

Vulnerability's Impact on Effective Leadership

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of the Requirements for the
Executive Fire Officer Program

by
Scott L. Booth

National Fire Academy

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Abstract

Fire service leaders are often opposed to expressing vulnerability directly with their subordinates, but doing so has a significant impact on their effectiveness. This study seeks to answer the following questions. Does vulnerability make a leader more effective? Do followers see vulnerability in their leader(s) as an asset or a liability? Do followers have different expectations of their leaders depending on the leader's rank? Ten members of Gig Harbor Fire & Medic One were interviewed using a generic qualitative inquiry. All interviews occurred virtually at a time selected by the interviewee. The results indicated that a relationship with one's supervisor was most important and that vulnerability was key to establishing a trusting bond. Trust requires honesty, and honesty requires at least an element of vulnerability. Followers expected all leaders to be competent but only expected personal investment from their immediate supervisor. The majority interviewed stated that vulnerability was an asset, with the more junior members worried that it could make the leader appear weak. All members shared that it did not take much to establish relationships with supervisors, but shared struggles were particularly powerful. Most interviewees agreed that familiarity with a leader makes it easier to follow their direction on the fireground, but only if previous experience(s) were positive. This information serves as an important roadmap for new and experienced officers alike. Investment in one's direct reports pays dividends both on and off the fireground and makes team dynamics more fulfilling for everyone.

Keywords: leadership, vulnerability, fire service, relationship

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership is one of the most significant challenges leaders face when interacting with those they oversee. This may be even more true when leading people in the high-consequence environment of the fire service. Research in other industries, which will be discussed in the following chapters, suggests that a key attribute of effective leadership includes one's willingness to be vulnerable directly with those they lead.

The fire service presents an interesting dichotomy. Leadership on the fire ground requires a literal life-or-death level of trust between leader and follower. However, interactions in the fire station and during routine daily activities are often guarded and hesitant, damaging the relationship and the necessary trust in one another. As a formal leader in my fire department, I have experienced crew continuity and culture that transcended traditional metrics and surpassed my expectations for the ways my crew took care of each other and performed together on incident scenes. This crew dynamic existed at least in part because of my willingness to be vulnerable. A leader's willingness to be vulnerable is critical in terms of building trust and developing a crew culture of love and respect.

This study will utilize the generic qualitative research model, using interviews with line personnel from a small to medium-sized suburban career fire department in the Pacific Northwest. This research will attempt to answer the question of whether vulnerability makes a leader more effective. I will also endeavor to either confirm or refute whether our company officers and firefighters see vulnerability as an asset or a liability in their leaders.

Background

Much research exists outside of the fire service regarding the positive effects of vulnerability in leadership. First, the fire service must agree on a definition of what vulnerability is. Lopez (2018) offers that vulnerability is “a willingness to be transparent and emotionally exposed in a relationship with another individual, with the possibility of being hurt or attacked” (p. 4). If we can agree on this definition and apply it to other research works, the problems begin to take shape.

Neinaber et al. (2015) state that “vulnerability and trust are distinct concepts but often times mentioned together in regard to leader-follower relationships” (p. 4). They go on to discuss that while trust and leadership are well understood, vulnerability’s impact on that trust remains more ambiguous. Military and scholarly examples are provided to better contextualize their position. Another author purports that leaders who exhibit humility to their followers, which incorporates vulnerability, lead to greater trust. Examples like owning one’s mistakes, embracing their weaknesses openly, and acknowledging that one needs help to succeed are all ways for a leader to express humility (Oc et al., 2020). Building out the idea of humility a bit more, Jackson (2021) shares that “humility has not been particularly valued in Western philosophy or education” (p. 26). As it relates to the fire service, are leaders’ unwillingness to be vulnerable a by-product of our society, or is there something specific about our service and work environment that stifles a leader’s humility and vulnerability?

Significance of the Study

Despite the relative lack of peer-reviewed research on the topic in our industry, there is no outright absence of literature attempting to change the hearts and minds of fire service leaders. One such article that relates vulnerability to courage comes from Chief (Dr.) Brett Ellis in the May 2021 issue of *Firehouse* magazine. Dr. Ellis (2021) states “Vulnerability is scary. In fact, vulnerability and fear are “in it” together. So, if you can recognize fear, then you surely can recognize courage and become vulnerable in spite of it” (para. 12). This idea supports my contention that vulnerability is not a weakness, but rather a show of strength, and strength is what the fire service praises and rewards in its leaders in so many ways. If this study can help improve the impact of fire service leaders, be they company officers, battalion or shift commanders, or command staff executive leaders in being vulnerable, then our service will become more effective and resilient.

Tying this idea into two of the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) guiding documents, the EFO program handbook and the *21st Century Fire and Emergency Services* white paper gives my hypothesis greater credibility and serves to validate the need for more research. In the EFO handbook, under program outcomes, the second bullet bears relevance to this notion; it reads “enhance personal and organizational ethics, integrity, accountability, and performance to secure public trust” as a goal (US Fire Administration, 2023, p. 8). Fostering greater leadership effectiveness directly impacts this outcome. The *21st Century Fire & Emergency Services* white paper states that the fire service needs to “Promote an organizational environment that is adaptable, open to change, innovative, and focused on continuous improvement” (Center for Public Safety Excellence [CPSE], 2020, p. 12). Continuous improvement and an openness to

change require a level of introspection that is difficult to achieve without vulnerability. I contend, like the consensus of the CPSE did in its guiding document, that if the fire service is unable to adapt to modern leadership principles, which include vulnerability, then we will struggle to execute on the critical issues of adaptability, openness, and innovation.

