

First In, Last Out

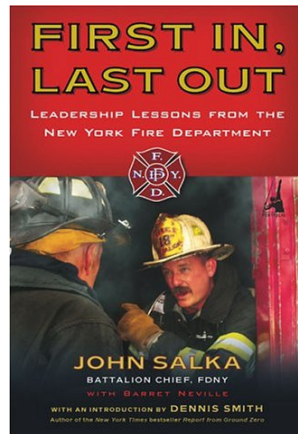
Leadership Lessons From The New York Fire Department

About the Author



Battalion Chief John Salka, FDNY is currently assigned to Battalion 18 in the Bronx. He has worked in some of FDNY's most active units including Rescue 3, Squad 1, and Eng. 48.

He is a featured speaker at Firehouse expo. Chief Salka is contributing editor for Firehouse Magazine and the recipient of FDIC Training Achievement Award for 2001. He conducts workshops and hands on training throughout the country.



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■ The Big Idea

Would the people who work for you follow you into a burning building?

The Fire Department of the City of New York is one of the most effective organizations in the world. And the foundation of that success is an extraordinary code of leadership: “first in, last put.” The senior officer on the team is always the first on into a burning building and the last one to leave. His people know that he’s at their side, sharing the danger – not barking orders from the rear. There’s no tolerance for buck-passing or finger-pointing.

John Salka, a twenty-five year veteran of the FDNY who rose from rookie to battalion chief, knows firsthand the power of “first in, last out” leadership. Salka’s gripping stories come straight from the front lines and the toughest fires. Now he has compiled the best leadership strategies of the FDNY into a practical, battle-tested guide for leaders in any field.

Why You Need This Book

This book distills the principles of FDNY leadership into a compelling, practical and highly readable guide that every leader and manager will want to read and reread.

THE LEADERSHIP TRIANGLE

Together, the three commitments make great leadership possible by supporting the strategies and disciplines that help you achieve your organization's goals. The commitments are uncovering reality, treating your people as assets, and developing leaders at all levels.

- To follow the smoke, you need to be out there all the time, gathering information from all kinds of sources, both quantitative and qualitative. You've got to be prepared to find and follow the smoke in yourself, your organization, and your industry if you hope to be effective.
- Your people are your true assets – they're the ones who make things happen, who get the job done. Make sure you give them the tools – and the leadership – they need to be effective.
- Every successful leader gets that way because he's backed by a core of subsidiary leaders who support his initiatives and goals. Spending time selecting and developing your support team is essential to becoming an out-in-front leader.

FUELING THE LEADERSHIP FIRE

Getting to know yourself a little better will help you uncover and manage the emotional triggers that torpedo your leadership which can sometimes lead to bullying, micromanaging, and other toxic behaviors. Once you take the steps to compensate for your weaknesses – through self-management or by learning new skills – you'll be better equipped to help your people do the same.

- Set aside time to reflect on past decisions, actions, and priorities. Ask yourself hard questions about how they relate to your motives and goals.
- Write down your values. Compose a leadership vision that sums up your beliefs about managing people. Then think about how well that vision matches your actions.
- Seek out friends, allies, and other leaders whom you trust, and ask them for constructive feedback on your management style. Have specific questions ready for them, particularly concerning areas where you suspect something might be wrong or where you seem to constantly have problems.

DON'T WASTE YOUR WATER ON SMOKE

You can use your organization's missions and values to focus your people on doing the right things while keeping your organization on track. Also, once you know what's important about what your company does, you can see how changes in your industry will affect your organization, and prepare to meet those changes.

- Your mission flows from the value you offer your customers. If you really want to understand your mission, you need to understand the people you serve. Make it a priority to interact with a customer, or with someone who's constantly interacting with customers themselves, at least once a week.
- By making your organization's mission come to life, you'll be able to help your people focus on a common goal. You can make your mission come to life for your people by telling stories that illustrate key mission-oriented

concepts or by using teaching approaches to reinforce the connection between what your people do and the bigger picture.

- Pay attention to your organization's values. And this doesn't mean just values like integrity or equal rights. By emphasizing the value of qualities like focus or pride in one's work, you can lead your people to higher levels of performance.

EVERY CHIEF NEEDS A RADIO, A WHITE HELMET, AND HIS PEOPLE'S TRUST

Leadership runs on relationships, and to be useful, relationships need to be built on trust. When your people trust you, they're more engaged and productive.

You can help trust happen by giving your people the information they need to feel good about putting their faith in you – that is, you need to give them some sign of your competence and consistency. A good place to do this is out in front, where they can see you.

