

P R A I S E F O R
L E S S O N S F R O M T H E L I N E

“In this powerful book, Kevin Baum opens the back door to the fire house and invites his audience into the fellowship of firefighters. He shares his experiences as if around the firehouse table, reliving the exhilarating drama and emotion of his stories. It is hard to imagine a profession where quick decision-making and strong leadership are more necessary than that of fighting fires. The clear and thoughtful leadership principles demonstrated in this book have been forged pure by men and women who face life-threatening emergencies on a daily basis. These principles are as powerful in the office, the boardroom, or the operating table as they are on the line, fighting fires.”

Michael Conlin, MD, FACS, Professor & Surgeon,
Oregon Health & Sciences University, Portland, Oregon

“Unlike many management books today, *Lessons* is a page-turner that will captivate you. Each chapter is flush with learning opportunities for community and business leaders, as well as for families and individuals. Readers of all ages will benefit from this insider’s look at the fire service. *Lessons from the Line* will challenge every reader to examine what it takes to execute a vision effectively; whether leading a company, a classroom, a sports team, or a family, this book is a *must read*.”

John C. Fleming, Former International CEO
President, Meridian Asset Management, Inc.
Austin, Texas

“*Lessons from the Line* is a fantastic book and a must-read for anyone seeking to become a true inspirational leader!”

Ben-Saba Hasan, Vice President, Dell, Inc.
Austin, Texas

“*Lessons from the Line* will do for the fire service of the twenty-first century what *Report from Engine Company 82* did for the fire service of the twentieth century, with the added bonus that Kevin skillfully creates a bridge from firefighting to universal leadership principles. The stories are nail-biters and the lessons are right on target. *Lessons* is a reading pleasure that provides leadership tools that will help not just managers, but anybody who wants to improve performance. Bravo, Chief Baum!”

Fire Chief Gary Aleshire,
Snohomish County Fire District One
Seattle, Washington

“This is a truly effective book about leadership and management principles that is also fun to read, uplifting, and irresistibly motivating! *Lessons from the Line* is destined to become a leadership classic—one you will refer to again and again for renewed inspiration and encouragement. By skillfully alternating heartfelt stories from his twenty-one years of experience as a firefighter with practical and understandable lessons about leadership, Kevin teaches us fundamental truths about both leadership *and* life. These are powerful prescriptions to cure whatever may ail you or any organization you work in or lead. As you read these

always fascinating and sometimes heartbreaking stories and the lessons that follow, you will laugh and cry and also be powerfully energized to confront your own failures and fears and overcome them to achieve more than you ever thought possible.”

Robert J. Stall Jr., JD
Chief Deputy Public Defender
San Diego, California

“*Lessons from the Line* demonstrates how one of the largest organizations in the world uses simple principles that drive consistency and excellence universally. These principles—the power of a clear mission, leveraging failure, taking risks—can have an enormous impact on any organization. Unfortunately, too many organizations today get lost on their voyage to excellence. I would encourage any business leader or manager of any organization to read this book as a tool to help them reset and rethink their current organizational reality.”

Daniel Kube
Vice President World Wide Marketing & Alliances
Actuate Corporation
Toronto, Canada

LESSONS

FROM THE
LINE

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WHY EVERY LEADER SHOULD BE A
FIREFIGHTER FOR A DAY

KEVIN BAUM



TATE PUBLISHING & *Enterprises*

Lessons from the Line

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To Jim Baum and Roy Bosson, two great leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world where you can pick up the telephone, dial three simple numbers and instantly be connected to a human, make an urgent request for service, and in less than five minutes have millions of dollars of resources and dozens of experts arrive at your door with a simple question on their mind—“What can we do for you today?”

Sound absurd?

In fact, here’s a fun exercise for you: Go to your computer and Google “Fortune 100 companies.” Pick any three off the list, find their main phone number, look at your watch, and give them a call. Time how long it takes to actually speak to a human. I’ll wager it takes more than five minutes. As you are all too aware, today our typical experience anytime we call a business is to spend an annoying amount of time on the phone going through automated voice menus and push-another-number frustrations, even when we are trying to *buy* a product or service. In fact, one major airline actually *charges* an additional fee if you want to talk to a human to complete an airfare transaction!