Problem Statement

The problem is that fire service leaders are often guarded and closed off from being vulnerable in front of those they lead, undermining their credibility and trustworthiness, thereby compromising their effectiveness both on and off the fireground. The men and women working in the fire and emergency services profession do so in a high-stakes environment, where confidence and trust in one's leader are critical. Intentional vulnerability is required to develop that trust whenever possible, instead of waiting for the moment where it matters the most and expecting followers to hesitantly engage.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this generic qualitative research study is to better understand how company officers and firefighters feel about their leaders (chief officers or lieutenants) exhibiting vulnerability. This study will take place with the employees of a small to medium-sized suburban career fire department in the Pacific Northwest, interviewing battalion chiefs, lieutenants, and firefighters.

Research Question(s) or Hypothesis

The first research question that will guide the interviews is whether vulnerability makes a leader more effective. Another research question to be answered is whether company officers and/or

firefighters see vulnerability from their leaders as an asset or a liability. Finally, this research will attempt to determine if there are different expectations for leaders based on their rank (i.e.: battalion chiefs versus lieutenants).

Summary

Several disciplines have studied the effect of vulnerability on their leaders' effectiveness. There have even been isolated fire service journal articles that suggest there is a place for vulnerability amongst fire service leaders. Moving forward into Chapter 2, I will take a deeper dive into the literature that currently exists and try to make an argument that the fire service would benefit from similar perspectives. In Chapter 3 an in-depth overview of the research methodology will be offered. In Chapter 4, the research findings will be reviewed. Finally, in Chapter 5, conclusions will be presented, and any recommendations made.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There are numerous authors and speakers who present on the topic of leadership in the fire service, but few focus on or even mention the role of expressed vulnerability in building trust and highly effective teams. Meyer et al. (2017) offer that “to be honest and open means to accept responsibility and expose one’s own mistakes or weaknesses, in other words, to show vulnerability” (p. 3). Outside of this industry, individuals have paid much more attention to how vulnerability affects team dynamics and how the leader is viewed. This study will explore the topic in various contexts, and ultimately tie these philosophies back to the fire service to either validate or refute vulnerability’s importance.

The disciplines represented by the research below primarily came from leaders who are actively employed and engaged with subordinates, including senior executives. These papers spanned different types of businesses, including education, consulting, and retail grocery, and varied across multiple cultures around the world. One of the papers referenced was a meta-analysis of multiple research offerings on the topic. Finally, three of the included references came from executive-level leadership programs, including a business school and a Master of Business Administration program.

Existing Literature

Several themes are revealed when comparing various research offerings on the topic of vulnerability and leadership. First, a leader’s willingness to show genuine vulnerability is not

common, nor is it socially acceptable in many cultures. Corlett et al. (2021) share that “... senior executives are not expected to be vulnerable” (p. 425). They explain that leaders need to “learn to be different” by leaning into vulnerability, but also acknowledge that there are times when they would choose not to be different. Oc et al. (2020) state that “when we feel that we might be socially excluded or devalued by others, we are likely to act in ways that we think others want or expect, even if this means being inauthentic” (p. 3). In other words, social pressures created by cultural norms may influence a leader’s preferred relational expression, for fear of repercussions that could follow the expression of vulnerability.

The next theme that emerged was that vulnerability requires courage. Lopez leads with a purpose statement that directly explores how vulnerability interrelates with courage, as well as other-centered calling and leadership differentiation (2018). Regarding courage specifically, Lopez (2018) further explains that “due to the possible costs associated with vulnerability, courage appears to be one necessary ingredient in the vulnerability equation” (p. 11). Lopez also offers that often leaders are expected to be all-knowing and in control, whether that perspective is self-imposed or otherwise, which makes choosing vulnerability even more challenging. This study assessed 296 “self-identified leaders” who were all part of an education program (Lopez, 2018, p. ix). Another study that focused on courage spoke of the research participants “engage[ing] in relational vulnerability by expressing emotions, acknowledging social support, claiming vulnerability, and risking possibilities of harm, loss, and connection” (Corlett et al., 2021, p. 430). Few would argue that those circumstances would not require courage from the leader willing to engage.

Other research highlighted the reality that a leader/ follower relationship ebbs and flows, and that vulnerability in some ways complicates that fact. By engaging in a more meaningful relationship between leader and follower, “the follower may continue to reevaluate the costs and benefits of sustaining the relationship, despite the fact that it is an increasingly higher quality exchange relationship” (Scandura et al., 2008, p. 107). They further explain that with greater trust, which is a natural byproduct of increased vulnerability, come greater expectations, which the follower or leader may decide negates the value. Scandura et al. (2008) state that “from a practitioner standpoint, this finding suggests that both members and leaders in a high-quality exchange relationship should be conscious of the other party’s continual weighing of costs and benefits toward sustaining the relationship” (p. 107). In reading this, the term work-life balance stands out.