- People need to have some experience with you in order to gather enough information to decide to trust you. Use existing processes like meetings or reviews as opportunities to build credibility. Seek out opportunities where your people will be able to see you doing great work.
- Make sure your people know what to expect from you; if you don't manage their expectations, you'll never be able to meet them. Also make sure your people know that you're great at what you do; leverage your reputation, as well as communicate any "war stories" that showcase your ability to deliver results.
- Resist the temptation micromanage your people or do their work for them. By delegating to them, not only do you free up more time to focus on your leadership functions, but you also show your people that you trust them. This is a powerful gesture, and as long as they don't feel that you're simply dumping busy work on them, they'll work hard to show that they're worthy of your faith in them.

KNOW THEIR NAMES BEFORE YOU SEND THEM INTO FLAMES

The keys to connecting with your people are, first, establishing a shared point of reference that allows for clear, two-way communication; second, understanding their goals; and third, teaching them about the organization and allowing them to do their best work.

After you've got this connection in place, then you're ready to start teaching your people about how their own goals are linked to the organization's goals. And once they understand this connection, you'll be better able to focus all their energy and potential on achieving those goals.

- To figure out what your people's goals are, all you have to do is ask. But before you do, make sure you're ready to listen to what they tell you and understand where they're coming from. To encourage a more candid conversation, ask them open-ended questions; these will spark a dialogue, as opposed to a yes or a no answer.
- Each of your people has a specific job to do, and each job is tied into the larger purpose of the organization. Use each person's job to teach him about the organization and what its goals are. Show him how what he does relates to both the bigger picture and his own aspirations.
- Don't be negative in front of your people. Attitudes are contagious, and if your downbeat mood infects the work environment, it will depress your people's ability to get their work done.

MAKING THE RIGHT CALL WHEN THE HEART IS ON

Making decisions that require you to do more than just slap a routine solution on a problem is what leadership is all about. The ideal decision-making process is one that asks you to figure out what the real problem is, orient yourself in relation to the problem, make a choice, and then execute it.

- Your people are often your best source of information, and conflict is the most efficient way of shaking their perspectives and insights out of them.
- Don't dismiss the roles that intangibles such as intuition, initiative, and timing play in your decision-making process. After all, intuition is really your subconscious trying to offer up the benefits of a lifetime's worth of experience, while initiative and timing are related qualities that, at their core, are about knowing when the benefits of action outweigh inaction.
- There are four steps you should follow when making decisions: Observe – Orient – Decide – Act. The two most important phases of this process are the first (Observe) and the last (Act). If you don't uncover enough or the right kind of information, the whole process is undermined. And if you don't execute, what's the point?

NO ONE GOES HOME UNTIL THE FIRE'S OUT

It's during the action phase of the decision-making process – also known as execution – that things really get done. It's also where weaknesses in leadership become most apparent. These five questions will help you focus on the key elements of execution:

1. Are your goals clear? Make sure you can define your objectives in specific, quantitative terms – these are the standards you'll use to gauge success or failure.
2. Who's going to get it done? You need to put the right people on the right jobs. Match their strengths to the needs of the undertaking.
3. What are they going to use to get it done? What resources are needed to accomplish your objective? Do you have those resources? If not, you'll need to revise your goals.
4. How is it going to get done? This question focuses you on your strategy and tactics. Even though you'll almost certainly deviate from this plan, you need to have one if you're to have any chance of succeeding.
5. Does all this seem reasonable? First, is what you're asking possible, or are you setting your people up for failure? Second, this question should prompt you to set up a feedback schedule so you can continue to gather

information and test your original assumptions in light of what's happening now.

FIRE UP YOUR PEOPLE'S POTENTIAL

The essence of leading for execution lies in guiding an organization or a group of people so that they not only get things done but get the right things done.

There are six rungs on this ladder, but in the end the most important thing you can do is give your people the chance to use their strengths to accomplish their goals; this will make them feel successful, and making people feel that they have the chance to be successful is the key to motivating them to get the right things done.

1. **Establish clear expectations.** Setting specific and realistic expectations will inspire people to raise their level of performance.
2. **Instill optimism.** Confident leadership is proven to help people overcome obstacles and work more effectively.
3. **Put people in a position to use their strengths.** Discover what your people are good at, and put them in roles where they can draw on these strengths.
4. **Let them do things their way.** When you let people achieve objectives in their own way, they'll reward your faith in them with innovative solutions and energetic execution.
5. **Provide feedback.** Constantly update people on their progress and offer them constructive criticism if necessary. People won't know how they're really doing unless you tell them. This also means praising them if they're doing a great job!
6. **Foster continuous improvement.** This is the key to a successful organization. When you expose your people to new experiences and help them learn new skills, you make possible the fresh ideas and insights that will help your company thrive.

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