

Leadership Starts with an



San Diego Fire-Rescue offers L-380 program to improve department leadership

BY WILLIAM MIDDLETON

“The most essential element for success in the wildland fire service is competent and confident leadership.”

—*The Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program*

Remove the word “wildland,” from the above quote, and it can be applied to all levels of the fire service. If this statement is in fact true—and I believe most fire service professionals would agree it is—why has the fire service as a whole been reluctant to make leadership development its top priority? No doubt, there are many reasons. The good news: Professional fire service leadership development has gained a lot of momentum, and one program in particular, the L-Course Training Curriculum, has demonstrated excellent results.

WANTED: EXPERIENCED LEADERS

The San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) is just like many large city fire departments, but in some ways, it is very different. The SDFD protects a 320-square-mile city that contains 1.3 million citizens, with fewer than 1,000 firefighters assigned to 46 fire stations. With 0.69 firefighters per 1,000 residents, the ratio is one of the lowest in the country. In addition to the typical metropolitan and urban challenges, the SDFD has more than 900 linear miles of wildland/urban interface (WUI) areas. With wildland fire activity on the rise—often reaching catastrophic levels as it did with the Cedar Fire in 2003 and Witch Creek and Harris fires in 2007—leadership development has never been a higher priority.

In 1995, SDFD senior managers identified a potential retirement exodus of up to 75 percent of fire department personnel from 2001 to 2011. Due in large part to the implementation of a third platoon in the late 1960s, as well as extreme population growth and the SDFD’s expansion

through the 1970s, this turnover was expected to be the largest since the department was chartered in 1889. Although leadership development was a high priority, ongoing budget challenges made it impossible to implement a comprehensive training program at the time.

Fast-forward 10 years: In 2005, SDFD managers began to see the effects of the anticipated retirements. The turnover taking place within the department had its greatest impact at the supervisory level (captain and above), and retiring department leaders were leaving a huge void. Additionally, uncoordinated and occasionally poor performance on the fireground was observed, and disciplinary issues were on the rise, suggesting accountability concerns.

Newly promoted supervisors participated in comprehensive examination processes, but they often had less than 10 years with the department. Some of these new supervisors simply hadn’t received the necessary leadership training to adequately prepare them for their new responsibilities. Coupled with an overall reduction in structure fires and major emergency incidents throughout the city since the 1980s, personnel charged with critical decision making on the fireground were not given all the tools required to ensure consistent successful outcomes. This ultimately led to the question, “How do you train experience?”

THE WILDLAND WAY

At about the same time, the SDFD learned of efforts being made for leadership development in the U.S. wildland fire community. Comprehensive studies and workshops from 1995 to 2004 identified leadership development as an issue that wildland fire agencies needed to address. And from 1995 to 2000, the wildland fire service generated a number of independent initiatives that focused on the topics of human factors, decision making

and leadership. Consequently, the members of the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG)—an operational group designed to coordinate programs of the participating wildfire management agencies—determined that an interagency strategy was needed to develop new leaders in the wildland fire service.

With this in mind, the NWCG created the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program to promote cultural change in the workforce and to emphasize the vital importance of leadership concepts. To meet these expectations, the group developed three program components:

- A core value set that supports principle-centered leadership actions in a high-risk work environment;
- A formal curriculum that provides leadership skills training and education at all stages of an individual's career; and
- Non-traditional leadership development opportunities that allow individuals to strive for a higher performance level as a leader through self-directed continuous learning.

The actions taken by the NWCG were similar to efforts already being made within the SDFD. For example, the department had used training concepts based on crew resource management (CRM) and human factors with select groups of firefighters. Further, structured after-action reviews (AAR) were conducted on the fireground at all significant multi-company emergency incidents. Although the concepts proved to have merit and appeared to be well received, it was clear that the goals and expectations needed to be defined and supported with comprehensive, focused training.