Another commonality amongst existing research is the direct relationship between the leader’s willingness to exhibit vulnerability and the psychological safety that is created in the relationship. Mane (2019) defines psychological safety as “feeling able to show and express yourself without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career and is seen as the foundation for high-performing teams” (p. 2). Mane’s (2019) study collected data from 28 managers and 48 direct reports in a retail grocery setting and concluded that “vulnerability predicted psychological safety” by the end of the project (p. 2). Another study points to an intimacy that is created “by surfacing the importance of honesty, openness, challenge, and vulnerability, in creating trusted and safe identity workspaces” (Corlett et al., 2021, p. 426). Interestingly, challenge is acknowledged as a key factor in a safe workplace, which ironically leads to more effective problem-solving and decision-making. Oc et al. (2020) contend “that

humble leaders are likely to weaken followers' relational dependence on their leaders and increase their sense of safety in part by 'giving away power'" (p. 20). This stance is predicated on the key aspect of a leader's humility being expressed through vulnerability.

Next, another similarity among the research reviewed was the notion that vulnerability leads to authentic relationships. This is critical for effective teams, especially during difficult situations or circumstances. "It is possible that humble leaders could help followers feel less vulnerable, more authentic, and less depleted, and thus better able to manage their uncertainty during economic turmoil" (Oc et al., 2020, p. 20). Lopez (2018) explains, in the context of practicing and displaying courage and vulnerability, that "whether it is during a weekly team meeting or in a one-on-one setting with their direct reports, leaders can act courageously in a step towards authenticity and vulnerability" (p. 40). It is the leader's responsibility to step out into uncomfortable territory, taking any available opportunity to express vulnerability to foster healthy workplace relationships.

Finally, highly effective teams engage in healthy conflict on a routine basis. This would not be possible without trust and vulnerability. Nienaber et al. (2015) posit that "a leader should behave in a benevolent way towards his followers and should not take advantage of a follower's vulnerability due to hierarchical issues or other dependencies" (p. 11). The safety between a leader and follower flows in both directions, with either at risk at various points. Elgayeva (2021) suggests that "by embracing vulnerability, leaders[sic] step into a dynamic range of conflicting complementarities quantifying and qualifying the tensions that vulnerability offers" (p. 485). In other words, vulnerability opens a team's interactions in a healthy way to work

through complex problems, despite any tension(s) that may surface. Lastly, change is an expectation in any situation and organization. For change to occur in productive ways, conflict usually precedes these shifts in organizational priorities or processes. Lopez (2018) offers that “vulnerability opens up the possibility of more deeply rooted change, even when change may be difficult” (p. 8). In other words, engaging in vulnerability offers opportunities for everyone to weigh in, which translates to better buy-in once a decision is made.

Synthesis of the Existing Literature

When considering the relationship between vulnerability and effective leadership in the context of existing research, several over-arching themes begin to materialize. First, vulnerability is generally not a highly regarded trait in modern society. Choosing to lead with vulnerability goes against the norm and infers a level of risk. Doing so requires courage, both in opening oneself up, as well as in how the follower may perceive the change in relational dynamic. Even when leader/follower relationships are clarified in the context of a willingness to express vulnerability, requiring constant attention and respect, the level of connection that follows remains fragile and open to change. If vulnerability is chosen and accepted by both the leader and direct report(s), an increased level of psychological safety will surely follow, leading to greater connection and cooperation. This high-quality relationship breeds greater authenticity and productivity. Finally, teams who operate under these shared conditions engage in more frequent and effective healthy conflict as a result.

One area missing in the existing research is greater clarity about which comes first. Does vulnerability offered preemptively result in greater trust and more effective leadership, or does

leadership offered with respect and humility create an environment that fosters increased vulnerability by those involved? The stark absence of studies focused on the unique teams and the environment of the fire service reveals a gap in the literature. Further research is needed to help fire service leaders better understand the power of expressed vulnerability, as well as empirical research to provide greater insight into the cause and effect of vulnerability and trust.

Summary

By surveying and analyzing existing research into vulnerability and its impact on leadership, the following study will either validate or refute the hypothesis that the two are directly interrelated in a positive way. The research served to validate the purpose statement and support the need for more academic study into how this philosophy relates to the fire service. In Chapter 3, I will offer an in-depth, detailed explanation of the components of my study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Design

For this study, the researcher will use the generic qualitative inquiry approach. The research problem is abstract enough that multiple interviewees could refer to subtleties around the idea using words that are not identical to the definition offered in Chapter 1 (Lopez, 2018, p. 4). Therefore, the characteristics of this type of research methodology are ideal for collecting data on a study of this type. Interviews will happen virtually in similar conditions; the researcher's involvement is key to the study's success as the interviewer; and the power of deduction will be used to identify patterns or themes in the results. Additionally, the researcher must keep an open mind to better understand the responses to the interview questions and to identify meanings that may emerge unexpectedly. Finally, qualitative research requires the researcher to reflect on their involvement in collecting the data and how it may influence the results, which leads to a high-level understanding of the issue being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

A key element of qualitative research regards the researchers themselves and a term called reflexivity. I am a 27-year veteran in the fire department being used as the study location, having served as a firefighter/paramedic, lieutenant, battalion chief, and currently as an assistant chief. I also filled the role of president of the labor union for a decade and was the founder of the organization's peer support team. Reflexivity requires the researcher to recognize past experiences with those being interviewed, as well as how those experiences create biases and guide interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I will maintain objectivity throughout the

research process, despite my strong belief in the importance of vulnerability in effective leadership.

