

By *MARK EMERY*

The Fire Service Pyramid of Success

Part 3 – The Character Level

Last month, you were introduced to Level One, the five behavioral blocks that establish a solid foundation for personal and team leadership and for building your “Fire Station Pyramid of Success,” an adaptation of the original “Pyramid of Success” developed by legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden.



The five behavioral blocks are:

1. Industriousness (hard work)
2. Enthusiasm
3. Friendship
4. Loyalty
5. Cooperation

This article will introduce you to Level Two, the character-level of your Fire Station Pyramid of Success:

1. Self-control
2. Alertness
3. Initiative
4. Intentness

Self-Control

As a fire officer, you must learn to control your emotions. Fire officers who become emotionally attached to incidents are dangerous; fire officers who cannot control their emotions in the fire station will create a house of turmoil. You cannot function mentally or physically unless your

emotions are under control. It is for this reason that Coach Wooden *never* engaged in pre-game pep talks that created “artificial emotional highs.” Rather than cresting a number of temporary peaks, Wooden preferred that his teams maintain a constant, slightly increasing level of achievement.

“For every contrived (emotional) peak you create there is a subsequent valley,” Wooden said. “I do not like (emotional) valleys.”

Self-control provides emotional stability. When you lose control of your emotions, when your self-discipline breaks down, judgment and common sense are compromised. When self-control has become an integral part of your leadership package, people will perceive you as one of those who thrive under pressure.

Learn to stay cool and relaxed. Cool and relaxed will become contagious. In the fire station, cease the whining, complaining and excuse-making that keep you out of the present. Self-control will keep you in the present and prepare you for the future. (Have you ever noticed that when firefighters complain, it’s usually about somebody who is not there during the complaining?)

Self-Control

- Deliberate, conscious focus
- Focus on the positive; on possibilities
- Mind & body under control
- Emotions under control
- Essential for discipline of yourself
- Essential when disciplining others
- Key to preparation & fitness

Live and lead according to the principles of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success, and others will follow.

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They are not being industrious, they are not being loyal, they are not exhibiting self-control and thus they are not working to gain the self-satisfaction of becoming the best that they can become.)

Focusing on the present will enable you to focus on future improvement, to have vision. Dwelling on the past and on others' mistakes is toxic and prevents you from doing something positive for your fire station *today* and in the future. Strive to maintain self-control. Be a positive influence. You will never complete your Fire Station Pyramid of Success without self-control.

Nowhere is self-control more important than during the evolution of an incident. It is easy to identify firefighters and fire officers who have lost their self-control and have become emotionally attached to an incident – before they arrive on-scene. It is simple: Look a speed-limit sign, then glance at the apparatus speedometer. If the posted speed limit is 40 mph and the apparatus is traveling 60 mph, there is (60 minus 40) 20 mph of emotional attachment. Because this driver and fire officer have lost their self-control, they are endangering the public and themselves. If firefighters lose their self-control while responding, imagine what will happen once they arrive on-scene: no size-up, freelancing, no command presence, random acts of tactical violence, etc.

A master craftsman fire officer ensures that everybody amps *down* and belts *up* before the rig rolls. Self-control, along with preparation before the alarm, is essential if you hope to sniff Level Four, the leadership-level of the Pyramid: *Poise and Confidence*. Poise and Confidence will be supported by Level Three of the Pyramid: *Condition, Skill and Team Spirit*. Level Three is supported by Level Two and Level Two is supported by Level One, the foundation. (I'm not an advocate of timed turnout drills. Turnout drills encourage emotional attachment rather than foster self-control. This culture of frenzy is the primary reason fire apparatus speed through intersections with occupants unbelted.)

Bottom line: When you lose control of your emotions, you lose your self-control. When you lose your self-control, corners get rounded and bad things can happen. Control the adrenaline rather than allow the adrenaline to control you.

Alertness

“There is something going on around you at all times from which you can acquire knowledge. Too often, we get lost in our tunnel vision and we don't see the things that are right in front of us for the taking – for the learning.”

As a fire officer and leader, you must constantly be alert and aware, looking for ways to improve and add value. In the fire station, “stuff” goes on around you all the time. As you strive to achieve and maintain your personal best, alertness will make the journey much easier and more interesting. By diligently monitoring your *opportunity radar*, you will be quick to spot flaws and weakness and be just as quick to correct, improve and change.

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“If you lose self-control, everything will fall. You cannot function physically or mentally or in any other way unless your emotions are under control.”