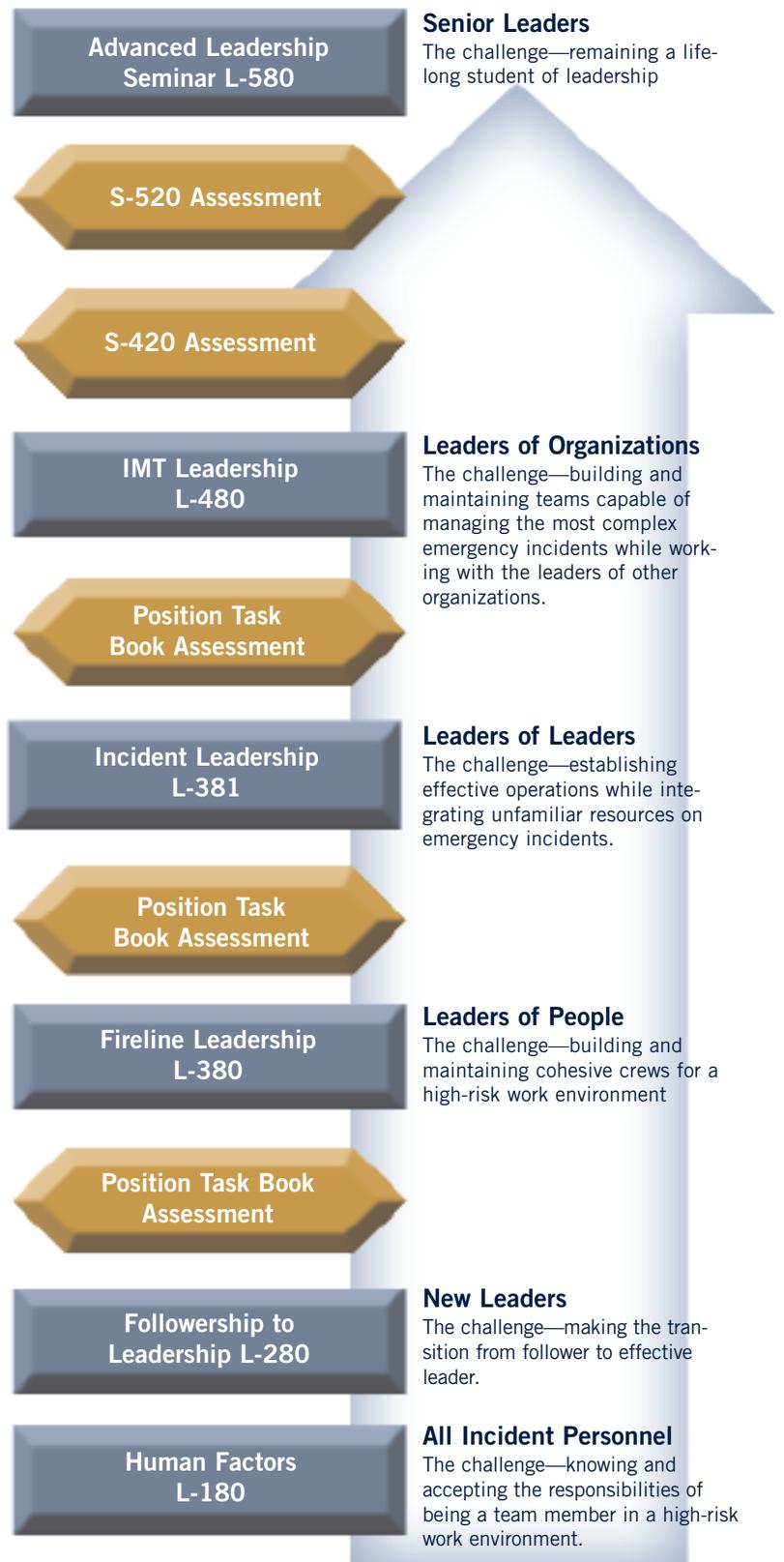
SHAPING THE L-SERIES

Not looking to reinvent the wheel, the SDFD sought more information from the NWCG regarding their progress and program design. Despite the fact that municipal/urban firefighters have different roles and responsibilities and often speak a different “language” than our wildland peers, it appeared that the core program elements outlined by the NWCG were consistent with the objectives identified by the SDFD.

