

By *MARK EMERY*

# The Fire Service Pyramid of Success

## Part 5 – Leadership and a Legacy of Professional Excellence



Near the apex of the Fire Service Pyramid of Success are the final two blocks: *poise* and *confidence*. Coach John Wooden, on whose Pyramid of Success this series is based, believed these two blocks to be the natural byproduct of the personal attributes established by the previous three levels:

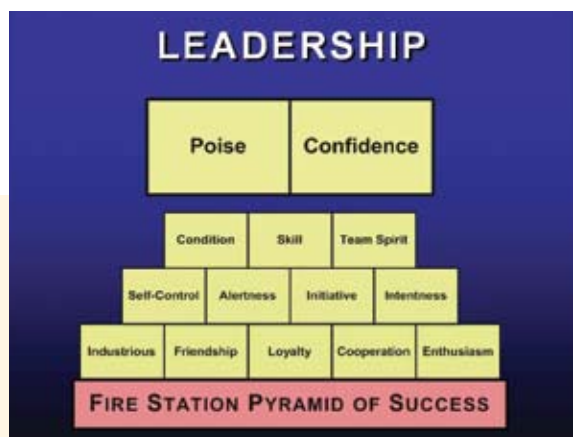
- Level one – *Industriousness, enthusiasm, loyalty, friendliness and cooperation*
- Level two – *Self-control, alertness, initiative and intentness*
- Level three – *Condition, skill and team spirit*

In other words, without a rock-solid *foundation* established by level one, without the *character* traits established by level two and without the *preparation* established by level three; it is impossible to experience the poise and confidence of leadership that is achieved at Level Four. *Poise* and *confidence* represent the leadership-actualization benefits that have been enabled by the Fire Station Pyramid of Success. The removal of any of the previous 12 blocks make leadership poise and confidence impossible to achieve and maintain.

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

### Poise and Confidence

As mentioned, *authentic* poise and confidence is impossible until you have established – and personify – the first three levels of the pyramid. This is why the *exact sequence* of Coach Wooden’s original pyramid is so important. We started with the foundation (*Firehouse*®, February 2008), developed level two (*Firehouse*®, March 2008), last month developed level three and this month I in-



**You discipline those under your supervision to correct, to help, to improve – not to punish.**

—John Wooden

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Poise

- Simply be yourself (not acting)
- You can't fake poise
- Grace under pressure
- At ease in any situation
- Total effort to be best you can be
- Command 'presence'

**The best leaders understand that to successfully compete at any level requires continuous learning and improvement. Unless the leader communicates this up and down the line, your team will not be at 100% in its performance level.**

—John Wooden

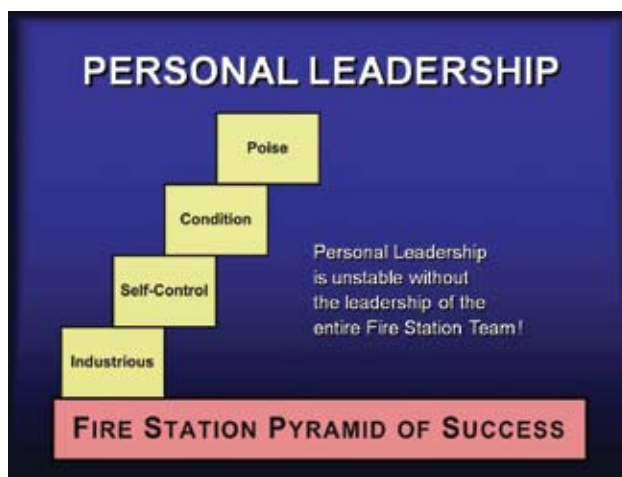
roduce level four – the leadership level – that will enable the poise and confidence necessary to foster a culture of *professional excellence*. Each level builds upon, and is supported by, the level below. Remember: with your Fire Station Pyramid of Success complete, the manifestation of *genuine* leadership will be seamlessly monolithic and interdependent, not simply a stack of independent characteristics and behaviors.

