

# Learning and Leading

BY PATRICK J. CHAMPAGNE

**I** ENTERED THE FIRE SERVICE IN 1986 and, as kid in a very small town, watched my uncles, grandfather, and father march in many Memorial and Labor Day parades. I grew up in an atmosphere of positive influence, watching *Emergency!* on Saturday evenings. That show's Season One DVDs sit next to my copy of John Norman's *Fire Officer's Handbook of Tactics* DVDs and Andy Fredericks's *Bread and Butter Operations* videos.

In the past couple of years, my role has changed dramatically with my becoming a New York State fire instructor and the chief of my volunteer department. These positions have allowed me to instruct and lead other firefighters and, in turn, learn more about myself, thus enhancing my skills, abilities, and decisions in the new roles. I never thought that I would be where I am today.

## Teacher and Learner

In today's fire service, you are definitely always learning new things if your mind is open to it. Most seasoned firefighters know that there is more than one method (i.e., a Plan B) to force a door, cut a vent hole, or perform any task, which is the reason we should continue to train and enhance our education. No one should be above this—a firefighter must always be ready to improvise because a one-track mindset is a recipe for failure. The fire scene is not the place or time to debate which method is better—many times, that depends on the variables involved.

I always tell firefighter audiences that our job is a team sport, especially for Firefighter I students. At this stage, new members must develop the discipline of good habits. I enjoy being a fire service instructor because I can help new firefighters create a solid foundation in the firefighting basics for future learning—it always comes back to the basics.

## Learner to Leader

In leading by example, you start as a learner and then become a leader.

If people are to follow you, you must put yourself on the path of learning as much as you can, no matter what your rank. You do not need a specific rank to learn. All leaders should consider themselves students of the fire service. As a leader, the more you demonstrate your openness to learning, and do learn, the more likely firefighters will buy into your message. Fire service instructors and leaders are not limited in how much they can contribute to and help shape the fire service—it is a network of continuously shared information. I have absorbed great

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learning from many knowledgeable peers, fire service articles, seminars, and hands-on training. Even outside the fire service, I have always enjoyed being around those from whom I can learn something. In general, I am very inquisitive and have been a learner for a very long time, but it wasn't until the past few years that I decided to step more into leadership. If I had never taken advantage of the numerous learning opportunities available, I would not be able to do what I am doing now.

As I progressed through the ranks as a firefighter and then a line officer, I always knew that if I were to successfully pass on to other firefighters what I had learned and experienced that I had to demonstrate and take the lead in some capacity. You can demonstrate leadership using the spoken word and teaching a skill. I have taken part in many live fire training evolutions pursuant to National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1403, *Standard on Live Fire Training Evolutions*. Ultimately, I was the officer planning and conducting the

training and in charge of several participants. I was no longer the student; I was the instructor. Realizing how much NFPA 1403 has influenced the conduct of live fire training evolutions, I have successfully fulfilled the ultimate leadership role: successfully conveying its enforcement to firefighters in my department and to students in the Firefighter I course. For many, NFPA 1403 is an inconvenience and is often questioned, but like it or not, we must follow it, and I have stressed this and was met with little resistance. I always emphasize the importance of safety as a group, not just as an individual, because if one person is hurt, it affects the whole team.

## Getting Dirty

Moreover, a leader at times has to get his hands dirty with his firefighters and as an instructor with his students. I enjoy demonstrating self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) skills because they are so vital to firefighter safety. Every seasoned firefighter realizes the importance of knowing his equipment, especially the SCBA. I enjoy involving myself in the hands-on SCBA learning because I was taught, and learned early on, its importance in saving my life. As a leader, it speaks volumes if you participate with everyone else and practice what you preach. It shows in part why you are an effective leader. A fire service leader has to relate to the firefighter, not develop a leader vs. firefighter way of thinking.

## Taking it Home

One of my best learning experiences occurred at the Fire Department Instructors Conference in 2010 when my brother Joe (a chief officer at the time) and I attended Dave Dodson's "The Art of Reading Smoke." For a chief officer, this information is indispensable and plays a large part in my size-up routine. I took away a lot of worthwhile learning.

