



Leadership & Managing People

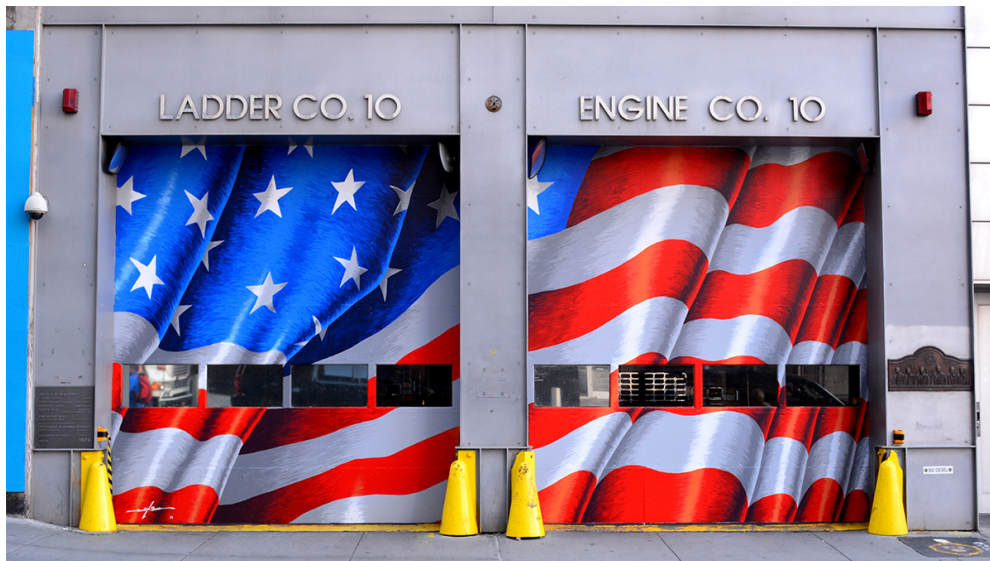
How the Fire Department of New York Changed After 9/11

by Gregory P. Shea, Andre Kotze, and Paul Brown

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Most of us remember September 11, 2001 as a horrific day. For the Fire Department of New York (FDNY), however, the horror stretched on. Fires around the World Trade Center Plaza, including two of the biggest in New York's history, took three days to subdue. It took three months to extinguish the smoldering fires in the stories upon stories of rubble, rubble which included more than 90 vehicles and spewed out toxins and hampered the search for identifiable remains. All the while, the FDNY was grieving the loss of 343 colleagues, including many of its officers and several of its top leaders, preparing for the possibility of additional

terrorist attacks, and tending to ongoing needs of its surviving firefighters – and of the massive and complex city it serves.

A monumental tragedy had ripped through the FDNY, one of the world's most renowned fire departments. Leadership challenges abounded that day and deep into the future. Simply carrying on would consume months, even years. While the FDNY was still putting out the fires at the World Trade Center, it had to decide how to rebuild. Should it seek to restore what had been, or should it build something different?

In the months and years to come, the FDNY took a long, hard look at itself. It utilized and invited outside perspectives, even as it grieved and bowed under the weight of months and months of funerals and the loss they represented, personally and professionally. Ultimately, the organization decided not to treat 9/11 as a black swan event. It converted an unspeakable tragedy into an occasion for learning and changing, for preparing for an expanded role in a most uncertain future. The department took in a wide array of perspectives. It commissioned McKinsey to [study both the day of the attacks and the FDNY as an organization](#). That six-month effort also led, in 2004, to the first FDNY [strategic plan](#). The [9/11 Commission](#) also offered relevant findings, as did the National Institute of Standards and Technology. In some cases, these reports highlighted and accelerated change efforts already under way. In other cases, they stimulated new efforts to change.

In the last 20 years, the FDNY has moved from a highly effective yet dated firefighting force to a modern emergency management and response organization. In 2015, it was ranked as [the top government employer](#) and the 17th overall best employer in the U.S. by *Forbes*.

We are five years into a research project exploring the FDNY's transformation and the lessons it offers other leaders. To date, we have spoken with more than 20 current and retired FDNY 9/11 first responders, collecting their insights and experiences in more than 40 hours of in-

depth, often quite personal interviews. Below are lessons derived from those interviews concerning not just leading through hard times, but also leading through those times to renewal.

To Lead Forward, First Regroup

It was around noon on 9/11. Both WTC towers were down. Building, vehicular, and human debris filled World Trade Center Plaza. Flames engulfed multistory buildings ringing the plaza and car fires burned seemingly everywhere. Firefighters, summoned and not, streamed into the area, many disconnected from a unit command, looking to contribute however they could, searching for missing colleagues and a role. The overall command structure lay in disarray, with hundreds of firefighters dead or missing, including the first deputy commissioner and three of the five ranking chief officers, and the command post destroyed in the collapse of the South Tower.

“There were a couple of hundred firefighters at the time. There’s anger, there is shock, there’s sadness. Every range of emotion just existed there,” recounted Chief of Department Peter Hayden (retired). “It was bad, believe me. I knew we were in a lot of trouble, but we stayed calm.”