Preparation is an essential component of developing *poise* and *confidence*. The second and third levels of your pyramid involve character and preparation. Burning fire station daylight aerodynamically reclined watching daytime TV will not prepare you or your “team” for success. Your fire station leadership will wither and your master craftsman fire officer image will fade; as each hour of “dine and recline” becomes easier and easier, it will become a malignancy that consumes the professional culture of your crew and your fire station. Please, do not surrender your fire station leadership to a recliner and the (aptly named) *idiot box*.

There is no shortcut to poise, confidence and professional excellence. Once you have built and secured three solid levels of your pyramid, you are prepared to lead; because you “have what it takes” to lead, you will personify poise and confidence.

**Personal Leadership**

Rising along the left side of your pyramid are three blocks that ascend directly to poise: *industriousness* (at the foundation), *self-control* (at level two) and *condition* (at level three). Coach Wooden had a simple definition of poise: *the ability to simply be yourself*. At-ease-in-any-situation poise re-



quires *personal leadership*; you can be yourself when you have ascended each block of personal leadership by being *industrious*, practicing *self-control*, and having *mental, moral* and *physical conditioning*.

Considering the four blocks of personal leadership in reverse, from the top down, it is impossible to have authentic *poise* unless you are *conditioned* to the best of your ability; you will never be *conditioned* to the best of your ability unless you possess *self-control*; you will never personify *self-control* unless you exemplify the foundation cornerstone *industriousness*. The manifestation of *poise* is the direct result of *condition*, *self-control* and *industriousness*. There is no quick and easy shortcut to personal leadership. Personal leadership is not a performance that requires an audience; evidence of mature personal leadership is what you do when nobody is around.

Poise without personal leadership (in the form of *industriousness*, *self-control*

and *condition*) is smoke and mirrors; without personal leadership, your energy and focus will be diverted to the struggle to *appear* cool, calm and collected. As you struggle to appear poised, the flimsy poise you may have and started with will crash and burn.

Bottom line: Don't waste your time and energy trying to *appear* poised; authentic poise is achieved through a natural progression of personal leadership attributes: *industriousness*, *self-control* and *conditioning*. However, even a genuine, strong self-leader can't do it alone. Poise requires sup-

port, and because you have assembled the blocks of personal leadership your poise will have the support it needs – the *collective* leadership and confidence of *your fire station team*.

**Confidence**

Positioned next to poise at level four is *confidence*. If you would like to have master-craftsman *confidence*, you must believe

Confidence

- Confident not cocky
- Respect without fear
- You are prepared; Team is prepared
- Confidence in yourself
- Confidence in The Team
- Expect others to have confidence in you

in your crew and crew members must believe in you; if you want others to have *confidence* in your leadership, you first must have *confidence* in yourself and your crew. *Poise* and *confidence* are the direct result of preparation, character and a strong foundation.

As discussed previously, poise is supported on the left side of the pyramid by the three blocks of personal leadership: *industriousness*, *self-control* and *condition*. However, these four blocks tilt precariously to the right and would topple over were they not leaning against a 10-block “sub-pyramid” that culminates with confidence. The 10 blocks that comprise this sub-pyramid represent “team leadership.” Enduring fire station team leadership is supported by four of the five foundation blocks: *friendship*, *loyalty*, *cooperation* and



High-performance fire station leadership is created when a high-performance team is assembled that consists of individuals who each possess a strong pyramid foundation and each personify personal leadership. High-performance teams, high-

ber’s contribution was appreciated and ensured the long-term success of the program and the culture.

### Proportional Confidence

Great leaders have earned what I call “proportional confidence.” Proportional confidence occurs when confidence in those that you lead is proportional to the confidence they have in you. For example, as an operations battalion chief, my confidence that company officers can develop an *initial* incident action plan (IAP) and provide for the safety of their crew members must be proportional to their confidence in my ability to build upon and manage the incident action plan and provide for the safety of all crews.