The NWCG's Leadership Development Program had evolved from a concept rolled out in 2000 into the L-Series Curriculum. The initial course, L-380: Fireline Leadership, was designed in partnership with Mission-Centered Solutions (MCS) for the company-level officer and intended to meet the challenge of building and maintaining cohesive crews for a high-risk work environment.

By all accounts, the course had proven to be successful, not only by developing and enhancing leadership skills, but also by creating an environment that encouraged an examination of an organization's culture. And with more than 5 years of course presentation, the L-Series was expanded, and future course subjects were identified for development. ▶

“L” courses range from introductory to complex. In the fire service, the target educational group for each class is as follows: L-580 (fire chief, deputy chief, assistant chief); L-480 (IMT members); L-381 (battalion chief, IC); L-380 (captain, company officer); L-280 (engineer, firefighter preparing for promotion to captain); and L-180 (all personnel).



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PHOTO COURTESY MAURICE LIQUE/SDFD

Members of an L-380 class participate in a night exercise in a San Diego area canyon.

The first effort to implement the L-380 course in a community-based fire department was made by Fire Chief Craig Bowen of the San Ramon Valley (Calif.) Fire Protection District. After the program proved as successful within his department, the SDFD set out to further refine the program for delivery to municipal firefighters. Working closely with Lark McDonald of MCS and Training Projects Coordinator Jim Cook with the U.S. Forest Service, the L-380 course was modified and titled “Fire Service Leadership.”

The L-380 course introduced to the SDFD was specifically designed for company officers, with a focus on building leadership skills that directly affect company performance and station culture. Captains must operate successfully in two very different environments: 1) emergency incidents, which require rapid decision making and quick action; and 2) personnel management situations in the firehouse, which require a slower, more measured approach.

MCS provides a program in which participants learn and practice decision making, communication techniques, team-building skills and interpersonal behaviors that enable them to be capable and effective leaders. The program strikes a balance between theory and practice: Roughly 50 percent of the time is spent in lecture and discussion (*what* and *why*) and 50 percent in classroom and field exercises (*how*). And the MCS instructors bring to the course extensive experience in emergency incident operations, human factors and decision making in high-risk and high-consequence environments. They have backgrounds in military special operations, aviation, firefighting and incident command. In short, they walk the walk.

THE NEW L-380 FOR SAN DIEGO

The new L-380 course was rolled out to the SDFD for the first time in September 2006. The initial class faced several hurdles. Like many departments, the SDFD was living with severe budget challenges. Although funds were identified for course presentation, no funds were available to pay personnel attending class during their time off. Placing a high priority on presenting the course in five consecutive days meant asking volunteer participants to attend

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class on their own time between 24-hour shifts. This required assuring participants that the knowledge gained would be worth the time invested. Further, typical summer fire activity forced the class to be rescheduled twice before all participants were available to attend. Also challenging: the logistics of finding a classroom location remote from the SDFD Training Facility to create a fresh and non-traditional learning environment. Finally, officials had to identify locations for field exercises to ensure practicality and consistency with program design.

The first L-380 class was made up of 24 firefighters. The majority of those attending were captains, but there were also a few chief officers and personnel on the captain's list who anticipated a promotion in the near future. To achieve the best measure of the overall course value, the group reflected long-time “salty” officers, newer/younger officers, strong personalities, mild personalities, people with open minds and people very comfortable with the status quo. The entire course was monitored by the SDFD. Daily discussions were held to measure progress, answer questions and help define local traditions, practices and terminology. Although some minor adjustments were made, course content remained unchanged and MCS instructors followed the curriculum closely.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Effective training can be described as a three-legged stool. First, the need for training in a specific area must be identified. Second, a course of instruction must be developed and implemented. Third, the training must be evaluated for effectiveness.

