

In Search of Cultural Change

San Diego's experience provides a road map for other departments

In 1995, senior managers in the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) identified a potential retirement exodus of up to 75 percent of fire department personnel beginning in 2001 and ending in 2010. This turnover was expected to be the largest since the department was chartered in 1889.

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); retiring department leaders were leaving a huge void in terms of emergency response experience. Additionally, uncoordinated and occasionally poor performance on the fireground was observed, and disciplinary issues were on the rise. Although leadership development was a high priority for SDFD, ongoing budget challenges made it impossible to implement a comprehensive training program at the time.

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. Couple that with an overall reduction in structure fires and major emergency incidents throughout the city since the 1980s, and the result was that personnel charged with critical decision-making on the fireground weren't being provided all of the tools required to ensure consistent, successful outcomes. This ultimately led to the question, "How do you train experience?"

As a result, the SDFD fire chief and key staff members identified a critical need to invest in current and future leaders. No previous effort had taken place within the organization to improve fire service leadership, especially in the area of operations. The emphasis was on accomplishing change by engaging first-line leaders and using them as an organizational fulcrum. Although the focus was to attract first-line command staff to the program, as these men and women represent the future of the department, it was crucial to include all levels of the command chain in the program to ensure support as these leaders began implementing their new leadership skills.

Other fire agencies, of course, have engaged in leadership development efforts. However, most of those programs provided leadership training only to department company officers. In contrast, SDFD's desire was for cultural change at all levels. This cultural change had to be driven internally and at the first-line leader level, as opposed to a traditional, corporate-based leadership training model (top-down) that focuses primarily on the senior level of management.

Five years into the initiative, the SDFD is beginning to see results and develop critical lessons learned for departments wanting to initiate similar situations.

THE "L" SERIES

Similar to many fire departments across the nation, the SDFD has experienced attrition at rates never before witnessed. As hundreds of firefighters have retired or left the department, promotions have





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occurred at an unprecedented rate. Although this is a concern in terms of hundreds of years of emergency response experience heading out the door, it's also a time of great excitement as the opportunity for cultural change within the organization has never been greater.

SDFD has taken a mindful position on its responsibility to provide leadership tools to its new leaders. As detailed in an earlier *FireRescue* article ("Leadership Starts with an 'L,'" August 2008, p. 98), leadership courses taken from (or patterned after) the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) "L" series courses are a large component of this training/cultural change effort.

To date, nearly the entire 950-plus uniformed members and several of the 300-plus non-uniformed members of the SDFD have completed the L-180 *Human Factors* training. This course is delivered internally and is also included in the basic fire academy curriculum for new fire recruits. The L-280 *Followership to Leadership* (for emerging leaders) program is also being presented at the local level by an internal SDFD cadre that received train-the-trainer instruction by key NWCG instructors.

At the fire battalion chief and fire captain leadership level, the SDFD selected the L-380-certified program *At the Point of the Spear: Fire Service Leadership* delivered by Mission-Centered Solutions (MCS), which is an urban/structural version of the

MCS L-380 Fireline Leadership program. *Fire Service Leadership* has been delivered by MCS on multiple occasions for SDFD over the last few years. The SDFD experience with MCS has been more of a partnership, with both organizations participating in strategic planning, as opposed to the traditional vendor/customer relationship.

MCS' L-381-certified All-Hazards Incident Leadership (AHIL) program is also being delivered. SDFD recently hosted this course with a target audience of multi-agency and multi-discipline members of the San Diego Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Region All-Hazards Incident Management Team (AHIMT). The program provides an opportunity to apply the leadership concepts learned in *Fire Service Leadership* to a simulated all-hazards incident. Moreover, the participants are divided into groups modeled after an IMT's command and general staff structure, providing an opportunity for team members to work together toward common objectives through the incident command system.

The cultural change effort by way of education would not be possible if not embraced by both the SDFD senior management team and San Diego Firefighters Local 145. As a result of the collaboration between management and labor, the completion of the *Fire Service Leadership* program is now a minimum requirement for participation in the battalion

chief promotional process. Additionally, the completion of the *Followership to Leadership* class has been supported by organized labor as a “highly desirable” qualification for fire engineers competing in the fire captain exam promotional process.

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

From the onset, SDFD recognized that the most significant challenge for the leadership development/cultural change initiative is how best to sustain the effort over time. Without continuing to provide our current and future leaders opportunity to grow, communicate and apply the leadership principles learned, this effort would be viewed as other efforts have been in past: just the latest and greatest “check the box” training exercise.

As a result, the SDFD established a Leadership Development Planning Group (LDPG) and Leadership Committee (LC). The LDPG meets semi-annually to ensure widespread input and representation throughout the organization. It sets the course for the strategic internal leadership development/cultural change effort that guides the LC.

As the courses continue to be delivered, the SDFD has seen increased interest in participation on the LDPG. The only prerequisite is having successfully completed the L-280 and/or the L-380 program(s). As previously discussed, success depends on the initiative

Fire Departments Having Participated in an L-380 SDFD-Sponsored Course

- Baltimore Fire Department
- Fire Department of New York
- Los Angeles County and City Fire Departments
- Montgomery County (Md.) Fire and Rescue Service
- Virginia Beach (Va.) Fire Department
- CAL FIRE

Fire Departments/Districts Having Hosted L-380 Courses

- San Diego Fire-Rescue Department
- Los Angeles City Fire Department
- San Ramon Valley (Calif.) Fire Protection District
- Chula Vista (Calif.) Fire Department
- San Miguel (Calif.) Fire Protection District
- National City (Calif.) Fire Department
- San Marcos (Calif.) Fire Department
- Fire Department of New York
- Baltimore Fire Department
- El Paso (Texas) Fire Department



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being embraced and driven internally by the department's first-line leaders. Committee members include one assistant fire chief representing the fire chief and senior SDFD leadership, a member of organized labor's executive board and firefighters representing the three division platoons.

as the NWCG's leadership development Web site (www.fireleadership.gov) and the MCS leader support Web site (www.CostaRicardo.com).

SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT

Cultural change takes many years. The SDFD is experiencing indicators that change is slowly taking place and that the efforts continue to be worth pursuing.

Providing quantifiable evidence of the desired cultural change has been a challenge. That said, there have been multiple anecdotal reports indicating that conflict resolution and communication has improved both during emergencies and at the fire stations.

Paramilitary organizations such as the fire service can suffer from a culture where first-line leaders follow orders blindly, sometimes to the detriment of their crew's safety. At SDFD, we're beginning to see the erosion of this leadership model. First-line leaders now understand how to express themselves respectfully to incident commanders when given an order that they consider to be unsafe, ineffective or inefficient. After-action reviews (AAR) have become commonplace at the conclusion of not only large emergency incidents, but all structure and wildland fires or other emergencies of magnitude. Formal AAR training has been delivered to all second-level leaders (battalion chiefs) in an effort to improve learning immediately following an incident. ►

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Each member has a specific responsibility or area to manage. One member is the primary point-of-contact (POC) for the L-280 training curriculum; one member is the POC for the L-380 training curriculum, etc. The training curriculum POCs are responsible for all aspects of organizing and managing the training deliveries. One committee member is also responsible for developing and distributing the LDPG quarterly newsletter "The Leader."

The LDPG also is tasked with assisting in the coordination of leadership training and the post-course support, using both internal and external tools such



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Nearly all of SDFD's 950-plus uniformed members have completed the *Human Factors* training and many have gone on to complete the next two levels, *Followership to Leadership* and *Fire Service Leadership*.

The LDPG is continuing to collect examples and observations of the desired cultural change within SDFD. Once the information has been collected and reviewed, it will be made available to any other organization with an interest in learning more about the SDFD leadership development/culture change initiative. This information will be useful internally as a method of measuring and benchmarking the

success of the program.

Quantifying the success of the initiative will always be a challenge, as absolutes are difficult to identify and measure, but our confidence remains high. Initial reported outcomes reflect results similar to those experienced by other agencies and departments that have used this leadership development program.

COLLABORATION IS KEY

As the SDFD program continues to grow and gain momentum, other regional, state and national agencies are following the success of the SDFD model and have begun their own internal programs. An informal exchange program has evolved among multiple agencies, with departments sending staff to participate in the SDFD courses and SDFD sending staff to participate when other departments host L-series courses.

Having outside agencies, such as law enforcement, lifeguard service, civilian staff and public works personnel, participate in the L-380 training has greatly increased the benefit by ensuring that neighboring jurisdictions and disciplines understand and practice shared concepts, skills and tools. In one of our first offerings of the *Fire Service Leadership* program, we invited San Diego Police Department (SDPD) and San Diego Lifeguard Service training officers to participate. It was so well received by the SDPD that ►



MCS built a modified version for law enforcement officers entitled *Beyond the Badge*. SDPD is now providing this program to its first- and second-level supervisors.

In addition, we receive a lot of interest from other fire service agencies throughout the United States. More than 25 agencies expressed interest after the original article on the L-series appeared in *FireRescue*, and several have participated in the San Diego deliveries, including FDNY, Baltimore, Virginia Beach and Montgomery County.

Many of the local and national fire service agencies that have been exposed to the San Diego effort are now having the “L” leadership curriculum delivered within their own agencies. These organizations are highly

diverse in size, organizational structure, history and level of commitment. Currently, the SDFD is looking into opportunities to expand its exchange program to include international participation.

JUST THE BEGINNING

In 2007, the SDFD worked with the California State Fire Marshal and Office of Homeland Security to gain approval for the *Fire Service Leadership* and *Incident Leadership* programs for inclusion in the DHS State-Sponsored Course Catalog. This cleared the way to use federal Homeland Security grant funding to pay for the classes (in all states), which has allowed for multiple deliveries. Without this funding, providing a comprehensive leadership program would have represented a significant challenge, especially during the current economic downturn.

The success of the NWCG and SDFD leadership programs recently caught the attention of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF). NFFF has long pointed to the need for a cultural change in the fire service as a key factor in reducing line-of-duty deaths (LODDs) and injuries. In fact, the first Life Safety Initiative is to “Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety; incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability and personal responsibility.” Our goal is that through continued discussions, the NFFF may find itself in a unique position to provide other fire service organizations support by way of making this program available and then evaluating effectiveness on a national level.

The SDFD’s program for cultural change and leadership development is building the future success of the SDFD by creating a culture that values communication skills and problem solving to complement technical skills. Education is just the beginning of SDFD leadership; it’s the building block. The true value is when leaders at all levels apply those skills at emergency incidents, in the firehouse or when interacting with the community. 🌐

Assistant Chief Brian Fennessy has 33 years of fire service experience. Chief Fennessy is a member of the International Association of Fire Chiefs and of the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Leadership Subcommittee and is the agency representative for Cities and Counties on the Committee. If you have questions about the SDFD experience or would like more information, e-mail him at bfennessy@sandiego.gov.