

Monthly Message from the Chief

I was recently asked to give the keynote address for the 2009 California-Nevada-Hawaii Forest Fire Council Annual Conference. The theme of the conference was “New Economic Times: Managing Dollars and Sense.” When asked to provide a title for my address with little advance notice, I chose “Staying Focused.” In trying economic times, staying focused is an essential element of success in any organization.



Shortly thereafter, I stumbled upon an article written by Beth Howard called “The Secrets of Resilient People.” Although the article dealt with people facing tough personal situations, I immediately connected the overall message of the article with the thoughts I was forming for my address. The “secrets” generally coincide with what I consider important elements of healthy organizations. The occurrence of the word “focus” several times also captured my attention.

Following the address, I was asked by several members of the mostly fire service audience, for a copy of it. I couldn't accommodate their requests because it wasn't scripted. I spoke from general points and expanded on them using personal experiences, observations and beliefs.

These are the points that comprised my address along with brief explanations of them.

BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU'RE DOING

No matter what business you're in, success depends on those involved believing that what they are doing is important. We are fortunate to be in the fire service and resource protection business. What we do is inarguably important, and no one doubts that.

STAY CONNECTED

Continuously learn about your business. Pursue networking opportunities inside and outside it. There are many resources at your disposal, but nothing is as valuable as face to face contact. This can happen on incidents or during training events, meetings or conferences. It's one thing to be there, but you will gain more by participating.

I used an example of a successful coffee break at the Cal Chiefs conference this year where I arranged for one fire department to share an agreement with another, discussed the loan of a helicopter and gained insight on an interpersonal relationship that needed attention.

BE PLAYFUL

“Playfulness is a sign of a healthy organization.” I heard this statement years ago. The business we are in is serious, but lighter moments abound. Have fun, but not at the expense of others. Pay attention to their demeanor. Laugh together!

FOCUS ON RESILIENCE

Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust to misfortune or change. While standing firm in our beliefs and practices is often necessary, rigidity of stance may lead to undesirable consequences; not the least of which is the potential to miss out on opportunities.

“The willow which bends to the tempest, often escapes better than the oak which resists it...” *Sir Walter Scott (Scottish historical novelist 1771-1832)*

BE PREPARED TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES

Luck is defined in many ways, but I believe one’s luck is directly related to the degree to which one has prepared to take advantage of opportunity. Leave your options open. Unexpected opportunities may not fit with your established priorities, but, though occasionally seeming to defy logic, should not be rejected out of hand. You may not get a second chance.

GIVE BACK

We receive many benefits from the work we do. Those who have taken advantage of the opportunities presented know what I mean. As you can, give back. Provide opportunities for people to explore and excel. Training and providing meaningful job experiences come immediately to mind.

ENCOURAGE HEALTHY BEHAVIOR

I feel and perform better when I adhere to a healthy diet, exercise regularly, manage stress appropriately and get adequate rest. Make your health a priority, encourage others to do so and afford them the time. These are measures that can be taken even when budgets are tight.

PICK YOUR BATTLES

It’s rare to achieve everything we want to achieve. Focus on your mission, your compatriots, your priorities and the things you can influence. Don’t waste time and energy on circumstances beyond your control, mistakes or lost opportunities.

REMAIN OPTIMISTIC

Researchers have found that people with positive dispositions manage crises better. Adversity is inevitable, but negativism is just a bad habit. It can be broken.

When I was the incident commander of CAL FIRE’s Incident Command Team 3, I employed a practice on nearly every deployment. The first time adversity struck, I would bring the team together, acknowledge that it had occurred, assess the group’s mien and express relief that we had it behind us in order to move on.

LOOK FOR THE SILVER LINING

There was a term in Beth Howard’s article attributed to Dr. Steven M. Southwick, a professor of psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine: post-traumatic growth syndrome.

I like it! The idea of something good coming from something bad has been expressed in many ways. I'm sure you can think of some of them.

I have often described myself as a silver lining kind of guy. It's a deliberate and focused mindset that has helped me through many challenges. One cannot abandon reality to successfully employ it. In fact, it's an aggregation of the elements above. I hope it's contagious.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Del Walters". The signature is stylized with a large initial "D" and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Del Walters, Chief
Director