Chief Hayden climbed atop a battered fire truck in the plaza. He wore the white helmet of a chief. He removed his jacket and exposed the white shirt that also identified him as a chief. A lieutenant handed him a megaphone.

Chief Hayden spoke above the cacophony and the carnage to the throng of milling firefighters, “Let’s have a moment of silence for those we lost today,” he said. Hundreds of firefighters stopped, removed their helmets, and went silent. “I just calmed everybody down. I just held [my helmet].” After perhaps two minutes, Chief Hayden said, “All right, we’re going to move forward here, we got work to do...Company officers come forward... We’re going to form up search teams... We’re going to give assignments out.”

Leading through crisis, its aftermath, and into renewal takes clarity of purpose and organization. Leaders must prioritize and address the tasks that need doing and energize their people to accomplish them.

But amidst trauma, leaders also must recognize, acknowledge, and accept the basic, even dominant emotional reality for their people — in this case, loss, grief, the desire to make a difference in a time of need, and feelings of impotence. Connecting with that hurt was part of securing the essence of the FDNY, a culture of comradeship and dedication that wove together more than 11,000 department members and enabled them to “move forward.”

Chief Hayden began the work of repairing the FDNY atop a demolished fire truck, organizing both the relationship work and the tasking work. He did so by working from a personal and shared understanding of his people and of the task at hand. He knew that his people were both hurt and that they needed to get organized. “That’s the only way that I could have done it. I couldn’t think — I needed help,” he told *Firehouse Magazine* in 2011. “It was a desperate measure.”

When we interviewed Chief Hayden, we asked him how he knew what to do in that pivotal moment of leadership. “I don’t know,” he said. “I was just trying to get everybody in my little world organized. It was a big scene, but in that corner, from that point on, we started to get some organization...and to make sure that nobody [else] gets hurt.”

And did it work? “In the aftermath of everything, when all was said and done, we never lost [another] firefighter [on 9/11],” Chief Hayden replied.

Accept Help ... Even From Unexpected Places

The magnitude of such a massive disaster soaked in quickly. Beyond the site and its immediate surroundings, leadership faced a number of additional complex challenges. How would they prevent cross-contamination of toxins from the WTC to firehouses, personal vehicles,

and firefighter homes? A massive and vertical city still needed its firefighters to extinguish fires and mitigate emergencies, every day, all day. Positions, especially leadership positions, needed filling. Lost experience needed replacing. Individual and collective trauma required treatment. A department needed rebuilding.

Some answers were homegrown, and some came from surprising places. For instance, the FDNY knew about incident management but not on a scale like this. Help, guidance, and a model for the future came from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), or “Smokey the Bear,” a nickname given to the representatives who showed up within days in forestry hats and green uniforms with tree emblems. For two decades, the USFS had operated incident management teams to handle the largest and most complex fires around the country. The forestry personnel quickly became central advisors to the project management work at hand, ultimately staying for about nine months.

In the ensuing years, the FDNY literally went to school on the Forestry Service’s incident management practices. FDNY officers trained in the classroom and shadowed Forest Service teams from Montana to Alaska. The FDNY has become a national incident management resource, answering the call to help in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, in New York after Superstorm Sandy, and in Surfside, Florida, after the deadly collapse of the Champlain Towers condominium. This August, FDNY teams assumed command of fighting the massive Woods Creek and Balsinger Fires in Montana.

Renewal Requires Investment Across the Board

The 343 fatalities that the FDNY suffered on 9/11 — let alone the subsequent retirements — carried a combined 4,400 years of experience. “We brought in I think 7,000 new firefighters over those 12, 13 years after the Trade Center,” Former FDNY Commissioner Sal Cassano told us. “We basically turned over our entire firefighting force.” Meanwhile, long-serving FDNY members put off retirement specifically to help rebuild the

department. Chief Medical Officer Kerry Kelly (retired) had put in more than 20 years of service before 9/11. “I was looking to leave,” she told us, “and then after 9/11, it became clear there was a reason to stay.”

The FDNY had to expand its training and mentoring programs to replace these losses. The fire academy recruit training program expanded from 13 weeks to 18 weeks, while training for new lieutenants went from four to six weeks (including much more leadership development) and for new captains from one to four weeks. Training for new chiefs was revised to include outside leadership instruction and increased significantly in overall length to eight weeks.

Many of the firefighters who didn’t retire became the officer corps. “Everybody was doing a job that was probably two or three years before their time, before they were ready,” said Former Chief of the Department, Ed Kilduff. In 2003, the department created the [Fire Officers Management Institute \(FOMI\)](#), partnering with Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs to teach everything from strategic planning to communications to project and performance management. It selected people for training at the Naval War College and West Point, and it developed a relationship with Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management.