You achieve professional excellence when each member of your crew possesses a high level of confidence in themselves (personal leadership) balanced with a high level of confidence in each other (fire station leadership). You have a powerful combination when the eccentric blocks of *personal leadership* are supported by the collective blocks of *fire station leadership*; in fact, your Fire Station Pyramid of Success is now complete! Your crewmembers now possess the character, preparation, poise, and confidence to experience lasting professional excellence.

**A real leader is much more than simply a person with authority. A prison guard has authority, but he or she is not a leader. A leader doesn’t need a hammer to motivate individuals.**

—John Wooden

*enthusiasm*. These foundation blocks support the three blocks of team character: *alertness*, *initiative* and *intentness*. These character blocks support the two blocks of team preparation: *skill* and *team spirit*. Collectively, team leadership welcomes, supports, nurtures and celebrates the personal leadership that each member brings to the fire station team.

performance organizations and high-performance fire stations have high-performance leadership.

Coach Wooden’s high-performance basketball teams were comprised of carefully selected, high-performance individuals; each high-performance individual was chosen for his ability to contribute to the program and to the culture that Wooden’s program had created. No team member was insignificant; each individual team mem-

### Fire Station Leadership

*Fire station leadership* is achieved when each member’s personal leadership is combined with the leadership of the fire station team. *Fire station leadership* is achieved when the Fire Station Pyramid of Success is complete and the fire station team embodies authentic, collective poise and confidence. Professional excellence will be the natural outcome of genuine fire station leadership; professional excellence will endure so long as the fire station has leadership.



### Monolithic Behavior

When building your Fire Station Pyramid of Success, start by establishing a solid foundation of industriousness (hard work), friendship, loyalty, cooperation and enthusiasm. As subsequent levels are added, they are secured with behavioral “mortar” that bonds each block and each level in place. This behavioral mortar will ensure that your Fire Station Pyramid of Success behaves as a single, monolithic structure rather than a collection of independent pieces.

- The four blocks of level two are bonded to the foundation with the behavioral mortar of *ambition* and *sincerity*.
- The blocks of level three are bonded to the blocks of level two with the behavioral mortar of *adaptability* and *honesty*.
- The blocks of level four are bonded to the blocks of level

three with the behavioral mortar of *resourcefulness* and *reliability*.

- The final block, professional excellence, is secured to the blocks of level four with the behavioral mortar of *fight* and *integrity*.

Imagine what an incredible place your fire station will be when it is functioning as one seamless, monolithic pyramid of success.

## Professional Excellence

Professional excellence is enabled when each block and each level of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success are firmly in place and secured with the behavioral mortar. (Hey, if professional excellence was quick and easy, it would be achieved more often by more people and more fire stations; mediocrity is easy.) Each of the 14 blocks of the pyramid is required to achieve professional excellence. Professional excellence requires that you give your best effort at all times. Professional excellence requires that you have the poise and confidence to welcome a challenge when things become difficult – even when things become *very* difficult. Because you are prepared and because you have the unwavering support of a high-performance team, you will accept and even welcome the challenge.

Most of the “stuff” that you do in and around the fire station is simple, often routine, even dull and uninteresting. Any person off the street could do most of the basic routine stuff. However, when the bells hit and it’s show time, only the prepared professional will possess the poise and confidence to greet the challenge. As a fire and life safety professional, one day your mind, body and spirit will be challenged – maybe not today, perhaps not this year, but that challenging “it’s-show-time” incident will occur. It will take special people – a high-performance fire station team comprised of authentic prepared professionals – to rise up and greet this challenge with poise and confidence. Prepared professionals will welcome this challenge as another opportunity to do their best.

Each player John Wooden coached was with the UCLA team for just four or five years; players routinely changed from one season to the next. Imagine



## A leader’s most powerful ally is his or her own example.

—John Wooden

what can be accomplished with a high-performance fire station team that is together for 10 or 20 years!