—John Wooden

Weak leaders are not alert; they have shut down their opportunity radar by burying their head in an endless tunnel of projects, paper and meetings. With head buried in an administrative bunker, you will miss opportunities to learn, improve and grow. You will miss golden opportunities for leadership. Don't allow routine stuff to isolate you; it is impossible to lead in isolation. Occasionally, an isolated leader will pop up like an organizational sniper,

into solutions – both in the fire station and on the fireground. Problem solving begins with clearly and objectively identifying the problem.

Alertness

- Observing constantly
- Quickly identify & correct errors
- Always learning
- Always listening
- Always improving
- Opportunity driven

Initiative

- Turn the television off
- Get out of the recliner
- Prepare, prepare, prepare
- Initiative conquers fear
- Cultivate a vibrant & alert atmosphere
- Creativity + Follow-through = Success!

squeeze-off a couple of quasi-leadership rounds and quickly retreat to the administrative bunker. Again, Coach Wooden: “Do not mistake activity for achievement.”

Stay alert as you strive to achieve personal and professional excellence. Alertness is about looking for opportunities to make your small corner of the universe a better place. You must be engaged with your crew in order to diagnose what they need and want they want. Likewise, your *players* need to know what your expectations are. Write them down, post them conspicuously. Coach Wooden's rules and expectations were documented and crystal clear.

By coupling alertness with self-control, you can focus on opportunities and solutions that will produce desired outcomes. As a leader, it is critical to respond to setbacks and problems by quickly redirecting your focus to desired outcomes. A simple yet powerful question to ask when confronted with a problem is: “What is the true, desired outcome?” This question can be the catalyst for transforming problems

Initiative

Coach Wooden defines initiative as: “Having the courage to make decisions and take action when action is needed.” As a leader, you must not be afraid to fail. You are not perfect and you are going to fail at times. Liberate yourself from perfection, once you don't have to be perfect and you know you're going to make mistakes, do so with gusto. If you are afraid of failure – or afraid of looking bad – you will never discover what you are capable of achieving.

There is no failure worse than failure to act; failure to act is a byproduct of lack of self-control, lack of alertness and lack of initiative. Fear of failure or mistakes is often what prevents smart, talented people from taking action and achieving the self-satisfaction of becoming the best they can. Quitting is often the result of a weak foundation

and lack of character. Quitting is the easy road, particularly when there is someone else to use as an excuse for your retreat.

Be downright scared of not being prepared to the best of your ability. You have vanquished fear when you have a strong desire to be your best. Learn from failure and mistakes; never miss an opportunity to learn. Focusing on elaborate excuses and rooting out and focusing on who is to blame will bring nothing of lasting value. Unfortunately, such an atmosphere will foster fear of failure, lack of action and fault finding – at the expense of learning, growth and improvement. (Raise your hand if you want to be the next person raked over the coals when you're not present?) In my experience firefighters criticize inaction harsher than they criticize mistakes.

Being a fire officer is about being what I call a “heroic leader.” You become a heroic leader when you throw every ounce of your heart and soul into making a positive difference for someone else. Initiative, along with a solid Pyramid foundation, is the key to leading heroically. A heroic leader has the courage to act alone and to make decisions.

One of the most valuable ways to exercise your initiative is to acknowledge and recognize initiative in others. Instead of feeling taken for granted, your firefighters must know they are truly important, appreciated and a valued member of the team. I agree with Coach Wooden that the team that makes the most mistakes usually wins. Being overly cautious and tentative will produce inaction. Hesitate and before you know it you're down by 20 points.

Intentness

Coach Wooden's definition of *intentness* is simple yet powerful: *Intentness is the ability to resist temptation and stay the course, to concentrate on your objective with determination and resolve. Impatience is wanting too much too soon. Intentness doesn't involve wanting something, intentness involves doing something.*

“When you lose control of your emotions, when your self-discipline breaks down, your judgment and common sense suffer. How can you perform at your best when you are using poor judgment?”

—John Wooden

Intentness

- Definite purpose & goal
- Industriousness requires smart work
- Legacy of success takes time
- Stay the course (Remember: 29 years!)
- Resist temptation to dine, recline & bitch
- Creativity + Follow-through = Success!

Your professional excellence journey will take time – a long time. I'll admit it sounds corny, but it's true, success is a journey not a destination. It took Coach Wooden 14 years to develop the Pyramid of Success. It was another 15 years before UCLA won the first of its 10 national championships. Wooden's patient 29-year journey produced the greatest NCAA

“Ability will get you to the top, character will keep you there.”

