

By *MARK EMERY*

The Fire Service Pyramid of Success

Part 4 – Heart of the Pyramid: Condition, Skill and Team Spirit



Coach Wooden's All-Time Best Starting Five

1. Industriousness
2. Enthusiasm
3. Condition
4. Fundamentals
5. Team Spirit

Day-to-day fire station success has little to do with your fire chief, your arm patch, your years of service, how many fire stations or firefighters your department has, or how many alarms your department responds to. Day-to-day fire station success has everything to do with *you*.

In the March and April issues of *Firehouse*®, you were introduced to Levels One and Two of The Fire Station Pyramid of Success. Level One provides five behavioral blocks that establish a strong foundation for personal and professional leadership: Industriousness, friendliness, loyalty, cooperation and enthusiasm. Level Two establishes the four blocks of character: self-control, alertness, initiative and intentness. This month you will be introduced to three blocks that comprise Level Three: condition, skill and team spirit. Collectively, these three blocks establish the “preparation level” of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success. Once firmly in place, Level Three will enable you to add the two blocks of Level Four, the “leadership level.” These two blocks are poise and confidence. Level Four will be discussed in the June issue of *Firehouse*®. Collectively, these four levels, comprised of 14 blocks, will help you establish a legacy of personal and professional leadership.

The Fire Station Pyramid of Success is an adaptation of the original Pyramid of Success developed by coaching legend John. R. Wooden (see part one for an account of Wooden’s accomplishments as UCLA head basketball coach). Coach Wooden’s primary expectation for his teams was that each player do everything within the limits of his ability to become the best that they are capable. Live, lead and follow according to the principles of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success and you will harvest the benefits of professional excellence and fire station success.

“Balance is perhaps the most important word for a player or coach to keep in mind. You have to have emotional balance. You have to have physical balance.

You have to have mental balance.”

—John Wooden

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

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It's Your Fire Station

You can choose to have a "championship" crew, fire station and life. All you've got to do is begin; choose to begin building your Fire Station Pyramid of Success. However, as with any structural system, you must begin by establishing a sturdy foundation:

- Level One (*Firehouse*®, March 2008) – The first level serves as the foundation for your Pyramid. Be industrious (work hard). Be enthusiastic about your work and life. Be friendly, be loyal and be cooperative. After establishing a strong and secure foundation, you're ready to add the next level to your pyramid.

- Level Two (*Firehouse*®, April 2008) – Develop self-control, be alert and show initiative. Live and work with intentness. Coach Wooden considered Level Two to be the character level.

This month you'll be prepared to achieve poise and confidence (Level Four) by adding Level Three, the preparation level. Level Three is comprised of condition, skill and team spirit.

Level Three: The Heart of Your Pyramid

Coach Wooden referred to Level Three, the preparation level, as the "heart" of the Pyramid of Success. Preparation is the heart of a champion and the heart of a championship team and will establish the heart of your championship fire station and crew. This third tier is comprised of three blocks: condition, skill and team spirit. These three attributes are achievable – and sustainable – because they are supported by the first two levels of your Pyramid. Completion of Level Three will enable you to achieve poise and confidence, the "leadership level" of your Pyramid.


Condition is comprised of equal parts *physical* condition, *mental* condition, *moral* condition and *emotional* condition. Coach Wooden taught his players that peak physical condition is not enough to be a champion. There are scores of gifted athletes who can run, shoot and rebound. He believed his players could not attain – and maintain – champion-level physical condition without first and foremost being *mentally*, *morally* and *emotionally* conditioned. Coach Wooden further asserted that you cannot be morally conditioned unless you are spiritually conditioned. Mental conditioning was at least as important to Wooden as physical conditioning.

Coach Wooden told his players that team condition depended on two factors: 1, how hard they worked *during* practice; and, 2, how well they behaved *between* practice sessions – when nobody was watching. (Recall that 95% of his players graduated with a degree.) Both factors became evident during games, especially during the many games that were won late in the fourth quarter. Many of UCLA's games and championships

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were won because of mental, moral and emotional conditioning – *not* because the players were better athletes. Coach Wooden was too smart to build UCLA's success on mere talent and physical conditioning. Many teams with more talent and size and better conditioning were defeated because they lost their cool. Coach Wooden's teams did not panic or lose their cool.

Coach Wooden's teams had steadfast poise and confidence because each player was recruited and nurtured according to Pyramid of Success principles. If a high school prospect was blessed with NBA-level physical talent, but exhibited behavioral red flags (uncooperative, disloyal, lazy, unfriendly, lacking self-control), he was not pursued by Wooden.