Population and Sample Size

The study location is Gig Harbor Fire and Medic One, a small to medium-sized suburban career fire department in the Pacific Northwest. The inclusion criteria selected included voluntary participants in the roles of firefighter, firefighter/paramedic, lieutenant, and battalion chief, in any grouping, with no other parameters being considered. Additionally, if any lateral-entry members volunteer, additional information may be gleaned by comparing their current organization to their previous one. Once permission to survey this department's members was granted by the fire chief, the researcher submitted an all-call for participants via email and text message, and once selected, respondents were assigned a number to be used throughout the remainder of the study to protect their personal identifying information (PII). The ideal sample size is 10-12 interviewees, and this study was capped at 15 volunteers. Incentives were only offered if at least 10 members did not volunteer in the first solicitation.

Instrument(s)

Once the sample participants were identified, everyone received a consent form developed by the National Fire Academy (NFA) via email (Appendix A). The research instrument to be used in this study is one-on-one interviews, with the interview questions developed by the researcher (Appendix B). The questions were field-tested by Professor of Political Science and Environmental Studies Chris Koski at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Additionally, the questions were reviewed by Dr. Marion Blackwell, faculty instructor for the EFO program

through Columbia Southern University. All documentation created for and utilized in this study will be stored in a password-protected OneDrive for four consecutive years following completion of the EFO program.

Research Process

The research questions were developed by the researcher to better understand how subordinates view their supervisors in terms of relatability and how expressions of vulnerability are perceived (Appendix B). An interview guide was created which included an introduction, the interview questions, as well as closing comments, and a review of the next steps (Appendix C). The field-tested questions utilized in the interviews are as follows:

- 1) How long have you been in the fire service?
 - a. Volunteer vs. career
 - b. Department size(s)
 - c. How many departments (if more than one, why did you switch)?
- 2) What is your current position in your department?
- 3) Why did you originally look for a career in the fire service?
- 4) What characteristics do you admire in a leader?
 - a. What traits do you find distasteful?
 - b. If vulnerability is mentioned or inferred, why (pro or con)?
- 5) What about your leader(s) makes them trustworthy or difficult to trust?
- 6) Do you have different expectations of your leaders depending on what role/ rank they fulfill? Explain.
 - a. Lieutenant vs. battalion chief (or above)?

- 7) Do you see a leader's willingness to be vulnerable as an asset or a liability? Why?
- 8) What activities or interactions serve to strengthen the relationship between yourself and your leader?
- 9) Are you more willing to follow the direction of a leader on the fireground if you have an existing familiarity with them before the incident? Why or why not?

The interviews were conducted virtually, with the interviewees being on or off duty, at their discretion. The interviewees had the freedom to choose when they would be interviewed, and they selected the environment that had them most at ease and minimized any undo impact on their families. The researcher took detailed notes during the interviews to cross-reference with the completed transcriptions. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed using software created for that purpose. Coding was instituted to better identify themes and patterns, either in support of the hypothesis or in contrast to it.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were reminded that their inclusion in the research study was at their sole discretion and that they could withdraw at any point for any reason. Additionally, interviewees were told that they could choose to skip questions if they felt uncomfortable answering.

Researcher bias was recognized and acknowledged in the introduction of the one-on-one interviews. Interviewees were expressly told that no adverse ramifications would result in their voluntary participation in the study. Furthermore, unless a member chose to conduct their interview while on duty, there would be no way for any other member of the

department to know whether they participated or not. It was also explained that no favorable or special treatment would result from agreeing to participate. The researcher approached each interviewee with an open mind, avoided becoming defensive, and did not take any answers or feedback personally during the process.

Summary

Utilization of a generic qualitative inquiry provided the most flexible platform to collect results on this abstract topic. Interviewees were solicited for voluntary inclusion in the study, which took place in a one-on-one virtual interview. Participants were assigned numbers to protect their PII, and strict confidentiality was maintained throughout. Results were transcribed and coded to identify patterns and themes to improve understanding. The results are explained in greater detail in the chapter to follow.

CHAPTER 4: STUDY RESULTS

Introduction – Demographics of the Participants

The research in this study was collected at Gig Harbor Fire and Medic One (GHFMO) in Gig Harbor, Washington. GHFMO is a small to medium-sized suburban career fire department that also provides advanced life support ambulance services. Ten frontline members were interviewed, having been self-selected through their willingness to volunteer. No incentives were offered. Seven of those interviewed were firefighters or firefighter/ paramedics; two were lieutenants (company officers); one was a battalion chief (Figure 1). Four participants came from other career fire departments (lateral entry candidates), and one was female. The total fire service experience of those interviewed was evenly split, as detailed in the graph below (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Rank or Role

