

Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

Some years ago, a good friend of mine left his house only to be notified a few minutes later that it was on fire. He immediately returned and watched firefighters attempt to extinguish the fire and minimize the damage.

Fighting fires is an interesting profession. It requires firefighters to travel to any location in the district at a moments notice and diffuse a dangerous situation.

Core workers in charge...

Sometimes supervisors feel like they spend their days running back and forth trying to figuratively put out fires. Problems seem to pop up everywhere and there doesn't seem to be enough hours in a day to take care of them all.

Interestingly enough, I was recently told that when a real fire breaks out, it's not a supervisor that takes charge, but the first firefighter on the scene. Since the first one on the scene knows more about the situation than those that come later, including the captain or chief, that's the person who assumes command.

But how?

Consider the principles at work that make this system successful. Firefighters don't usually know what they will be up against until they arrive at the scene of the fire. If firefighters must know what to do under

any circumstance, there must be significant cross-training to ensure broad-based skills are possessed by all members of the crew.

What about leadership skills? Consider that if everyone has to be able to take charge at any given moment what kind of leadership training must be available and to whom it is offered. If it was only offered to the captain or chief, of what use would a firefighter be who first arrived on the scene? To be effective, all crew members must be capable of organizing and managing the work in any situation, at least on a temporary basis.

What about accountability and trust? If a firefighter couldn't be trusted to choose accountability for the kinds of life-threatening situations encountered by firefighters, the system would break down completely.

Firefighting 101 for supervisors...

Although few organizations operate under the same pressures as firefighters, there may be some useful lessons that can be applied to more common workplace situations. For example, considering your own work groups, what might be possible if all were trained in every job performed by the group? Might work processes operate more smoothly? Would there be less disruption when a member of the group was absent?

If all employees learned how to be a leader that could take charge whenever a problem arose, could problems be resolved more quickly and efficiently? Might work groups pull together to resolve crises with an understanding of what's required by each member to succeed?

A yellow suit and fire axe may not be the preferred equipment for work

each day. But perhaps there are a few fire fighting lessons that could be applied to the fires that have to be put out each day in the workplace

Trying it on for fit: Identify many of the typical problems at work that result in stalled work processes and inefficiencies. Make a list of knowledge, skills, experiences and other attributes that have prevented work group members from taking a stronger leadership role in those circumstances.

Describe the bottom line benefits of building a work group with many of the attributes of our firefighters. Determine what it would cost in terms of time and money to develop employees for greater accountability and trust.

Send an e-mail and let me know what you learn from your experiences. I would love to hear from you!

Kevin Herring is President of Ascent Management Consulting. Ascent specializes in creating business solutions through effective management, workplace cultures and organization systems. Kevin can be reached at 520-742-7300, kevinh@ascentmgt.com or www.ascentmgt.com.

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