Wooden had each of his players for just four or five years; you could have each of your fire station "players" for 20 or 30 years. Imagine what kind of fire department you would have if you recruited according to the five blocks of the Pyramid foundation? Is this individual Industrious? Enthusiastic?

Skill

- The 'heart' of the Pyramid
- Rock-solid fundamentals (Unconscious)
- More important than experience!
- Know what to do & how to do it
- Execute quickly & properly
- Inspired repetition = Inspired execution

Loyal? Friendly? Cooperative? If you're a volunteer organization, a Pyramid-based culture could help with retention – who wouldn't like to be part of a special, dynamic and elite culture? You already have the marketing advantage that the fire service is admired and respected by the community. A basketball team is not an essential service; your fire department is an essential service. Without mental, emotional and moral conditioning, the most talented and physically fit firefighter in your department is susceptible to losing his or her cool under pressure. Conditioning (and success) is built

“Ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to stay there.”

—John Wooden

upon execution of basic fundamentals and the first two levels of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success.

To the right of condition is skill. Skill is positioned smack-dab in the middle of the entire Pyramid for a reason: To be a successful leader, you must be competent and you must make sure that your crew is competent. Skill means fundamental competency – “the basics.” Skill is the ability of you and your crew to execute the fundamentals quickly and efficiently. This level of skill is known as unconscious competence. Skill serves as the heart of the Fire Station Pyramid.

Response fundamentals include driving, fastening seatbelts, acquiring a water supply, apparatus positioning, and pump and aerial operation. *Tactical* fundamentals include operating tools and equipment, ve-



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hicle extrication, ventilation, ladders, hose handling, forcible entry, primary search, salvage, overhaul, patient exam, splinting, bandaging and defibrillation. *Strategic* fundamentals include size-up, determination of value, action planning, incident management, implementation of the incident command system, risk management, span of control, team integrity – and more.

There are fire station fundamentals as well. These include maintenance of apparatus, tools and equipment. Although not glamorous or exciting, fire station housekeeping is a fundamental skill. Other fundamentals include pre-incident planning, company inspections – and fostering professional conduct and appearance. Do firefighters look like they are minimum-wage laborers or do they look like professionals? What do their helmets and personal protective equipment (PPE) look like? Does a firefighter's dirty, melted helmet imply that the fire department ensures that offensive fireground operations are coordinated? What if the helmet was

Condition

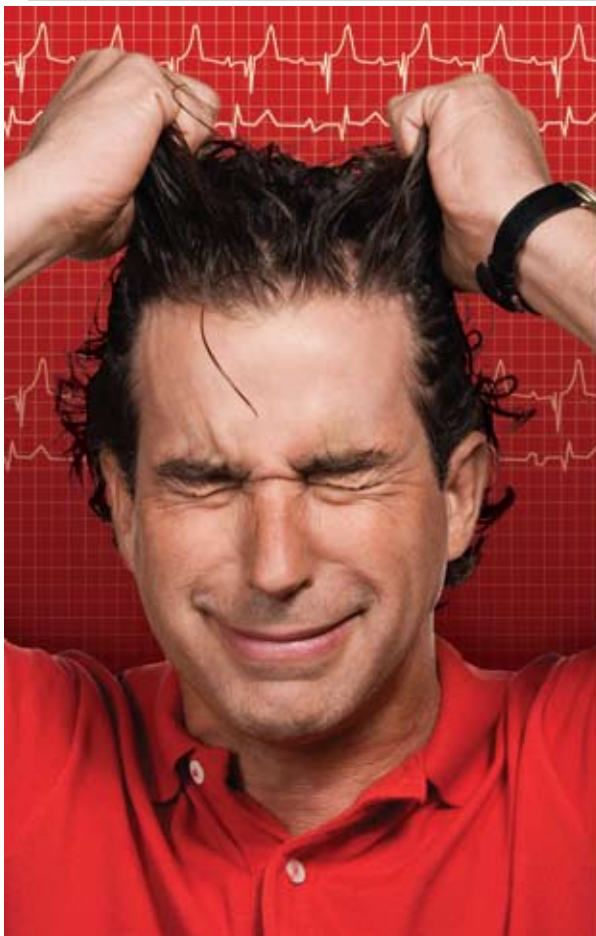
- **Balanced conditioning**
- **Mind & body**
- **Emotional, moral, spiritual**
- **Leader = conditioning coach**
- **Development oriented**
- **Unselfish acknowledgement & appreciation of others**

melted during training? Does a surgeon need to advertise experience by strutting the halls of a hospital wearing bloody scrubs? (“*Hey, look at me everybody, I did surgery!*”) Would bloody, contaminated scrubs be an indication that the surgeon has achieved and is modeling the first two levels of the Pyramid? What does modeling dirty, contaminated PPE imply?

