

BATTALION-LEVEL LEADERSHIP

3 ways the *transformational leadership* method can motivate individuals & inspire organizational change.

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Fire departments use a transactional approach for almost everything they do. Transactional simply means, "If you do X, it will produce Y." Put another way, transactional methods provide for expected outcomes based on certain actions.

Transactional leadership methods are best utilized in a settled environment with a developed organizational structure. The Blue Card System uses this concept with its *standard conditions, standard actions, standard outcomes* approach. Many organizations use SOPs/SOGs or other policies and procedures to ensure a desired outcome. Each of these explains how to do *the thing* to get the desired results. Transactional leadership, however, tends to produce a reactionary environment.

Transformational leadership focuses on changing organizational culture by inspiring or motivating individuals.

An example is a PPE policy. Typically, these policies specify which type of PPE shall be worn on specific types of incidents. When a firefighter does not adhere to the policy, an officer initially uses coaching or counseling to get the desired result. If the firefighter continues to ignore the policy, the officer's actions will progress into the corrective action of an oral or written reprimand. The firefighter's actions trigger the officer's reaction.

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, focuses on changing organizational culture by inspiring or motivating individuals. It tends to produce innovation, and although the results aren't often as black and white as a transactional approach, it can produce performance beyond expectations. Transformational leadership shifts the focus from the individual to the group. A clear difference between these methods is that transformational leadership addresses how to motivate people, while transactional leadership addresses how to do things.

Fire chiefs often focus more on transformational leadership, starting with mission and vision statements. They look at where we are headed one to five years down the road. Their goal is to inspire us to become the best organization we can be. Company officers usually rely on transactional leadership. As first-line supervisors, they need to ensure the day-to-day tasks,

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such as station and apparatus duties, training, and emergency response, are conducted based on organizational expectations.

Battalion chiefs and shift commanders are uniquely positioned to utilize both transactional and transformational leadership methods. Ensuring training is completed correctly, apparatus and station duties are accomplished, and response standards are followed requires a transactional approach. Inspiring officers and firefighters to be the best version of themselves and to think about the department's larger mission requires the transformational style.

This format provided a safe space to discuss the lessons from the book & ask questions about situations we were dealing with.

The transactional method feels comfortable for most of us because it is the default for most departments, and its clear, definitive nature aligns with many of our Type A personalities. The transformational approach has many gray areas; what motivates or inspires one person might not do the same for others. Below, I discuss a few transformational methods that will work for a variety of people.

1. Start a Book Club. This is a method a former assistant chief of operations started in our department many years ago. He purchased copies of "Small Unit Leadership" by Col. Dandridge M. Malone for all the new company officers. We would read through the book independently and then meet at a station to discuss chapters. The AC would ask us how we could utilize certain lessons in our new roles. He would also share his experiences and discuss successes and failures. This format provided a safe space to discuss the lessons from the book and ask questions about situations we were dealing with. Having a peer group to bounce ideas off of is invaluable.

Although the format has varied, we have continued this practice and expanded it to include all officers on the shift. We sometimes pull a few companies together and meet with the officers to discuss a book in person, or we might utilize Zoom to connect. The point is to be creative and not allow call volume or distance to keep you from having your discussions. It is important for the leader of the exercise to know the book and the lessons or key points they want to highlight. You can ask officers to review a certain chapter or do it yourself, depending on their knowledge or comfort with the material.

If it isn't feasible to buy books for everyone, you can review it with the officers and give them a CliffsNotes version; if it inspires them, they can purchase the book on their own. We are currently reading "Mentoring 101" by John C. Maxwell. Past books include "The Culture Code" by Daniel Coyle and

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"Start with Why" by Simon Sinek. Understanding how to lead, mentor and build a great culture is necessary to transform people and organizations.

2) Focus on coaching instead of being a critic or a cheerleader. Our people need us to explain or show them how to be successful. Giving them specific feedback about what they can correct to improve themselves is more beneficial than telling them what they screwed up on. It is also more helpful than just saying, "Good job." For example, "Your line choice and apparatus placement on the last fire were spot on; they allowed for a quick knock-down and rapid hoseline advancement." Followed by, "Something you can improve on next time is getting the primary search started more quickly." Providing honest feedback will build trust between you and your officers. And once you have their trust, you can encourage them to seek discomfort in their personal growth.

3) Encourage the awkwardness that comes from making mistakes. When we get good (or at least acceptable) at our jobs, we tend to stay in our little comfortable places. This does not encourage improvement. Many departments use the *crawl, walk, run* approach to introduce new equipment or tasks. This helps us gain understanding and improve in a controlled manner. Even when we utilize this approach, we must seek discomfort to experience growth. Training should be where mistakes happen to help us minimize them on the emergency scene. If we create an environment dominated by perfection, the person and the organization will never reach their true potential.

Focus on excellence instead of perfection. Perfectionists tend to spend too much time obsessing over small things instead of the most important things. Perfectionists are usually very critical of themselves, too, and tend to avoid situations where they might make mistakes. Shifting their focus from flawlessness to improvement or growth produces better outcomes, and our collective results improve when our individual performance improves. Shifting our focus from individual to department success can help push us into that essential discomfort/growth phase.

Transactional relationships result in expected outcomes, while transformational ones can lead to performance beyond expectations. This allows us to maintain our commitment to providing our citizens the highest level of service. Helping individuals and the organization become the best versions of themselves requires dedication and long-term effort. **BS**



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