In today’s world of Internet self-service, voice navigation systems and “I’m sorry, I will be out of the office

until 2010” auto e-mail replies, it is becoming difficult to feel like we are anything more than simple consumer statistics in an increasingly impersonal world. Indeed, in our efforts to automate everything and to hold “economy” and “efficiency” as the continuous carrots of competitive positioning, I wonder if we have lost sight of why our organizations exist in the first place. So much of today’s pursuit of profit and scale seem to place the organization first and the customer, well, last. What’s particularly disturbing is that this trend of self-service, automated efficiencies appears to be on the rise—almost a self-feeding cycle of efficiency competing against efficiency until ultimately, I fear, we will all be sitting in our little home offices ordering everything we need for existence off the Internet. What a terribly antisocial thought!

There is hope. The scenario I presented in the first paragraph is actually possible; in fact, it happens *thousands of times a day*, every time somebody has an emergency. Think about it. When you pick up the phone and dial those three magic numbers, 9-1-1, odds are you are about to receive a visit from a host of complete strangers who all have one single-minded purpose driving them—*helping you*.

Is there any other business model on the planet where you can expect the same level of service? Find *one* Fortune 100 company that can make the same service commitment.

You can’t. And you won’t.

But you can find it at your local fire department.

Much has been written about the emergency services since September 11, 2001. The tragic events of that terrible day roused a public fascination for the emergency services in general and firefighters in particular. Most firefighters

find this renewed interest in their occupation as a welcome embrace and validation that their efforts are valued and appreciated. Others find it to be mildly embarrassing and too much attention for a traditionally humble profession.

As a twenty-one-year veteran of the fire service and today as a consultant working on organizational development and performance, I find the public fascination for firefighters and their occupation to be a compelling invitation to explore, to drill deeply into the well of this occupation, and to ask some important questions: Why are firefighters so universally valued? What is it about their occupation and the nature of their service that makes them so appreciated? How can it be that a home can burn completely to the ground, and yet the owners still bring the responding firefighters milk and cookies, give them hugs, and tell them thank you? Are there any lessons for leaders or managers that can be extracted from this profession and applied to organizational life in general?

I think these questions are particularly important given the recent corporate trends to chase efficiencies at almost any cost (pun intended). Indeed, I think this conversation is *urgent*. Here’s why: As organizations today busily occupy themselves with “flattening” the world, are we inadvertently flattening expectations of corporate services in the process, slowly creating a do-it-yourself society? Have we become unwitting accomplices to a cultural shift that puts the company and its profits ahead of the customers and their experience? If this is the case, what are the unforeseen consequences of this trend? Indeed, when is the last time you even considered giving a complete stranger a hug and a thank you for a service or product?

Where have all the heroes gone?

While much can be written about both good *and* bad leadership practices in the fire service, one truth does seem to hold constant—their customers love them. Imagine if you could capture and maintain the same loyalty from your customers. Imagine if you could capture the same loyalty from your employees. What would you stand to gain?

In this short book, I will be exploring what I call the “Firefighter Model.” This name describes what I consider to be the synergy of a few leadership and management principles that seem to distinguish the fire service from other industries and to win them hugs from complete strangers and unwavering customer support. I have organized this conversation simply. Each chapter begins with a story from my own experience, and then ends with a few thoughts on important leadership lessons that can be extracted from the experience. The principles I discuss in this book aren’t complex nor are they confused by an abundance of academic citations, but they don’t have to be. These lessons are real, and every day they make a difference in how the fire service performs and is perceived by its customers. I think they are important lessons to share.

While both the title and the thesis of this book are geared toward organizational leaders and managers, the stories and lessons have universal application and appeal and can serve as stimulating seeds for personal improvement as well. I encourage anyone who is interested in self-renewal, personal growth, or leadership to take this short journey with me. After all, we are all leaders in one form or another, whether it’s family, church, work, or life. We

can all learn a great deal from the Firefighter Model and grow in the process.

Finally, this book reflects years of observation and experience, not to mention numerous sleepless nights ruminating on my many fire service experiences. I reflected on these experiences from many different perspectives—personal, organizational, management, leadership, and others—and have informed these experiences through years of academic and practical research into management and leadership practices. In fact, the more I reflect on the Firefighter Model, the more I become convinced that we can extract some powerful lessons from this unique profession—lessons that can have a profound impact on our own lives and organizations. I think you will find this conversation to be both interesting and valuable, and I hope you will be able to apply much of what I have learned from this journey to your own efforts to improve performance, whether it is personal performance or organizational.