



the **Leading Next Generation**

Study identifies characteristics of & challenges
for present & future fire service leaders

By Shelley Langan & Jeffrey P. Feuquay, PhD, Esq.

Prompted by reports from fire service leaders of the increased difficulty identifying firefighters who are both qualified and willing to become tomorrow's leaders, CPS Human Resource Services recently engaged in a comprehensive review of leadership in the fire service. The two goals of the study were 1) to better understand leadership in a fire service setting and 2) to determine the underlying causes of the anticipated leadership deficit—whether rooted in human resource (HR) practices or in the structure of the fire service itself, or perhaps some combination of the two. In addition to this research study, CPS also engaged a group of nationally recognized fire service leaders to discuss and expand upon the study results and to provide guidance for further exploration of this issue.

PHOTO: GLEN ELLMAN

STUDY DETAILS

For the national research study, CPS followed a traditional study model. After reviewing the professional literature on leadership, CPS worked with recognized fire service leaders to develop and pilot test a survey instrument before full distribution. Potential respondents included chiefs, assistant chiefs, human resource professionals and union representatives from a sample of small and large, volunteer and professional departments and agencies across the United States. Additionally, fire service leaders reviewed study conclusions for logical consistency.

THE FINDINGS

Findings indicate a number of areas of agreement and disagreement between fire leadership and the HR community, and provide opportunities for further exploration and coordination as the fire service moves into the future. "It is critical that human resource professionals understand the role they play in supporting and serving the mission of the fire service as they actively maintain and replenish the leadership pipeline," says Jerry Greenwell, CPS' chief executive officer.

Challenges: Fire service leaders and HR professionals agree on the top four future challenges: funding, staffing levels, generational differences between firefighters and officers, and community expectations. But fire leaders were significantly more likely than HR professionals to view a lack of technical skills and training opportunities throughout the fire service as key future challenges.

Onset of Leadership: With respect to the onset of leadership, there appears to be marked differences in the perspectives of fire leaders and HR professionals on when leadership emerges in the fire ranks and when it becomes most useful during the careers of firefighters. More than 80 percent of the fire leaders reported leadership potential is first evident and first becomes useful at the entry level. In contrast, only 66 percent of the HR professionals said leadership skills are useful for an entry-level firefighter.

Leadership Characteristics: Fire leaders and HR professionals identified leadership characteristics required at different ranks in the fire service. Ethics, interpersonal and communication skills, decision-making skills, customer service and technical expertise were identified as necessary regardless of rank. A substantial proportion of respondents believed that leadership characteristics normally associated with higher ranks—strategic thinking, team development skills, community and government relations, vision of the future, and incident management skills—are also important at lower ranks. As expected, the rank of fire captain emerged as a point of transition in the leadership pipeline—the skills needed are consistent with those of higher ranks, but the individual's "heart" remains with those of

lower ranks. This can present challenges when individuals assume this level of command without proper preparation and continuing development.

Promotion Seeking: When evaluating motivation for seeking promotion, quality-of-life issues—loss of overtime, loss of work/life balance and loss of excitement on the fire scene—discourage firefighters from seeking promotion. Conversely, the chance to make a difference in the fire community, a positive relationship with current leaders and the need for achievement encourage individuals to seek command positions.

The Assessment Process: A key element of the leadership pipeline is the effectiveness of the testing and assessment process in identifying future leaders. Fire leaders are about equally divided on whether entry-level tests screen out future leaders, while less than one-third of HR professionals see entry testing as a problem. A substantial majority of both fire leaders and HR professionals indicate promotional testing lacks focus on critical leadership competencies. However, fire leaders are much more likely to see this as a problem.

About CPS Human Resource Services

CPS is a self-supporting public agency that provides a full range of human resource services to the public and non-profit sectors. It has unique expertise in delivering HR management and consulting services, employment testing and assessment services to government agencies throughout North America. It provides organizational strategy planning models and systems to assist agencies in the recruitment, selection and development of employees.

CPS's roots are quite different from other HR multinational consulting firms. It is

- a not-for-profit, joint powers public agency;
- governed by a board of directors comprising leaders from the special districts, cities, counties and states it serves.

CPS's mission is to transform HR management in the public sector. To this end, it provides innovative, best-practice solutions to today's leadership challenges.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

While a number of conclusions can be drawn from the research, what is clear is that leadership occurs in context, shows itself differently at the entry and command levels, and is both evident and useful from day one as a firefighter. To this end, selection processes for both entry-level and promotional testing should be designed to identify potential leaders, and leadership development should receive increased focus at and below the captain rank.

Moving forward, significant challenges face fire leaders, and it's critical that fire leaders and HR professionals

have a shared understanding of these challenges and coordinate their efforts to meet them through organizational initiatives.

FIRE LEADERS' FORUM

CPS presented these findings to a select group of senior fire service leaders from across the country as an adjunct to the 2009 Fire-Rescue International Conference in Dallas. The goals of the Fire Leaders' Forum were to confirm the initial survey results, engage the leaders in a discussion around the challenges of leadership in the fire service both today and in the future, and explore the next steps to take to both clarify and apply the findings to improve fire service leadership.

Through small-group exercises and discussions within the group, the leaders verified the survey results and decided on the following future priorities:

- Thoughtful projection of the fire service 5 years in the future, including command structures to encourage future leaders.

Leading the Next Generation

- Development of tools to better select individuals, both at entry and for promotion, with increased focus on leadership as it shows itself at all levels, and on finding firefighters adaptable to different missions within the fire service.
- Creating and fostering an organizational culture where mentoring of future leaders is both expected and rewarded.
- HR systems that provide for continuous personal development at firefighter and command levels, including looking outside the organization for training, when appropriate.
- Far greater communication between the fire and HR functions within organizations to ensure both groups understand that their respective actions on behalf of the organization should support protecting the citizens as an overall mission, rather than serving purely internal functional or departmental needs.

As the forum discussions concluded, the fire leaders indicated an interest in remaining involved in the efforts of CPS to address these issues, and CPS committed to remaining engaged with this leadership cadre.

Additionally, CPS was grateful to have U.S. Fire Administrator Kelvin Cochran participate in the event. His comments sum up not only the event, but research efforts to date: "As U.S. Fire Administrator, I am honored to have participated in the CPS Forum on the future of fire service leadership at FRI 2009 with chief officers from around the country. It was evident from the conversations that meeting the leadership demands of the future requires evaluating and revising processes for recruitment and hiring, professional development and promotional practices. The current rate of attrition suggests a sense of urgency such that all fire service stakeholders

should be engaged in shaping the future of the fire service leadership. Without such an initiative, the American fire service will be faced with a shortage of competent and capable leaders in the professional development pipeline to succeed retiring senior leaders."

FINAL THOUGHTS

To address those issues identified by fire service leaders, HR professionals must attend to the character and importance of leadership at all ranks, with the goal of ensuring entry and promotional selection processes include and identify potential leaders. Refocusing selection and assessment efforts alone is not a complete solution. Even when we can reliably identify leadership potential, the current environment, in combination with the life priorities of a new generation of firefighters, will continue to limit the availability of new leaders.

CPS is prepared to work with top fire service leaders, HR professionals and union representatives to "re-envision" organizational and quality-of-life factors that motivate future leaders. Through this cooperative effort, CPS continues its commitment to helping public agencies acquire, retain and develop the best employees.

To obtain a copy of the complete Fire Service Leadership report or discuss these findings in greater detail, please contact CPS Human Resource Services at www.cps.ca.gov/fireleadership or 916/471-3462. ☺

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