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## **Leading a Different Way**

by Craig Hendrickson and Emily Williams

Whether your team made it to the Super Bowl™ or not, chances are pretty good that you gathered with friends or family somewhere (maybe in between calls if you were on duty that day) and looked forward to what this year's game - and commercials - would bring forth. For some, the event itself was enough. From a broader perspective, this year's game stood out for many reasons, one of which was the opportunity it provided to watch two coaches who approach the game very differently from the norm reach the pinnacle of their profession at the same time.

Coaching the right way for these two men means refusing to use intimidation, abusive language, or scare tactics to motivate their players, believing instead that their players and teams achieve higher levels of performance and success through positive influence, encouragement, and inspirational leadership. They both believe that if they model the type of lives they want their players to live—putting their values and their families first—and that if they expect the best of their players and coaches—clearly outlining their expectations at the beginning of year and then trusting them to do their jobs—that their people will rise to the challenge and achieve excellence. In doing so they provided the environment and the tools necessary to allow their players and their teams to succeed, and because of it they were rewarded with trips to their desired destination in February—the Superbowl in Miami.

One thing should be obvious from the story above—Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith choose to lead in a way that demonstrates how much they value their team members. They are not alone. The Los Angeles Fire Department also has individuals who lead this way—and it has earned them the trust and respect of those who serve under their leadership.

In September 2006, Human Relations Instructors began asking members to tell us about the people they've worked with who have inspired them through principled behavior, respectful treatment of others, and dedication to service. We referred to these people as Positive Influencers. As we pored through the submissions, we noticed names, ranks, and assignments, but what struck us were the detailed descriptions of behavior and characteristics and the numerous examples of acts of leadership and integrity. (See Exhibit 1)

What began as an exercise to demonstrate how many positive role models exist within the LAFD grew into a testament to how deeply a person's motivation, satisfaction, and performance can be affected by the words and behavior of just one individual. In so many cases, members describe how they themselves were transformed as a result of one person's thoughtful actions. What follows are some of the lessons that stayed with members - in some cases for decades.

### Catch People Doing Something Right

The phrase "caught in the act" universally brings to mind an image of exposing someone engaged in negative activity. However, is it possible to catch someone in the act of doing something right? One new member, when describing a positive influencer, wrote about a tenured firefighter: "He helps me with my drills and tells me what I am doing right." Positive reinforcement assists in the retention of information. By contrast, what happens to an employee's performance level when a supervisor gives little or no feedback...until the employee does something incorrectly? The negative feedback loop is a powerful one, decreasing motivation and confidence – two factors that contribute heavily to success on the job.

### Listen to the Meaning Beneath the Words

One member recalled his first few shifts as a Captain I when he was assigned to a busy station. One night, after receiving his fourth call after midnight, he muttered his displeasure as he climbed back out of bed. To his surprise, he received a salty rebuke from the Captain II, who told him to quit complaining, reminding him that these were human beings who needed their help.

Granted, the delivery of the message was far from perfect. However, when placed in this position, you have two choices: to feel stung by the rebuke and begin building resentment toward the offending party or to really open your ears and hear what is being said. Someone who listens for meaning hears a reminder of the call to service. Someone who listens to the words only hears an admonishment. This Captain chose to listen for meaning. And so he selected his next step wisely: he patiently reminded his crew that anyone requiring their service should be treated with dignity and respect. When they arrived on-scene, they found a man in a back alley with a needle hanging out of his arm. Each member proceeded to treat this man with dignity and respect. The lesson this captain learned that night has remained with him throughout his career.

### Observe the 'Waiter Rule'

In 2006, USA Today conducted a survey of CEOs and discovered that the one rule of management these executives all could agree upon was something called the Waiter Rule. According to the Waiter Rule, a person's character is revealed by the way he or she treats someone in a subordinate role. People who turn their charm on and off depending on the status and rank of the person they're interacting with are telling you something very important about themselves. They tend to have larger-than-average egos and are unlikely to be collaborative. How someone treats probationary firefighters and civilian employees might also reveal a lot about character. What might the following examples reveal about that person's character?

- Just prior to a rookie's ten-month evaluation, one battalion chief personally calls every probationary firefighter in his battalion to congratulate them on making it this far; to let them know that he believes in them and that they will do well; and to let them know that he is there to support them.
- One member selected a probationary employee as his positive influencer: "Maintains a positive attitude, although a rookie in his 3rd house. He has a good understanding of service to the public, veracity, and honor."

Do you find it easy to look past the exterior of a waiter and see the person inside or even tomorrow's CEO? And do you have it in you to look past the exterior of today's rookie to see the person inside and, possibly, tomorrow's Fire Chief?

### Communicate Clear Expectations

Ambiguous leadership sends mixed messages and, predictably, results in ambiguous actions. One member described his captain the following way: "He is fair and makes his and the department's expectations very clear. This informs members that outcomes will be based on their actions, not his opinions." It also lets them know exactly how the captain will support them and instills confidence that their choices and resulting actions will determine their fates.

### Treat Challenges As If They Are Opportunities

Look for opportunities in the challenges that arise. For example, knowing that some members were dissatisfied with the survey methods used by auditors in 2005, a battalion chief used the opportunity to jump start dialogue on topics people had previously felt uncomfortable discussing. He then asked captains to do the same with their crews and bring back information. By creating a two-way path of communication, he ensured that members' concerns would be heard and taken

seriously. This improved the level of communication in his battalion, thus innovatively addressing one of the audits' primary concerns.

Each of us has the ability to exert positive influence, whether it is formally or informally. Are we setting examples that blaze new trails or are we reluctant to stray from the familiar, uncertain of where these new trails will take us? Allow the examples above to light the way as we all strive to motivate and inspire the people we lead and influence to higher levels of excellence. In doing so, the potential for innovation and growth will be limitless.

### Exhibit 1

Below are just a few of the powerful descriptions members provided when asked to describe someone who had positively influenced them:

- An EMS Captain who is: "always looking out for people who work under him and is always available for consult or advice. Very consistent with department policy and an excellent example to emulate."
- A Captain I who: "early in my career taught from experience and created an environment in which you weren't afraid to fail."
- A Firefighter/Paramedic who is: "always concerned with providing the best possible medical care. Very positive about being a paramedic. Actually enjoys his job!"
- An Engineer who: "goes out of his way for training amongst all rookies. He puts in time even off-duty to see that rookies are trained up for 4, 8, and 12 month evaluations."
- A Captain II who: "leads by example and treats every member as an adult. Our shift has great morale."
- A Firefighter/Paramedic who: "has a great attitude. She treats people the way they want to be treated."
- An Apparatus Operator who: "maintains high personal standards of integrity and consistently tries to teach and broaden peers' knowledge and performance. He truly has a vision for the department and is a good leader by example."
- A Firefighter who: "always shows a great attitude, is always smiling and always asking if I need help with anything. He's a very approachable senior firefighter. A great question can't stump this guy."

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