

Mental toughness in the fire service

David Cain

Wednesday, October 11, 2017



On Sept. 28, I was up at 0430 listening to the rain fall and feeling winter's warnings. My wife, who gets up at 0330 every morning was off to the gym for her workout/run. The gym is close to home, so she returned to shower and get ready for her 10-hour day at work.

She has a work ethic that rivals anyone I have ever known. I often wonder

why some people can push so hard and never miss a beat. The answer to my question was in my office stacked under a bunch of notes I had written to myself. There I found an article on the "[7 Habits of People with Remarkable Mental Toughness](#)."

The following list is not my work, but I want to add some of my thoughts as it pertains to the fire service. Mental toughness precedes physical toughness. Without mental toughness, you will not achieve physical toughness. And those who are truly physically tough have incredible mental strength. They go hand in hand.

1. Always act as if you are in total control

This is a big one as it pertains to firefighters and the job they do. No one can lose their cool under fire. It can and will destroy the operation. Your ability to act and react, to read and size up the scene, and make intelligent decisions should occur in a controlled and calm manner.

I have seen several incidents where incompetent officers have lost their cool under pressure. And, in one case, an officer went haywire on more than one occasion. He was not a bad guy; he just did not have the confidence or mindset for being a fire officer.

On the other hand, I witnessed a lot of great firefighters who handled some intense situations with the cool and confidence of a bullfighter. If you are not in control of yourself, how can you lead or follow?

2. Put aside things you can't affect

Firefighters live in a para-military structure. In this structure, everyone has a job to do. That means that you should focus on your own job and understand the principles of leadership and followership.

Opinions can be loud, but they can also lead to a dysfunctional team. Stay the course and do not worry about what others are doing, unless it compromises the mission.

3. See the past as valuable training and nothing more

The past is gone and we cannot change it, but we can control our future. We have all heard that we learn more from failure than we do from our successes. Honest mistakes will happen in the fire service. So, learn and move on.

4. Celebrate the success of others

Promotions, awards and other achievements bestowed on fellow employees should be recognized and honored.

Firefighters, for the most part, are proud of what they do and who they are. Those who survive a grueling 15-week academy, a promotion to Engineer, Lieutenant, Captain or Chief Officer have worked hard for that title. We must honor the effort and celebrate the achievement.

5. Never allow yourself to whine, complain or criticize

No one likes a whiner. It is contrary to who we are and what we stand for. Yet we all know there are the few who complain about everything and anything. We also know there is no respect for them or their attitudes. They become a joke and are never relevant in a serious conversation.

It is not easy to bite the bullet when you think you have been wronged. However, the strength of your convictions will help overcome it, and you will keep it to yourself.

6. Focus only on impressing yourself

This one reminds me of a friend I knew for years but never knew his accomplishments. He was quiet and unassuming, yet he knew what he had done in his life. He was the strong, silent type that goes unnoticed. That is until the poop hits the fan.

He was an Army Ranger who saw combat and death. He rode undercover with a motorcycle gang and started a drug task force. He could build a house and fix a car. He could do damn near anything. And yet, he never spoke of what he had done. Eventually our trust in each other, and some good Scotch, revealed his story.

The moral of this one is no one likes a bragger, yet they seem to get the attention. Remember those who inspire you and drive to be like them.

7. Count your blessings

No matter how hard we try, we have our own limitations. I remember that day when I arrived in Boulder, Colorado, to take the written exam. The gymnasium was packed with hundreds of men and women. I thought to myself that there is no way I can make the cut.

The city was hiring 13 new recruits. The odds were stacked against me. Or so I thought. I had already taken the entrance test for six other departments.

I finally got my chance, and today I look back at a career that gave me so much. It had its ups and downs, but I do count my blessings that I got to be part of a profession that I honored, respected and loved.

About the Author



David Cain was deputy chief with the Boulder (Colo.) Fire Department for 34 years. Since his retirement in 2013, he has worked as a consultant for PSTrax.com, a cloud-based service that digitizes fire department apparatus and equipment checks. You can reach Chief Cain at david@pstrax.com or 303-972-9444.