



What Does It Mean to Exercise Leadership?

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Learning Objective: The student shall explain the differences between the use of authority and the exercise of leadership.

James McGregor Burns once wrote that “there are as many definitions of leadership as there are individuals who would care to define it.” Burns was reminding us that leading or leadership has so many different meanings to so many people because of the very interpretations and applications that provide guidance but also result in confusion. This brief training component is an effort to provide a few foundational elements that are anchors within the Executive Fire Officer Program.

Authority vs. Leadership: Are They the Same?

Authority involves providing protection, directing others, and maintaining order. These acts of power can be achieved in the smallest of families or the largest of nations. There is nothing inherently wrong with having authority or the use of it, but there have been many instances where the use of authority (power) has been misused. Actually, as children depend on their parents, all humans depend on authority figures to provide for them, particularly in times of need and when peril is present.

Those in authority normally function well when they can take care of problems with known solutions and procedures. These problems are the so-called “technical problems.” Many of these are serious and important, but there are known cures or remedies for the most part. However, there are many problems, the “adaptive problems,” which have no known solutions or easy answers. Some adaptive problems require changes of heart and mind by the people who own and are impacted by the problems.

Are All Problems
the Same?
Answer: No

Leading is a Process of Facilitating Work to Confront an Adaptive Problem

It now becomes evident that leading can be exercised by those with authority and by those with little of it. Obviously those with authority may have an advantage as they may have a position of power and resources to go along with it. The act to confront an adaptive problem itself can be motivated by a sense of purpose and belief in both the cause and the ideals at stake. The interesting realization is that those who choose to lead may be very near the limits of their authority or have exceeded it. Otherwise, they would have already solved the adaptive problem at hand.

For more information: Refer to “Leadership On the Line – Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading,” Heifetz, R.A., Linsky, M., Harvard Business Press, Boston, Mass., 2002.