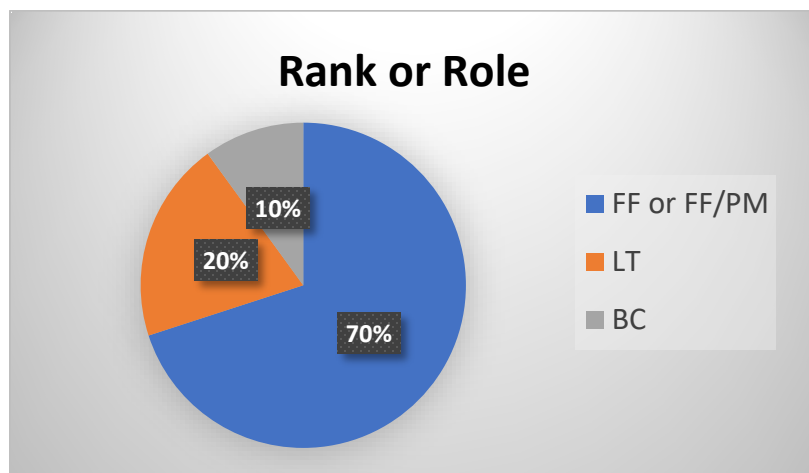


Figure 2*Years of Experience*

The research questions to be answered began with whether vulnerability makes a leader more effective. Next, the questions sought to identify if company officers or firefighters see vulnerability from their leader(s) as an asset or a liability. Lastly, this study tried to answer if there are different expectations of one's leader based on rank (i.e.: battalion chiefs versus lieutenants).

Research Results

Traits

Most of those interviewed indicated that a leader's intention to be relational was the most admired trait. Interviewee 1 stated that the leaders they remember most fondly were those who "care deeply about their people," and "are willing to establish those relationships." Interviewee 10 shared that "the things that really set leaders apart are the leaders that take an interest in their people, [and] you can tell care about their people because that creates buy-in from the people

they lead.” Interviewee 3 said, “The thing that I admire in a leader is someone who takes an interest in his or her people.” When viewed from the opposite perspective, the leadership traits most disliked included micromanagement, arrogance, and a lack of confidence. Interviewee 6 shared that they “don’t want certain levels of leadership worrying about minimal things as they get higher in rank.” Interviewee 7 stated that “some of the bigger ones [traits] that I find distasteful are overconfidence, arrogance, and ignorance.”

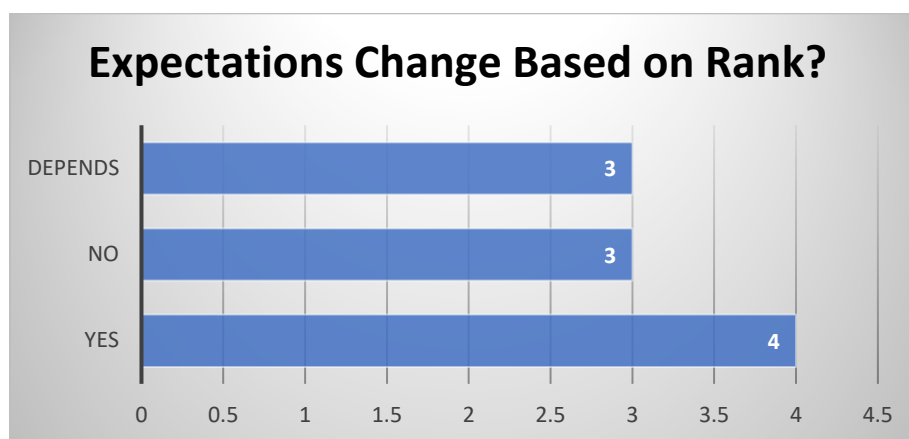
Honesty was the most important leadership trait when viewed through trustworthiness. Interviewee 10 said “Integrity is also one of those non-negotiable things,” and “It’s [trust] very easy to lose and extremely difficult to get back.” Interviewee 8 conveyed a story about an officer who told his crew that he had been lacking motivation recently, stating, “I appreciate the honesty and it made me trust him a little bit more...”. Interviewee 10 shared, “Integrity is more important the higher you get because you don’t have those personal relationships to fall back on.” Conversely, those interviewed identified manipulateness, selfishness, and volatility as the traits that eroded trust. Interviewee 9 stated, “Everybody is entitled to good days and bad days... But a leader who has really high highs and really low lows... a volatile leader can be hard to trust.” Interviewee 1 shared a story of a supervisor he had who, when he was working on a project, “he basically sabotaged it, took it over, and then took credit for it.” Interviewee 7 shared when referring to past leaders and how they would treat subordinates, that he lost trust when “they detect[ed] vulnerability, they attacked it.”

Expectations of a Leader

The results regarding the expectations of a leader depending on rank were mixed and nuanced. The majority agreed that competence was required no matter the leader's level, while a third felt that expectations increased with rank (Figure 3). Most also expected more “personal investment” from their immediate supervisor, regardless of rank. Interviewee 9 offered two adages on this topic; “To whom much is given, much is expected” and “The higher you go, the brighter the light.” Interviewee 2 shared that when newer in the fire service, he would have said yes (different expectations). But now that he is more experienced, he feels that expectations should be the same, to include informal leaders. He said, “I think at this point the expectations should be the same. Their job description, scope, and level of responsibility are different, but I don’t think a lieutenant should be held to a lower standard... and the same goes for senior firefighters.”