How a fire station answers the telephone will provide insight into the profes-

sional conduct culture of your fire station. If the fire station phone is answered with an abrupt “Hello” or “10s” (*ten what?*), then it is likely the absence of professional leadership *within that fire station* has fostered a culture akin to teenagers rebelling against parents. When the guys working at the tire store down the street answer their phone with more *fundamental* professional conduct than your firefighters, you’ve got a fire station leadership problem.

Test the Pyramid Levels One and Two fundamental culture of your fire station: Place a crumpled soda cup in the parking lot. At shift change or on drill night, observe the behavior of your firefighters. If nobody sees and removes the cup, you’ve got a fundamental culture problem. Firefighters are leaving it for somebody else or, worse, they don’t care. Day-to-day conduct will soon become culture. How often is a chainsaw dirty or apparatus low on fuel at shift change? What’s the relationship with other



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crews and other fire stations: high school or professional?

The soda cup in the parking lot represents a lack of fundamental Level One and Level Two Pyramid behavior discussed in parts two and three of this series: industriousness, alertness and initiative. When the fire station cancer of “leave it for somebody else” and “I don’t care” metastasizes to the fireground and when interacting with the public, you have a culture that requires major leadership surgery.

Coach Wooden considered himself a *practice* coach more than a *game* coach. Many fire stations foster game cultures rather than practice cultures. In other words, the fire station is unenthusiastic, lethargic and inattentive until the pagers fire and it’s show time.

Despite all the success and stardom at UCLA, Coach Wooden made sure that his players cleaned up after themselves. Even in a visiting locker room, they were industrious, alert and showed initiative. No player left a mess around his locker. No tape, towels or trash was left on the floor for somebody else to pick up. The custodi-

“Being in good mental and moral condition is crucial to strong leadership. It starts with good physical condition, because a leader lacking it is less likely to summon the strength to stand up and fight for beliefs, ideals and standards.”

—John Wooden

an and trainers were part of the team and were treated with dignity and respect. The custodian was responsible for emptying the trash cans, not *filling* them; picking up after young adults was not the custodian’s responsibility. Coach Wooden: *“Somebody’s going to have to clean up the mess, and I see no reason why it shouldn’t be the person who made the mess.”*

Dignity and respect were palpable on Wooden’s teams. Being part of the UCLA team was a privilege and the “team” was more than individual players. Coach Wooden tells a story of an elite high school athlete that he visited personally. (Wooden rarely made recruiting visits himself,

so this young man must have been a remarkable athlete.) While chatting with the young man and his family, his mother entered the conversation. The athlete interrupted and snapped, “Quiet, Mom, he’s not here to recruit you.” Coach Wooden rose, thanked the woman for allowing him to visit their home, and announced that there is no doubt that her son will be an incredible college athlete – but not for UCLA. Wooden did not want that player’s attitude of disrespect to compromise the culture of dignity and respect he fostered at UCLA. Wooden would not compromise his Pyramid principles to win basketball games. (Although the young man didn’t play col-

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lege basketball at UCLA, years later he was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame.)

One of the most reliable indicators of fire station culture is to examine the hosebed and compartments on a fire engine. Is hose loaded with meticulous care and attention to detail (professional) or is the hose untidy and sloppy (amateur)? Are compartment contents clean, organized, secured and in reliable working condition? These are perhaps the most basic and fundamental skills in the fire station. Is the daily apparatus checklist quickly checked from the driver seat or does the driver ensure that each item is meticulously inspected and tested? Without leadership, over time, the corners of fire station culture become rounded; it requires team leadership and personal leadership to keep the corners square. Positive, Pyramid-based leadership is hard to sustain; Pyramid-based leadership requires hard work.

Are your firefighters *willing* to do housekeeping or are they *enthusiastic* to keep their house in top shape and be the best that they are capable? Industriousness and enthusiasm in tandem with self-control, alertness and initiative help ensure that the fundamentals getting done – and continue to get done. Industriousness, enthusiasm, alertness and initiative turn the routine and mundane into an uninterrupted stream of opportunities to make yourself and your fire station better. Skill encompasses all components and re-

Team Spirit

- **The Team comes first!**
- **Genuine consideration for others**
- **Adjust to The Team** (not the opposite)
- **Nobody is above The Team**
- **Dignity & respect**
- **Effort more important than results**
- **Team spirit begins with selection**

sponsibilities of fire station duties, not just the exciting and entertaining stuff. Skill requires the ability, desire and knowledge to quickly and properly execute all of the basic fundamental skills of a professional.