When taking on a leadership position, it is natural to be apprehensive. In

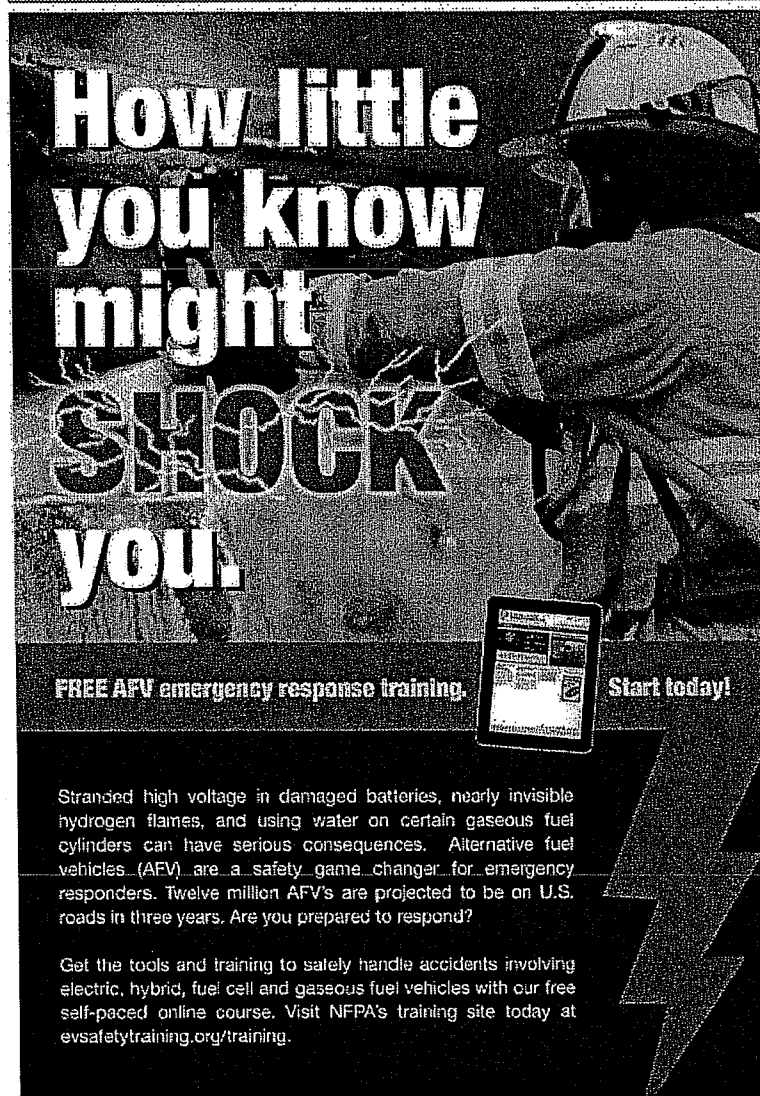
leading, you are expected to have all the answers, and that's not possible. You may also lose friends and make enemies because leadership sometimes requires making unpopular decisions. Although a leader must have a certain level of understanding and empathy, he must also make decisions for the greater good. A common fear of some leaders is that they will succeed. Becoming a leader means that you have made yourself available to a wider audience and others

will look to you for guidance. Some people fear success more than failure. I was one of those people in my younger years; I passed up many opportunities. It was easy to find an excuse and stay out of the spotlight. Consider success as the end result of learning and failure as an opportunity for learning. In my new roles, I can encourage individuals firsthand to pursue their goals, accept certain fears as normal, and use them as motivators. However, the unique thing

about being a leader in the fire service is that you are responsible for so many people and are required to put yourself in harm's way regularly.

Learning at any level should be fun. It doesn't just take place when you are a student. A quality instructor learns many things about his students—their learning styles, obstacles to their learning, and the pace at which each will comprehend information. An instructor must adapt to these challenges.

The same applies to leadership. All leaders must know their subordinates' strengths and weaknesses; ultimately, the leader is responsible for ensuring that the learning continues. The ultimate teaching or leadership experience is witnessing the progress a new student or a firefighter with little or no



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fire service background or experience makes. It confirms for me the process and continued evolution that should occur within the fire service, the passing along of knowledge and information to those who continue to walk through the doors and join us in "the best job in the world"—firefighting.

Not everyone has to become an official leader in rank, but we all should want to learn because we can still lead others unofficially. That is why past chiefs, officers, and firefighters should continue to contribute to those who want to join us. I plan to do that. ■

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