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Chief Marc Bashoor

Chief's Forum

Professionalism is about performance, not a paycheck

Fire service leaders, paid and volunteer, must focus on problem-solving and decision-making in service to the community

Feb 25, 2020

Performance – making rescues, putting out fires and, yes, getting the occasional cat out of the tree or picking up Grandma Jones after she falls. That is what we do, isn't it?

It really doesn't matter whether you're paid or volunteer, the fundamental responsibility of our firefighters is to take care of our communities *first*, not second, third or as an afterthought.

In the past I've written about [value-based vision statement and leadership traits](#) as well as THE PROMISE, an acronym that can help build public trust. While trust, honor and ethics (THE) are the core values, let's focus for a bit on the P in PROMISE – professionalism – and how it applies to our performance for the community.



Working with public information officers affords departments the opportunity to paint a professional image. (Photo/Marc Bashoor)

Professionalism is NOT a paycheck, a patch or a uniform. Professionalism is a demonstration of performance, presented with integrity, trustworthiness, honorability and high ethical standards on or off duty. Does that mean we can break rules “just because”? Absolutely not; however, we must make sure that:

- Our rules are rooted in standards, best practices and the law where appropriate.
- Our firefighters are trained to think on their feet, are educated to make commonsense decisions and are empowered to deviate from protocols when it’s the right thing to do – usually only under the most extreme of circumstances, like trapped civilians or firefighters.
- Our people follow the chain of command and incident command system principles, and that corrective discipline, when warranted, is measured, appropriate and consistent.

LEADERS MUST BE PROBLEM-SOLVERS

In its simplest form, our professional mission is to provide service. Providing service requires problem-solving skills through leadership. But problem-solving can become crippled when leaders fail to take bold and decisive action.

Leaders, whether formal or informal, cannot **kick the proverbial can down the road** on fire scenes any more than would be acceptable with, let’s say, paying your taxes. The cascading failure to pay your taxes has consequences that can reverberate for years – even decades – in fines, credit scores and loan applications. Similarly, the failure of a fire chief, or other leader, to lead can have life and death consequences that will have cascading effects for firefighters, families and communities long term.

Problem-solving doesn’t have to be complex, but some problems are complex. Here are three suggestions to improve your problem-solving capabilities:

1. Emergency scene: Use the OODA loop – Observe, Orient, Decide, Act. With military origins, the OODA loop is a great emergency scene tool, often used in the descriptive analogies of scene size-up and the decision of initial tactics. The OODA loop is a continuous cycle concept, not a one-and-done option.
2. Non-emergent scene: The OODA loop is still a useful tool; however, the complexity of the problem might require the **“Planning P.”** A more complex set of circumstances, or the desire/opportunity to include others in the decision-making process, provides the

opportunity to use longer-term research and planning meetings in the path toward making a decision.

3. Complex problems will require **critical-thinking skills**, focused analytical thought and may require “creative” thinking that’s judgment-free, subjective and novel. Complex problems may require complex skills and may have complex answers.

MAKE A DECISION AND MOVE ON

Recently, I’ve had some conversations where some within the organization keep asking each other, “What do you think?” or “What’s your preference?”

It’s great that individuals in the organization are empowered to ask those simple questions of each other, to give their opinion and that management listens. Sooner than later, however, management is going to have to decide.

I’m not quite sure how many times you get to ask someone (the Tootsie-Pop three-lick owl commercial comes to mind), but when it’s time, it’s time. Get their opinions, especially when it’s non-emergency, then MAKE A DECISION and move on.

Being the chief or the decision-maker can be a lonely place, especially with controversial or hot-button topics. It is important to remember that **being chief is not about being popular**. If you’re making everybody happy and there’s no dissent, and with human nature being what it is, chances are that somewhere along the way, you’re not doing your job.

YOU CANNOT PURCHASE PRIDE AND DEDICATION

I routinely hear a related, and problematic, refrain from career firefighters aimed at their volunteer counterparts: “You’re not professional, you’re just a volunteer.” Let’s be clear once again: Being professional has NOTHING to do with a paycheck or lack thereof. Professionalism is a measure of performance, not a reflection of pay status. There are ample examples of both paid and volunteer firefighters making good and bad decisions that fall on both sides of the “professionalism fence.”

Professionalism is very much a reflection of the pride and dedication people have to this profession – their station, equipment, appearance, performance, etc. A wise owl once told me (as he was licking his Tootsie-Pop) that you cannot buy pride and dedication.

Incidents that stream across our screens daily provide windows of opportunity for introspective performance analysis. Thousands of people opine on the positives and negatives of the public performance of firefighters and chiefs, as well as departments in general. We all likely have our opinions; I have espoused mine. But unless you are immersed in the specific department, I suspect you don’t have all the facts. Here’s some professional leadership advice for all of those keyboard-fire station-lawyers: Back away from the keyboard sooner than later.

A SERIOUS MISSION

Our mission is serious – to provide *professional* service to anyone in need. The vision to provide that service will come through forward-thinking, community-focused professional leadership. Anything less is just a T-shirt.

About the author

Chief Marc S. Bashoor is the FireRescue1 and Fire Chief executive editor and a member of the [Editorial Advisory Board](#). He has served 37 years in emergency services, and is currently the Highlands County, Florida, public safety director. Chief Bashoor also spent six years as chief of the Prince George's County (Maryland) Fire/EMS Department and five years as emergency manager in Mineral County, West Virginia. Chief Bashoor assisted the NFPA with fire service missions in Brazil and China, and has presented at many industry conferences and trade shows. He has contributed to several industry publications. He is a National Pro-board certified Fire Officer IV, Fire Instructor III and Fire Instructor. Connect with Chief Bashoor at on [Twitter](#), on [Facebook](#) or on [LinkedIn](#). Do you have a leadership tip or incident you'd like to discuss? Send the chief an email at marc.bashoor@firerescue1.com.

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