wildly popular “Pyramid of Success,” which provides people with a framework of specific tenets to help achieve individual and organizational greatness. The pyramid is broken down into five interconnected levels, each serving as a foundational element of the above mentioned level. The “Pyramid of Success” is so popular that it often finds itself woven into the lexicon of American society through television programs like “Parks and Rec” and “Ted Lasso.”

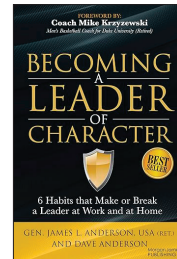


Mike Krzyzewski, commonly known as Coach K, has written several books on leadership and recently collaborated with the folks at Master Class to develop a 17-episode program on value-driven leadership. During each episode, Coach K walks viewers through the importance of the

Continued

identified values with a ton of teachable moments and actionable items. The return on investment is well worth the cost of admission.

If you are an avid reader who does not derive inspiration from games, artwork or online learning, I suggest reading “Becoming a Leader of Character” by General James L. Anderson and his son, Dave Anderson. They have done what so many other authors in the genre have struggled with and written a book that not only defines the six characteristics of a great leader but also simplifies the process of making principles actionable with exercises to perform personally, professionally and at home with the family.



Integrating Your Values

Once you have gone through the process of identifying your values (or re-aligning them in some cases), you must integrate them into your organization. Integration is not about simply posting tenets on a website or plastering them on the walls of your station(s). Even though there is tremendous benefit in making the values known to everyone, integration is about making each of these core qualities actionable and a part of your day-to-day operations. The values must be operationalized, and this is accomplished through professional development.

The values identified by the organization are the ones held in the highest regard. They become the foundation of everything you do and manifest themselves in our work and through our actions. Departments should integrate them into professional development programming from day one. For some of you, that might mean weaving them into your recruit training programs. For others, it might start with the onboarding process with new hires. Either way, the principles you identify become the fabric of a department's culture.

Integrating organizational values into your professional development programming requires designing curricula that emphasize their importance and focus on task-level training. Departments could design real-life scenario-based training exercises that require value-based decision-making. Ethical dilemmas and leadership challenges must be woven into training to foster a deeper understanding of the department's commitment to its principles. Mentorship programs are another example of facilitating the transfer of knowledge when you pair members who embody the department's ethos with someone new to the organization. A comprehensive approach ensures that as members continually advance their skills, they garner a deeper understanding of the tenets that define the essence of the organizational culture.

Continued

Modeling Your Values

Modeling departmental values requires a commitment to embodying them. Organizational leaders set a powerful example by demonstrating departmental virtues through their daily actions, interactions and decisions. This involves using the values to guide our interactions with department members and the members of our community. By living these principles, fire service leaders enhance their effectiveness and trust within the community and inspire and cultivate these qualities within the next generation of firefighters.

Being Accountable

Accountability is a hot-button topic in the fire service. The word evokes thoughts of keeping firefighters safe in the hazard zone or ensuring members adhere to departmental policies, procedures and guidelines. Accountability is not something one group uses to lord over another. I suggest a high-order sense of accountability. This means being accountable for the greater good, where members actively work to uphold the organization's values while embodying the principles of your organization's culture and identity. Accountability is a shared responsibility, requiring every member, from the new firefighting recruit to the fire chief, to consistently reflect the department's ethos in their decisions, actions and interactions. Accountability requires a feedback-driven culture where individuals feel empowered to speak freely and contribute to the organization's growth and evolution.

Principles Cultivate Professional Growth

Professional development is crucial for the growth and advancement of firefighters throughout their careers. It must go beyond seeking the perfection of task-level skills and incorporate a focus on character development, leadership training, and officer development. Identifying, integrating, modeling, and being accountable to organizational principles is essential for building character through professional development. When fire service leaders embody these values, they enhance their effectiveness, inspire the next generation of firefighters, and cultivate a culture of accountability and growth within an organization. **BS**

Jeff began his career with the Houston Fire Department in 2001 and currently serves as deputy chief of health, safety and professional development with the Spring (Texas) Fire Department in his hometown. As a dedicated student of the fire service, Jeff earned a Bachelor of Science in fire science and a Master of Science in emergency services management. He has also earned the professional designations of fire service chief executive officer through the Mays School of Business at Texas A&M University along with a chief fire officer and chief training officer through the Center for Public Safety Excellence. Jeff is a graduate of the City of Houston's Leadership Institute Program. He lives in Spring, Texas, with his wife Tracy and their daughters, Savannah and Madigan.