



## KEEP YOUR LEADERSHIP RELEVANT

### Listen, learn, and don't stop to rest on your laurels

By Brian LaCroix, FACPE, NRP (ret.)

**C**an you guess what bank tellers, travel agents, cashiers, and bus drivers all have in common? These are occupations many believe will become obsolete in the next five years.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, some future version of a person helping you at your bank or grocery is still likely to exist, but not as we know them today. It's undeniable that things change over time.

It's been several years since musicians have had to rely on record producers to publish music. Technology allows today's journalists to report on things like city council meetings and court cases from the coffee shop or park bench without ever talking to a copyreader. And the COVID-19 pandemic has supercharged the pace with which health-care providers assess and treat patients using telemedicine, calling into question the future need for (and relevance of) the traditionally staffed medical clinic.

It's not just technology that has driven these changes. Throughout history cultural, political, and social influences have all created changes in both what we value in society and also what has retained relevance. Relevance can be defined as the degree to which something is useful and related to what is happening in the world around us. So ask yourself, how relevant is your practice of leadership?

#### The Mirror First

A quick online scan for words describing leadership came up with terms like *vision*,

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Photo: Derek O. Hanley

*influence, courage, resilience, and flexibility.* For me these results seemed fairly predictable. That's not to say they're not important to be a successful leader. These characteristics are admirable and even required, but it got me thinking about ways to take things to the next level.

In the mid 1990s I was talking to a physician leader who provided medical direction for my service at the time. I was timidly wrestling with a problem and told him I could not address the issue before seeking guidance up my chain of command. He placed his hand on my shoulder, looked at me over the rim of his glasses, and with the wisdom of a knowing grandfather, said, "Leaders lead."

His admonition wasn't any sort of encouragement to go rogue or bypass the rules. Rather, he was urging me to become a leader—to look in the mirror first and stop

expecting others to solve my problems. That lesson was a gift.

There are a lot of ways in which leaders can work to stay relevant.

#### Don't Dodge the Big Issues

Here are a few big (and uncomfortable) problems EMS leaders don't often discuss in polite circles.

**Racism and social justice**—Besides the direct operational impact of street protests and violence, I've rarely heard EMS leaders discuss this issue as it relates to being a relevant leader. Making efforts to address health disparities, the lack of diversity in our EMS population, and the lack of people of color among our leadership ranks are just a few ideas EMS leaders might tackle.

**Cyberbullying**—Overall 36.5% of people in America say they've experienced

cyberbullying.<sup>2</sup> And while attention has appropriately been focused on kids and schools, adults report cyberbullying at a rate that has doubled in the past 10 years. Derogatory online comments, embarrassing photos, and videos have been linked to a number of disturbing events, including the deaths by suicide of EMS, fire, and hospital personnel around the country. Relevant EMS leaders are never silent on the issue.

*Poverty and income inequality*—In October 2019 MagnifyMoney, a subsidiary of LendingTree, commissioned an online survey of 1,007 Americans. Fifty-three percent of respondents reported they lived paycheck to paycheck, meaning that after paying all their expenses, they had no money left.<sup>3</sup> It is important that EMS leaders consider our role in supporting our employees and promoting a just society. We should understand how economic realities impact the attitudes, attendance, well-being, and intentions of our employees and union leaders.

These are big and difficult issues. Should EMS, public safety, and healthcare leaders shoulder the responsibility of solving all society's ills? Of course not. But I don't think it's any longer OK for us to pretend these issues are not our issues. The very definition of leadership means leaders are in positions of influence and should not shirk responsibility for big problems—even the big problems we've historically left to others. Remember, leaders lead.

## What's a Leader to Do?

*Stay informed*—These days there are endless opportunities (many free) to stay up to date on current events. Subscribe to online news outlets seeking a mix of perspectives. If you tend to get your news from one side of the spectrum, it's more important than ever to expose yourself to the opposite view too—even (or especially) if you disagree or don't like it.

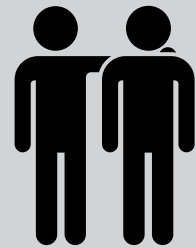
When exposed to differing views of the same issue, good leaders use the dichotomy to strengthen their critical-thinking skills. So when it comes to information, find something new you might not typically pick up. You may even find value in looking at international news outlets like the BBC or others—these agencies can provide new perspectives you might not get anywhere else.

*Talk*—Find forums to spread your message and be heard. People want to know what leaders are thinking. If you have nothing to say, why should anyone follow you? This doesn't mean talking just to hear your own voice; it's more about making connections in hopes of influencing others. So first be sure you have something worthwhile to say. But once you find your voice, communicate within your organization. Look for education sessions and conferences to speak at. Be heard via social media, blogs, magazines, and television.

*Listen*—Above all things, if you want to boost your relevance, spend time with your frontline staff to hear what they have to say. Find novel ways to connect with those in your span of control. You might also visit with other leaders and seek their thoughts and ideas.

Sometimes great learning can be found by listening to those who work entirely outside of EMS. TED Talks are a fun, simple way to do this. They're easy and free. But I suggest you occasionally make it a priority to listen to an in-person presentation on a subject you know absolutely nothing about. It's amazing how the lessons of leadership

## REVERSE MENTORSHIP



A few years ago I read a story about reverse mentorship, a concept that turns traditional mentorship on its head. Usually we think of mentors as people older and more experienced than we are. We often seek them out precisely because of their longevity. Reverse mentorship, as the name implies, involves partnering with those younger and newer in an organization. Inspired by the article, I sought out two people from my ambulance service: a 28-year-old female paramedic and a 22-year-old male dispatcher. I asked them to serve as my mentors for one year. We held dedicated monthly meetings, usually at a coffee shop or restaurant. I mostly listened—to their ideas, concerns, and occasionally their fears. What I learned was priceless. In addition to learning about fun things like Snapchat (which was new back then), I learned many more substantive things, like what it was like to work at my service as a busy young professional with small kids at home and a new employee wanting to build their résumé. It was a fabulous experience that helped shape my leadership as an EMS chief.

—Brian LaCroix

translate across avocations.

Of course the best lessons to help you be relevant as a leader come from your patients. Any opportunity to listen to their experiences is the best gift of all. Participate in callbacks if your agency does them. Personally handle complaint calls if your structure allows it. Invite patients to speak at your leadership meetings and ask them to describe their experiences. What went well, and how might you improve? Many of our colleagues within hospital systems have done this for a long time with strong results. Ultimately our patients are the reason we are here. Striving to understand their insights, concerns, ideas, and worries exhibits some of the most relevant leadership traits of all.

Leaders who rest on their laurels will soon fade. Although it's hard work, it's tremendously important to constantly be on the lookout for new ways to stay relevant. 🌐

## RESOURCES

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3. Berger S. Survey: 53% of Americans Live Paycheck to Paycheck. MagnifyMoney, 2020 Feb 4; [www.magnifymoney.com/blog/news/paycheck-survey/](http://www.magnifymoney.com/blog/news/paycheck-survey/).

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