Figure 3

Expectations Based on Rank

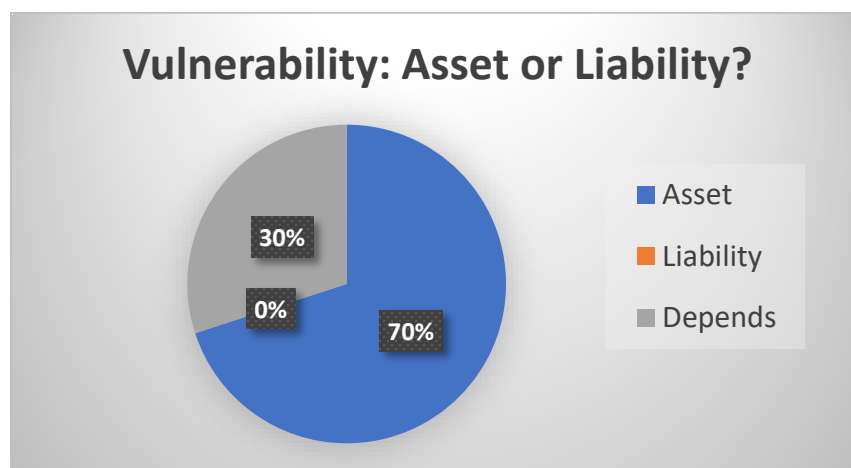


Vulnerability

Seven of the ten interviewees enthusiastically answered that they saw vulnerability as an asset rather than a liability, with the remaining three answering that it depends (Figure 4). Those who stated that it depended were focused on a perception that vulnerability on the fireground could convey a lack of confidence or relative weakness.

Figure 4

Vulnerability: Asset or Liability



Expanding on the vulnerability question, Interviewee 9 stated, “I think maybe in certain situations you might get a certain individual that might take it out of context.” Interviewee 10 said, “It becomes a liability when it is emotional,” referring to an example of a leader making an unreasonable decision because of an emotional bias. The majority shared that vulnerability was an asset, with interviewee 5 saying “Definitely an asset” and interviewee #3 stating “100% an asset.” Interviewee 7, a senior company officer himself, shared that “being vulnerable with them [his crew] elicits trust very quickly.” Interviewee 9 offered that a leader's willingness to express vulnerability “gives everybody else in the organization... their own permission to be

vulnerable.” He went on to further explain that “out of vulnerability is where some really cool relationships... exponential growth as an organization and as a team can happen.” Interviewee 1 said, “You need to be able to show the people that you’re leading that you’re not always right, and you’re willing to admit [it].” He went on to say, “It’s very unreasonable to expect anybody to not be vulnerable.” Interviewee 10 explained that vulnerability expressed on a personal level with a subordinate can be “incredibly useful, necessary even to be a good leader.” Interviewee 3 shared an example where a leader said, “If you see something that’s going to make the incident or the team unsafe, please let me know.” This example was during a wildland deployment where the officer lacked experience, and the respondent believed that “vulnerability strengthen[ed] the team.”

Ways to Strengthen Relationships/ Trust

When considering the interactions or activities that strengthen one’s relationship with their leader, interviewees’ replies expressed that showing an interest in the subordinate's personal life, spending time together, and overcoming shared struggles were the most consistent ways to achieve that. Time spent as a crew away from the workplace was also identified as valuable, but several of the respondents stated that it was neither expected nor required. Interviewee 3 stated, “Anything the leader can do to spend time with his or her people is going to benefit. Working out together, cooking together.” Interviewee 10 shared that “anything that you intentionally do together” improves the relationship. He also offered “Doing difficult things together creates sort of a deeper bond.” Interviewee 9 said, “When you are working on something with your leader that’s challenging, and you get to work through something... ‘get dirty a little bit’... that builds and strengthens the relationship.” Interviewee 7 suggested “It’s simple. Like asking ‘What’s

going on with your children?’ or ‘How’s your family?’” He continued that it offers the leader the opportunity to “have some empathy,” and “makes it easier to give them some grace.”

Interviewee 2 provided examples of activities to build relationships, which included “play[ing] pickleball,” and “interacting at social events.” Interviewee 5 also listed some examples, including “training activities, working out, and day-to-day activities in the station.”

Impact of Relationship on Willingness to Follow

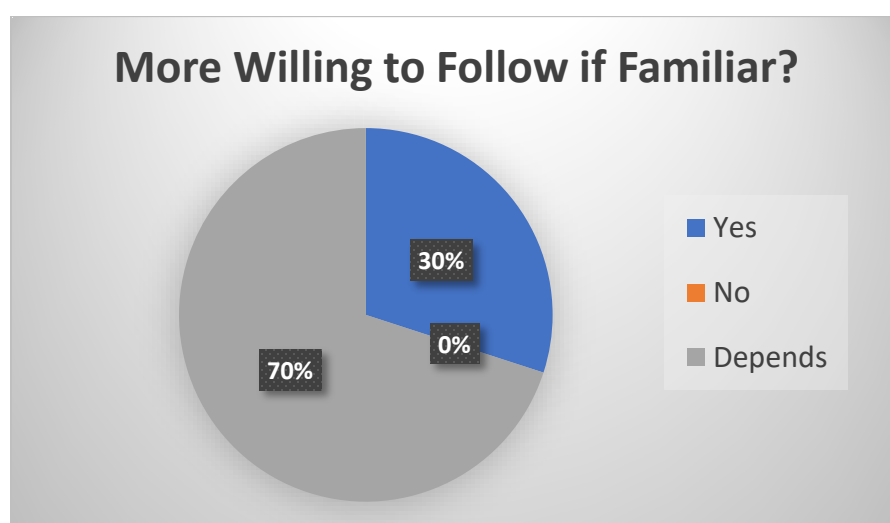
Most respondents indicated that it depends when considering whether familiarity with a leader makes them (the respondent) more willing to follow on the fireground (Figure 5). The most common perspective was that they would follow a lawful order, but there were instances where familiarity would impact that willingness. Many stated that they were part of a paramilitary structure, and following orders from higher-ranked individuals was part of that structure.