Unless the simple, routine and uninteresting is performed with poise, confidence and enthusiasm, lasting *professional excellence* is impossible. When all members of a high-performance fire station team do their best each day, each week and each year, that fire station will be prepared to confront challenging situations with reliable and authentic poise and confidence.

## Legacy of Professional Excellence

“Success” is not a block or a level of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success; fire station success is an intangible byproduct that happens when you have invested your time and energy to achieve *professional excellence*. Professional excellence is the direct result of *fire station leadership*; fire station leadership is the direct result of the self-satisfaction knowing that each member

gave his or her best effort to become the best firefighter and the best fire officer that he or she is capable of becoming.

Finally, after your pyramid is complete – block by block, level by level – and bonded with behavioral mortar, the success of your fire station (and perhaps the success of your fire department) will be secured at the top with the behavioral mortar of two essential qualities of enduring professional excellence: *faith* and *patience*; *faith* that things will turn out as they should and the *pa-*

*ience* to continuously pursue professional excellence with poise and confidence. Professional excellence is not a destination or achievement; a legacy of professional excellence is a non-stop process of continuous improvement.

Professional excellence is not about being better than another person, crew, fire station or fire department. Success is not a game of you against *them*; personal leadership is a one-on-one challenge of you against *you*. Don’t waste energy and focus complaining about and trying to change “them”; instead, focus your energy on the most important person that you can change and improve: you. None of us will ever be perfect; perhaps more accurate, none of us can maintain perfection; struggling to maintain perfection will turn you into a neurotic mess.

Nevertheless, perfection is a worthy goal. True success requires giving 100% of your mind, body and effort to “*The Job*” – whether “*The Job*” is your vocation, avocation or both. Although none of us is capable of achieving and maintaining perfection, each of us is capable of striving for perfection by being the best that we are capable of becoming. That is doable and doing so will provide peace of mind.

Professional excellence is about continuous effort to learn, continuous effort to improve, and continuous effort to make yourself, your fire station and your community better tomorrow than it is today. When you make your fire station a better place you make



**Acquire peace of mind by making the effort to become the best which you are capable.**

—John Wooden

your fire department a better place. As a fire officer – a position of leadership – your responsibility is to bring a group of firefighters together so that they reach their greatest level of competence and potential. The real challenge is to bring individual firefighters together as a high-performance team. This can be difficult and challenging. However, that is your

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"Ten Command-ments"  
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Fire Station**

Firehouse.com TrainingLIVE and IMS Alliance are proud to present Mark Emery's "Ten Command-ments of Intelligent & Safe Fireground Operations," previously published as a series in Firehouse® Magazine, as an interactive webcast on June 27.

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job and your primary responsibility. "The Job" will be much easier when each team member possesses personal leadership that fits neatly beside the sub-pyramid of *team leadership*. You are in complete control of your fire station legacy – not other firefighters, not other crews, not other fire stations, not the union, not the fire chief, not the mayor. This life and "The Job" is not a dress rehearsal; whether good, mediocre or a combination, your fire station legacy is a work in progress.

It is not unreasonable to expect that each member of your fire station team will always contribute their best effort when they are in the fire station. When each member contributes personal leadership to the fire station team, the result is fire station leadership; fire station leadership will establish and sustain a *legacy of professional excellence*. With faith and patience, the Fire Station Pyramid of Success will help you become the best that you are capable of becoming. When everybody in the fire station does the same you will be a part of something very special.

Free stuff: To receive a cool Fire Station Pyramid of Success PowerPoint presentation, contact the Mark Emery at [fci@usa.com](mailto:fci@usa.com).

John R. Wooden: For more information about the life, career and philosophy of Coach John Wooden, obtain his book *They Call Me Coach*, published by Contemporary Books (ISBN 0-07-142491-1).

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