Coach Wooden describes team spirit as an *eagerness* to sacrifice personal comfort and glory for the welfare of all. In other words, the team comes first. Notice that team spirit doesn't mean *willing* to put the team first; team spirit is *eagerness* to put the team first. There is a profound difference between willingness and eagerness. Again, Coach Wooden: "A *prisoner on a chain gang may be willing to break rocks, but how eager is he?*" (We chose to become fire department members; we weren't sentenced to hard fire station labor by a judge.) Eagerness to make your fire station better, your crew better, your apparatus better, your equipment better, your fire department better, your community

better – and eagerness to make yourself better – is what will create a championship fire station culture. Most rookies enter the fire station with enthusiastic eagerness to be industrious and show initiative only to have their alertness and initiative crushed due to a culture of lassitude and feeble leadership. A recliner, a TV and Internet surfing is selfish and will not improve you, your crew or your fire station. Time in the recliner feels much better when it has been earned through initiative and enthusiastic industriousness.

So long as ambition is put to good use for your family, crew, fire station and fire department, there is nothing wrong with wanting to achieve personal success. However, team players are defined by their willingness to sacrifice personal considerations for the benefit and success of all. Although friendship is a component of the Pyramid foundation, it is unlikely that everyone in your fire department will like each other; however, it is essential they everyone in your fire station respect each other and place the dignity, welfare and success of the "team" first.

Team spirit will enable all members of your crew to succeed, not just one individual. Should one member experience individual success (for example, receive a promotion or college degree), the group should share in the celebration. Each member is much more likely to achieve individual success when they are a loyal, reliable, and respected member of a team (or fire department) that has achieved (and works hard at maintaining) team success.

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Peace of mind does not accompany winning and notoriety; peace of mind is the direct result of the self-satisfaction that comes with knowing you gave your best effort to become the best that you are capable.

When you show up at the fire station, be ready to give your best effort for the team. Reward members that give their best effort to become the best firefighters they are capable of becoming. A genuine leader does not crush the industriousness, initiative and team spirit of other members.

Call to Action

There is no question that the members of a fire department are part of an elite, high-performance team. True

leaders are leaders of Coach Wooden's Pyramid principles, plain and simple. I challenge anyone to show me an excellent leader who does not exemplify the principles of Coach Wooden's Pyramid of Success. Whether they are aware or not, true team leaders already personify most of Coach Wooden's Pyramid principles, plain and simple. (Just because you're a leader doesn't mean that you're a leader of good; history books are full of strong leaders who left a legacy of evil and destruction.)

If you would like to be a member of a high-performance fire station, start by developing your high-performance self – start with your foundation. Get off your butt and be industrious, friendly, loyal, cooperative and enthusiastic. After you've established a solid foundation, add character by exhibiting self-control, be alert, show initiative, and live and work with intentness.

Next, make sure you are prepared; be conditioned physically, mentally, and morally. Develop fundamental skill competency; know how to do all aspects of your job quickly and efficiently – work to achieve

"unconscious competence." Perform all aspects of your job with enthusiasm. Be a *practice* leader more than a *game* leader; don't sit around waiting for "show time." Because your team is prepared, when show time does come, you will make it look easy. Do all this with the team in mind by nurturing and investing in team spirit.

Coach Wooden professed that "the star of the team is the team." He could have chosen "teamwork" rather than team spirit. You have to admit that the word "spirit" is more compelling than "work." Team spirit captures all the significance of "teamwork" with the added value of heart and soul. Team

spirit means placing the goals of your fire station (and your fire department) ahead of personal desires and interests. Again, Coach Wooden: *"Just as enthusiasm ignites industriousness, team spirit is the catalyst for enhancing condition and skill, and all the supporting blocks of the Pyramid to extraordinary levels. It is so because it creates a deep desire on the part of each individual to do everything within his or her power to improve and strengthen the organization."*

Level Four: The Leadership Level

Next month, we will add the final two blocks of the Fire Station Pyramid of Success: poise and confidence. Coach Wooden considered Level Four the "leadership level" of his Pyramid. The 12 blocks discussed thus far were carefully selected by Coach Wooden: *"Each block has a unique purpose, and there is logic behind its position in the Pyramid."*

When you have given your sustained best effort to assemble the three levels discussed so far, they will, in turn, give something significant back to you.

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