However, there was nuance in the responses collected. Interviewee 4 stated, “If I have that trust in the person, I know how they operate... They’re not going to get me hurt or killed either,” then they would immediately follow without a second thought. He went on to further explain when accepting an order from an unfamiliar leader, “It’s not like you can just ignore it. But there’s definitely going to be those questions in your head,” which may slow or impact one’s performance. Interviewee 8 had a very pragmatic approach to this concept; “Yes, if I trust them, but no if I don’t.” Interviewee 6 offered, “I do give respect to higher rank, higher leadership. They didn’t just get there with good looks.” Additionally, he said, “I think without the experience it might make me do a double take... just to make sure I’m understanding and receiving the order.” Interviewee 2 said, “Well, yes and no. If all the positive aspects we’ve talked about are there, and you know that leader very well, that’s only going to benefit the

situation.” From the opposite perspective, “But it can go both ways because you can have someone that’s got a lot of the negatives... and there’s not trust.” He summed up his point of view with “Do you trust their intent is in line with the organization?”, in which case one would hesitantly follow, but be paying very close attention at the “macro level.”

Figure 5

More Willing to Follow if Familiar?



Summary

A relational approach by one’s supervisor is one of the most admired traits when viewed by the subordinate. Micromanagement is the most distasteful leadership trait. Honesty is required to establish trust, and vulnerability is an important aspect of the process of developing trust. The quickest ways to undermine trust are to be manipulative, selfish, and volatile. Expectations change the further a leader is separated from the individual regarding the expected relational interaction, but competence is expected at all levels. Expectations do increase with rank and influence. Vulnerability is an asset from the follower’s viewpoint but must be expressed when

appropriate. It can be misunderstood if witnessed on the fireground or during high-risk activities or incidents. Shared time between the supervisor and subordinate is the best way to improve the relationship, and shared struggle is particularly powerful. Familiarity with a leader positively impacts one's willingness to follow only if previous interactions were positive. A lack of familiarity will slow or negatively impact the followers' actions, but most subordinates will follow lawful orders within the fire service.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of the Results

An intentional interest in a relationship with one's direct reports was the most admired trait of any leader. This can be accomplished more quickly if the leader is willing to express vulnerability. Micromanagement was found to be the most distasteful attribute of a leader. Developing trust requires honesty from the leader, and vulnerability is a key part of that interaction. Leaders who are manipulative, selfish, or volatile erode or undermine any trust they might receive from a follower. Competence is required at all levels of leadership, but personal investment is expected from an individual's immediate supervisor. The majority believed that expressed vulnerability was an asset versus being viewed as a liability. Developing relationships with subordinates can be accomplished in many ways, which are not complicated. A leader's actions or inactions before an incident occurs directly relate to how willing a member is to follow orders on the fireground.

Conclusions Based Upon Your Results

Vulnerability-based trust is critical to a team's success, especially in the high-stakes environment of the fire service. A leader must establish and nurture personal relationships with their direct reports to maximize their effectiveness and influence. Fostering these relationships is straightforward but requires intention and time. The quickest way to erode trust and damage a relationship is to micromanage one's subordinates. For the leader who prefers to micromanage, they should try and understand why that is their preference. Is it a result of a lack of trust in those they lead, a lack of self-confidence, an unwillingness to show and, therefore, receive

vulnerability, or a combination of all three? Careful introspection on the part of the leader is critical to maximize one's effectiveness.

Followers expect every leader, regardless of level, to be competent in the skills and abilities that are required at their rank or position. Generally speaking, the higher the role or rank, the greater the expectations from those below them. This study revealed that the less time a member had in the profession, the greater the focus on competence ("hard skills") versus relational aspects ("soft or human skills"). A leader's direct reports expect, if not demand, that their supervisor invest in them personally. This is a requirement for every leader in the fire service.

Vulnerability is broadly viewed as an asset for every leader. Again, from the more junior employees, there may be concern that expressed vulnerability, if not conveyed in appropriate settings (such as away from the fireground), could undermine the leader's credibility. More senior members recognized that context was important but understood that vulnerability can strengthen one's leadership regardless of where shared. Expressed vulnerability accomplishes several goals, including building trust, developing relationships, modeling desired behavior, and strengthening team dynamics.

Spending time as a team or crew is very important in developing and maintaining relationships. One area that shows influence is shared struggle. This can happen organically (i.e.: on the fireground, difficult calls) or be manufactured, such as solving complex problems, challenging drills, and personal hardships. As a leader, one should create opportunities for a team or crew to struggle together, instead of relying on chance to offer those situations.

Familiarity with those they will be directing on the fireground should make one's orders more quickly followed, but only if one appears to be competent and trustworthy beforehand. How a leader conducts themselves in the everyday routine of the fire service directly impacts how they are perceived in battle. A leader should always strive to be the best versions of themselves, especially when in the company of their direct reports and peers.

Limitations

A key limitation of these results stems from the fact that only a single organization was accessed and only a small percentage were interviewed. Local differences may be present, if not by state or region. While the results are compelling and relevant to fire service leadership, more research needs to be done with organizations across the United States to gain greater insight into how widely held the enclosed beliefs and opinions are.

