

Leadership — Everyone Learns from a Mentor or Two

By Chief Bill Jenaway, PhD, CFOD, CFPS
Executive Vice President, VFIS Education, Training & Consulting

Whether they admit it or not, every good leader has had at least one good mentor. According to Wikipedia, a mentor can be a trusted friend, counselor or teacher, usually a more experienced person. There have also been some professions that have instituted mentoring programs where newcomers are matched with more experienced individuals, who advise them. These mentors also serve in leading by example. In almost all cases, individuals have benefitted from a mentoring relationship.

Dr. William F. Jenaway, CSP, CFO, CFPS, is Executive Vice President of VFIS Education and Training Services and has over 30 years of experience in safety and risk management in the insurance industry. Bill is also an adjunct professor in Risk Analysis at the Graduate School of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. He was named "Volunteer Fire Chief of the Year" as Chief of the King of Prussia (PA) Volunteer Fire Company, and is the author of the text, "Emergency Service Risk Management".

I am sure each of you reading this article has, at one time or another, had a mentor. It may have been a relative, a co-worker, a peer, or just a friend. Whatever the relationship, if the person had an impact on you by demonstrating a leadership skill or technique, there is great opportunity for you to investigate why it works, what made it effective, when to apply it and more.

As I think back in my career, there were a number of mentors who served me well, ranging from my father, who was a chief officer in my fire department, to my first chief other than my dad, to three managers I have had in my career and two others I have worked with on committees. Each had qualities that helped mold my skill, knowledge and performance as a leader. There were significant attributes that each exemplified that made a profound impact upon me. These were distinct for me, and included the ability to:

- be "cool" under pressure, leading resources during a major emergency
- know when to compliment or reward someone and when to discipline someone, using a progressive discipline process
- recognize when training was needed and to effectively discuss that training and performance enhancement needs with the person



- sense when to engage and disengage interaction with a person, as might be appropriate in a social or professional situation
- be identified by people as an individual one turns to for counsel, guidance, or an opinion
- lead by example

Interestingly, some of these individuals had a military background, while some did not. Some of these leaders were college-educated, and one did not finish high school. What I do know is that each one of them also had someone they had looked up to as a leader who had influenced their performance. Each of these leaders knew how and when to provide constructive comments and criticism. What I also recall is that these individuals had become expert at situational leadership—recognizing what to do and how to lead, based on the circumstances being encountered.

Given this personal experience, and understanding the impact of this leadership upon my involvement in the fire service, I am confident that learning from leaders who perform exemplarily in your viewpoint can have an immense impact upon you. What I ask you to consider is to think back in your career and identify a couple of mentors who have had a profound impact on your performance as a leader or as you are becoming a leader. Reach out to them now and ask questions about why they do the things they do, and what their perspective of successful leadership is.

What do you think? Send me an email at wjenaway@vfis.com. As we wrestle with the leadership performance of tomorrow's emergency service officers, you may agree, have a great idea or disagree entirely. Let's advance leadership by challenging each other to define it and make it a station-wide word. 🌟

Wikipedia reference: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mentor>