By 2016, the FDNY had changed dramatically — its broad array of investments having paid off. It had built a new \$4.2 million high-tech simulation center and begun using data analytics to assign a fire risk score and prioritize buildings for inspection. It also engaged in additional training with other services (e.g., NYPD), altered its command structure to aid coordination across units and city departments, reworked its on-scene protocols, revamped its communication technology, reconstructed its marine division, and enhanced support services for firefighters and their families.

Tend to the People

The FDNY had a longstanding culture of stoic, individual self-reliance. Previously, “Therapy came in a bottle,” as Lt. (Ret.) Ray Brown described the culture. But the psychological toll and hurt of 9/11 was too big for too many. Norms needed to change — and fast.

Firefighters moved slowly to avail themselves of the highly trained, professional therapeutic support services offered by departmental counseling. So, the FDNY took a novel approach: It trained retired firefighters in basic counseling and placed them in firehouses as peer counselors. Use of counseling increased.

The impact was apparent and lasting. One of us (Paul) who was an FDNY captain at the time, recalled that he felt no shame about going to counseling and that it almost felt as if you were tempting fate if you didn’t utilize the services. Today, FDNY veterans of the Twin Towers speak of the depth and availability of counseling. For example, Capt. (Ret.) Kerry Hollywood told us: “It is different. Before [it was] ‘Deal with it.’ That was it. Now...they’ll send counselors into the firehouse....If you want to talk to somebody, you talk to a counselor, and they could take you off the [work schedule] chart for as long as you need to be taken off the chart.”

Today, an estimated 75% of the firefighters who toiled at Ground Zero suffer from related chronic diseases. In February 2002, the FDNY formalized policies to provide assistance to any firefighter who was injured or fallen on 9/11 and to their families. It covers everything from medical expenses to transporting children to school to assistance with burdensome paperwork to a burial with full honors.

“I think [FDNY] recovered when Chief Nigro started this family assistance...We’re going to take care of these guys that are dying. That’s when I said, ‘We’re stronger than we were,’” said Lt. (Ret.) Glenn Rohan.

Integrate the Event into Your Collective Identity

Weaving so staggering an event as 9/11 into the fabric of individual and collective identity necessitates skilled balancing. On the one hand, a traumatic event changes everything. For example, Lt. (Ret.) Ray Brown recalled that firefighters would commonly use the parting words, “See you at the big one.” After 9/11, Brown told us “We stopped saying, ‘See you at the big one.’” On the other hand, these events cannot become the be all and end all. “I didn’t want to be defined by 9/11, to be my 15 minutes of fame” as former FDNY firefighter, Louis Giaconnelli told us. Neither did the department.

That’s the challenge for an individual, a department, or an organization emerging from trauma. Denial of hard times means compartmentalizing the trauma (or trying to) by placing it in a box — but the box leaks. On the other hand, living and reliving the trauma turns the person or the organization into nothing but the trauma.

Leaders should help their people place themselves in a flow of events that stretches into the past as well as forward into the future. That narrative provides context and meaning, it strengthens a common purpose, and it facilitates healing.

Pulling the past into today, any of the many visitors to FDNY headquarters, an administrative and medical care center, cannot miss the wall filled with a bronze plaque listing all 343 lost firefighters or the posters throughout the FDNY with the pictures and names of every firefighter lost at the WTC. Looking into tomorrow, all FDNY new recruits, or “probies,” receive their training at the Fire Academy, a campus filled with artifacts and memorials of 9/11 and yet the message about looking forward, about carrying a legacy into the future could hardly be clearer. For instance, probies do their pull-ups on bars secured on columns made from the wreckage of the Twin Towers. A plaque at the base articulates the connection of the past, through the present, into the future: “From those who have in the past to those who will continue to give in the

future, be proud, be brave, be strong, but most of all be prepared. FDNY, Never Forget, 9/11/01.”

Perhaps the strongest connection between the fallen and the future comes from the growing number of FDNY firefighters — now totaling 65 — who lost a firefighting parent as a result of 9/11. When asked why they joined the FDNY, it usually comes down to a version of living in conjunction with an honored and beloved parent, of moving into the future with them close by. As firefighter James Tancredi, who lost his father Vincent to 9/11-related brain cancer, told the *New York Post*, “I wish we could have conversations about things that happen on the job. But doing it makes me feel ... whole.” A recent probie class included 21 such class members or, as some FDNY firefighters term them, “9/11 orphans.”

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New York City could have defiantly reconstructed the Twin Towers, made them identical, or the same but taller, bigger. It consciously decided to think carefully about how best to rebuild and did not merely reconstruct what had been.

Similarly, the FDNY could have defiantly restored itself to pre-9/11 operation. It could have sought comfort and triumph in pulling the old FDNY through the crucible of 9/11 and the days immediately following. Instead, FDNY leadership led the FDNY in looking at itself and in converting a tragedy of the very first order into an occasion for learning and changing, for preparing for an expanded role in an unknown future.

Perhaps the biggest lesson that FDNY extracted from 9/11 came down to the words of Lt. (Ret.) Ray Brown: “No matter where you work, you need to be ready for whatever.” That lesson guided the FDNY’s strategy for leading toward what might come next.

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