Implications and Recommendations to the Field

All leaders need to be committed to their craft and model that commitment every day they report for duty. Not only do the citizens deserve one's best, but subordinates demand it. Leaders need to make opportunities during a shift to be present with their crew, whether that happens during chores, working out, preparing meals, or just chatting. One's direct reports should want to spend quality time with them, and if they do not, one should try to understand why. Get out of the office as often as practicable. Leaders should express vulnerability to the team. If one shows them some humanness, they will likely do the same in return. Endeavor to create opportunities for 'shared struggle' and take advantage of those times when the situation happens naturally. If

leaders want to be taken seriously on the fireground, they must have earned that right long before the incident occurred. If the leader is a mess day-to-day, they should expect hesitancy and distrust when it matters the most.

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research is needed regarding vulnerability-based leadership in the fire service. In addition to simply replicating this study in different states and regions, other opportunities exist to better understand this concept. Studies could focus and evaluate the participants into specific ranks, company officers versus shift commanders. A study could only interview front-line firefighters and/or firefighter/paramedics to target the subordinate's perspective exclusively, also a study could highlight the perspectives of fire service minorities, women, and minority ethnic groups, to see how their views differ from the majority (white males).

Conclusion

Based on this research study, the leader's expressed vulnerability does make that leader more effective. Closer relationships, greater trust, and clearer expectations are all byproducts of leaders' willingness to be vulnerable with those they lead. Much of this study's results are nuanced and require deliberate implementation by the leader to maximize their influence on the team. Shared struggle is particularly powerful in terms of developing trust and loyalty.

The fire service has evolved since its inception regarding emotional intelligence and culture, but more work needs to be done. Organizations across the United States are struggling with recruitment and retention, and many of our challenges may be buried in an antiquated culture of

unhealthy ego and toxic masculinity. Harmful social norms are still prevalent in this profession, but deliberate introspection in the contexts revealed by this study can help transform organizations, regardless of tradition or location.

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Appendix A

Interview Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Scott L Booth from the National Fire Academy (NFA) and Columbia Southern University. The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of a critical issue in the fire and emergency services. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of their final project for the Executive Fire Officer program.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all of your questions about the study have been answered to your satisfaction. The study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your experience within a particular community. **A video recording of the virtual interview will be taken for transcription purposes only. The video file will be deleted after the study and will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher.** You may turn off your camera if you do not wish to be filmed.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require approximately 60 minutes of your time.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

The NFA, Columbia Southern University, and its contractors take no responsibility for the actions or outcomes of the research study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to the participant; however, information from this study may benefit your, and other, communities in the future.

Incentives

There are no incentives (financial or otherwise) associated with participation in this study.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented to NFA and Columbia Southern University program faculty and students. The results of this project will be coded so that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that

matches up individual respondents with their answers (including audio and/or video recordings) will be destroyed. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion, or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Scott L Booth

Student

National Fire Academy

Hawkeye1824@msn.com

Dr. Justin Heim

Course Manager

Columbia Southern University

Justin.Heim@columbiasouthern.edu

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form, and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have received satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

- ☐ I give consent to be filmed and audio recorded during my interview. _____ (interviewee initials)
- ☐ I give consent to be audio recorded during my interview. _____ (interviewee initials)

Interviewer Signature		Date:	
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Interviewee Signature		Date:	
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(United States Fire Administration, 2023)

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Questions	Follow-ups
1) How long have you been in the fire service?	a) Volunteer vs. Career b) Department(s) size c) How many Dept's (if 1+, why switch)
2) What is your current position in your department?	
3) Why did you originally look for a career in the fire service?	
4) What characteristics do you admire in a leader?	a) What traits do you find distasteful? b) If vulnerability is mentioned or inferred, why (pro or con)?
5) What about your leader(s) makes them trustworthy or difficult to trust?	
6) Do you have different expectations of your leaders depending on what role/rank they fulfill? Explain.	a) Lieutenant vs. Battalion Chief (or above)?
7) Do you see a leader's willingness to be vulnerable as an asset or a liability? Why?	
8) What activities or interactions serve to strengthen the relationship between yourself and your leader?	
9) Are you more willing to follow the direction of a leader on the fire ground if you have an existing familiarity with them before the incident? Why or why not?	

Appendix C

Interview Script

Pre-Interview –

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview as part of the capstone research project for my EFO program. Before we begin, it is important to cover a few key aspects of your assistance. Your cooperation is 100% voluntary, and you can refuse to answer individual questions or end your participation at any point for any reason. You will not face any untoward ramifications for your willingness to assist in this project, nor will you receive any special treatment or favor. Despite my rank in the department and my bias toward the topic, I encourage you to answer honestly and candidly about your ideas and opinions.

For this interview, we will use the following definition for vulnerability – “a willingness to be transparent and emotionally exposed in a relationship with another individual, with the possibility of being hurt or attacked” (Lopez, 2018, p. 4). Please keep this in mind when answering the following questions. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Post-Interview –

Thank you for your answers to the previous questions! Your participation in this study will remain strictly confidential. You will be assigned a number, and any personally identifiable information (PII) will be removed. Your answers will be transcribed and reviewed against the other interviewees. You may get a copy of that transcription if you choose. All study results must be saved in a password-protected OneDrive for four years following my completion of EFO (tentatively this October 2024). Before we finish, do you have any final questions or concerns?