When evaluating training specific to a “standards-based” area of performance, evaluation is relatively simple. Did performance, or scores during assessment, improve? Measuring the effectiveness of leadership, command presence, critical decision making, personnel management and human factors can be described as somewhat subjective. Measuring the broader objective of cultural change is certain to take time—probably years.

The initial attempt to measure L-380 was to ask participants to fill out a course-assessment form. All forms were reviewed by MCS and the SDFD. The general response to the material's presentation and content was overwhelmingly positive. Reviewers had never seen participants take such time to add individual comments reflecting the impact of the course. The follow-up effort also involved an assistant chief and staff interviewing all participants to measure the program's success. This level of review by senior leadership was uncommon in the SDFD, and was received by the participants as a sincere commitment. The feedback was extremely positive. One participant summed up the group's overall feeling: “This class needs to be provided to every officer on the department—and soon.”

A second class was scheduled. The makeup of the participants was largely the same—with a significant exception. This class included two representatives of the California State Fire Marshal (SFM). Approval of the program by the SFM was the first step in the course's approval by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the accompanying listing in the Sponsored Course Catalog. As a result, the SDFD enjoyed an excellent partnership with the SFM's Office in this effort.

The same review process was conducted with similar results; however, officials began to observe additional feedback—specifically, isolated instances of recognized performance among class ►

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participants and their crews. Multi-company drills were held to discuss leadership, accountability and human behavior. Further, battalion chiefs were receiving vocal feedback from subordinate participants. We were beginning to see the same kind of effect in the department that the wildland community had experienced a few years before.

A third class was held and, again, included a change in the makeup of participants. Lifeguards, a division within the SDFD, were asked to send three supervisors. In addition, the class included representatives from the Los Angeles City and Los Angeles County fire departments. Like the previous classes, participants' assessment of the course was extremely positive.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

To date, the SDFD has conducted five L-380 classes. The course has been approved by the DHS, which allows federal grant funds to be applied to the training program.

To say the L-Series curriculum has developed a strong presence in the municipal/urban fire service is an understatement. SDFD has hosted representatives from the LAFD, LACoFD, Montgomery County (Md.) Fire Department, Virginia Beach (Va.) Fire Department, Baltimore City (Md.) Fire Department and several San Diego County-area fire departments in the L-380 program; FDNY will be hosted in the next class, scheduled for September 2008.

The partnerships created allowed the SDFD to send officers to attend an L-381 class (All-Hazards Incident Leadership) hosted by FDNY last May. Additionally, an L-381 class in June hosted by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) included representatives from the USCG, SDFD, Seattle Fire Department, FDNY, U.S. Navy and an oil company-spill response team.

The LAFD, LACoFD and several other Southern California fire departments are currently evaluating the L-Series for implementation. Further, later this year, the SDFD will implement the L-280 course (Followership to Leadership) with a focus on personnel preparing for promotion to captain. L-180 (Human Factors) is taught to fire recruits in the SDFD Fire Academy and has recently been instructed to all members of the department. In addition, L-380 has become a minimum requirement to take the examination for battalion chief, and L-381 is being discussed for scheduling in the near future.

A FINAL THOUGHT

The L-Series courses, initially designed by the NWCG and MCS for the wildfire service, have proven to be a valuable component of the leadership development process in the SDFD. Providing the tools necessary for successful outcomes is good for the organization, good for the members and good for the citizens we serve.

If you would like more information about how to implement a similar program in your area, contact SDFD Deputy Chief Brian Fennessy at bfennessy@sandiego.gov. ■

William Middleton retired as assistant fire chief from the SDFD in 2007, completing a 33-year fire service career. Middleton implemented the L-Series Curriculum within the SDFD in 2006.