—John Wooden

basketball record in history. (UCLA won its first NCAA championship with a team that had no player taller than 6-foot-5! Before the season started, sports journalists and basketball “experts” dismissed UCLA as a championship contender; they believed that no team of such short stature could possibly win an NCAA championship.)

After winning their first national championship, Wooden's UCLA teams compiled the most amazing run of championship performances in NCAA history. The “Wizard of Westwood” was the model of intentness.

Once you have determined your vision and established goals for yourself, your crew and for your fire station, stay the course. There will be setbacks. You may have to change your methods. You may have to go around, under or over. You may have to return to the drawing board and start over. Adapt and adjust; don't fight it. Do what you've got to do, but you do not quit. Just remember not to project fault on other people – instead focus on learning, adapting, and moving forward.



Coach Wooden told his players: “Be persistent. Be determined. Be tenacious. Be completely determined to reach your goal.” My friend, *that* is intentness.

F. E. A. R.

Familiarization. Education. Application. Repeat.

My personal model for implementing this level of the Pyramid is the acronym F.E.A.R.:

- *Familiarization* examples include pre-plan familiarization tours (access problems, fire load problems, evacuation and exposure challenges, etc.), ensuring

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Shame on the fire officer that surrenders their Fire Station Leadership to a recliner and the television.



that everybody knows where everything is on the apparatus, knowing your response area, reviewing post incident analysis, reviewing the *DOT Emergency Response Guidebook*, and revisiting a policy or procedure each shift. There is never nothing to do in or around your fire station. Visit target hazard occupancies; measure interior hoselays, look for optimal locations for apparatus and ground ladder placement. Design and lead simple incident-simulation exercises.

- **Education** examples include formal training and drills, incident case study, give your crew a reading assignment followed by a 10-question key-point quiz. Attend outside training opportunities. Get your degree. Study building construction. Review your accountability system. Review the incident command system. Have your firefighters prepare and deliver short training sessions. Review communication procedures. Help aspiring fire officers prepare for promotion and promotional tests.

- **Application** includes anything that

builds on familiarization, education, and training. Experience (post-incident analysis), practice, drills, review, accountability exercises, simulations, and skull sessions.

- **Repeat**, as in more familiarization, education and application. Refresh, update, learn and improve.

To keep the cycle of F.E.A.R. going requires a solid Pyramid foundation and that Level Two is firmly in place: Self-Control, Alertness, Initiative and Intentness.

The Company Officer Model

As a company officer, you need to ensure that you are providing your firefighters what they want and what they need. A master craftsman fire officer does not surrender fire station leadership to a recliner and to the television. "Dine & Recline" is not leadership, but subversion of history and tradition; perpetuating a fire station culture of "Dine & Recline" does not establish a legacy to be proud of.

This requires that you:

- **First of all, model the Pyramid foundation.**

- **Model self-control** – Set the bar high. You are the example your firefighters will observe; make sure the example you model is the best you can offer; schedule your time and schedule your day; be

a "cool head"; keep your emotions under control.

- **Model alertness** – Constantly monitor your "opportunity radar." What does my crew need? What can I do to make us better? What can we do to improve my fire station, my fire department and the community we serve?

- **Model initiative** – Don't wait for things to happen and for everything to be perfect, just get started – *now*, today. Momentum will build quickly.

- **Model intentness** – Stay focused and stick with your plan, even if you occasionally blow it. (The only way to guarantee that you won't make mistakes is to do nothing.) If you don't blow it occasionally, you aren't trying hard enough and aren't doing enough. Start over if necessary.

Eye on the Prize

Coach Wooden began coaching basketball at UCLA in 1948. During each hour of practice, the players worked hard. Each day, they worked hard. Each week, they worked hard. Each season, they worked hard. For 14 years, they worked hard and didn't win a national championship. However, Wooden and the UCLA Bruins had character. UCLA won its first of 10 national championships 15 years after Wooden's Pyramid of Success was finished and it had become woven into the culture of the program. Wooden and his players will tell you that they could not have achieved their remarkable record were it not for the power of the Pyramid of Success.

You can have a "championship" career, crew, fire station and life. All you have to do is begin assembling the first two levels of your Fire Station Pyramid of Success:

- **Level One** – The foundation: Be industrious. Be enthusiastic. Be friendly. Be loyal. Be cooperative.

- **Level Two** – The character level: Develop self-control. Be alert. Show initiative. Live and work with intentness.

Next month, you will be introduced to Level Three, the preparation level of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success:

1. Condition
2. Skill
3. Team spirit

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Check out the official website of John Wooden: www.coachjohnwooden.com



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