

# THE 2024 THOUGHT LEADERSHIP ESSAY COMPETITION

*Overcoming Institutional &  
Interpersonal Resistance to  
Change in the Fire Service*

## *Top Three Essays*

"I actively seek opportunities to express my views on leadership and the evolution of culture in the fire service. I was excited to apply for the Darley Essay Contest - it felt like the perfect fit and a fantastic opportunity."

- Jamie Howarth, 2024 Essay Winner



*Sponsored by Darley in collaboration with the  
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF)*

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*We are inspired by the overwhelming enthusiasm and creativity showcased in our third Thought Leadership Essay Competition. With a commendable 85 entries centered on overcoming institutional and interpersonal resistance to change in the fire service, it's evident that our fire service heroes are eager to spotlight this important discussion.*

THE FIRE SERVICE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP COMEPTITION WAS CONCEIVED BY GARRY BRIESE AND BROUGHT TO FRUITION BY DARLEY'S COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE OF THE FIRE SERVICE.

# WHY IS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP & WRITING SO IMPORTANT?

Informational influence has become one of the most important leadership traits. The only way to lead effectively is to be an example of how leaders share information and lead from a place of caring.

While future and current leaders may have different perspectives than more senior members of the fire service, their level of dedication and willingness to address and problem-solve reflects the best the fire service has to offer. It is both impressive and exciting when firefighters, company officers and chief officers thoughtfully and respectfully challenge how we think about the future of the fire service.

***Good leadership depends on good communication. At Darley, we encourage you all to think like a leader and write like a leader.***

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*“Being a thought leader can be an ethereal experience, yet it is not always an academic exercise. Training and education certainly provide the developmental basis and methodology for the critical-thinking process, but it’s up to current thought leaders to mentor those around us to become the next group of progressive leaders. The philosophic questions we should be asking don’t require a doctorate, but they certainly do require the ability to think beyond...”*

- Chief Marc Bashoor, Executive Editor of FireRescue1 (Sept. '19)

# HOW IT WORKS

Fire service members responded to the below prompt:

The essay competition is not about reiterating known problems in the fire service, restating current doctrine, or drafting theoretical essays; it's about offering original thought and identifying actions to address the specific root causes of institutional and interpersonal resistance.

Thought-provoking essays will ignite discussions and challenge readers to understand & embrace their roles in a diverse and evolving fire service. We encourage new ideas to help foster a culture within the fire service that embraces both change and curiosity. Authors and readers of this essay should be motivated and challenged to act beyond the status quo using critical thinking concepts.

We encourage participants to focus on the substance of their ideas and put personal experiences in context without spending too much of their essays on personal stories. We also encourage you to address impactful change at every level of the organization so that the proposed solutions have a broader reach and contribute to overall organizational improvement.

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## GRADING CRITERIA

After the submission period closed, the 85 entries went through three rounds of peer reviewed judging process by our distinguished judges. Judges evaluated essays based on four key sets of criteria including:

1. Specific Solutions Offered
2. Potential Impact on the Fire Service
3. Quality of Writing
4. Intangibles

# WHAT DO THE WINNERS GET?

This contest serves as a gateway to enhance the contestants' opportunities. Not only does their involvement contribute to their overall career advancements, but it simultaneously gives the contestants the opportunity to voice their innovative ideas and ignite honest conversations based on their everyday accounts.

*All winners received a monetary prize 1st-\$3,000, 2nd-\$2,000, 3rd-\$1,000*

An additional recognition for the 1st place winner is the opportunity to present at the Texas A&M (TEEX) Leadership Conference in Texas, occurring from January 8 - 10, 2025, in Frisco, Texas.

*Winners are highlighted on platforms such as the Inside Darley video series, In Service Darley podcast, NFFF, Fire Engineering,*

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## 2024 JUDGES

The competition served as a catalyst to those from all ranks and functions in the fire service to put forth their transformative ideas. This is a peer-reviewed process recognizing courage in innovative thinking. Our judging panel represents diverse backgrounds, genders, and ethnicities.

*"I am always inspired by those willing to take a risk and voice their opinions for the betterment of the fire service! This essay contest was such a great opportunity for these participants to express their creative solutions for positive impact on firefighter survivability and quality of life. Thanks for sharing, they were truly outstanding!"*

*- Danny Kistner*



Burton Clark



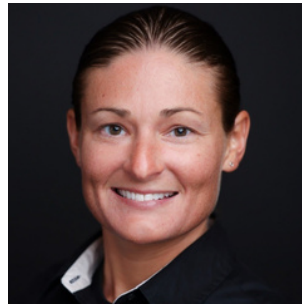
Vincent B. Davis



Kerry Henderson



Anthony James



Lindsay Judah



Danny Kistner



Lisa Mayers



LaRae Smiley-Sliger



Nick Russo



Martin Serna



Demond Simmons



Rachael Staebell



Bertral Washington

# JUDGES' INSIGHTS:

*"It was gratifying and informative to participate in the Essay project. As an emergency manager, I learned a great deal about the challenges facing the fire service in today's changing environment. Much of what I learned from the great essays can be applied to managing change in the EM community. Thanks for allowing me to participate, and I wouldn't hesitate to be part of similar efforts in the future."*

- Vincent B. Davis

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*"The quality and quantity of a discipline's literature measures its professionalism. Fire culture has life-and-death consequences. A firefighter's writing can contribute to the quality of life way beyond the firehouse. That is part of a fire service calling."*

- Burton Clark

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*"The Darley Essay Contest is a great opportunity for fire industry professionals to share their thoughts and ideas on a variety of pertinent topics. As a rater, I get the chance to learn something new from very passionate and engaged members of our fire service."*

- Anthony James

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*"Great set of thoughtful articles. The fire service continues to move forward with thoughtful and visionary individuals who are true scholar-firefighters!"*

- Demond Simmons

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*"I was honored to take part in the judging of this years' NFFF and Darley Essay contest. There was a level of intelligence, innovation and passion in proposals I had the chance to read, that certainly bodes well for the future of the Fire Service. Thank you to all who entered and congratulations to the winners."*

- Nick Ruso



# JUDGES' INSIGHTS:

*"I absolutely love being a judge for the Darley Fire Service essay contest. The insightful words and solutions that are submitted every year show how complex the fire service industry has become. This year's topic focused on leadership during change and it is clear that helping members navigate change is always going to be one of our biggest challenges".*

*- Kerry Henderson*

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*"As a 2024 Thought Leadership Essay judge; I would like to express gratitude to both Darley and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation®. This essay competition is just one illustration of an innovative way these organizations have invested in the enrichment of our industry. We can learn from individuals' by their approaches, experiences, ideas, and ability to share; as well as capitalize on collective thought which can lead to impactful action. We can learn from history, engage the current workforce, and develop our industry's future by leaning in with intentionality."*

*- Lindsay Judah*

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## WHAT NEXT?

We're seeking the next wave of thought leaders ready to challenge the status quo in the fire service. The ideas below represent bold thinking and a willingness to disrupt traditional doctrine. These writers took a stand, questioned long-held beliefs, and are shaping the future of firefighting.

Take the time to explore their perspectives, challenge their conclusions, and reach out to collaborate. This is a community of innovators that you could be part of next year.

Please consider applying for the 2025 contest and be prepared to question, disrupt, and inspire change.



We want to congratulate everyone who dared to submit an essay and especially spotlight the top 3 winners from this process! Enjoy reading these essays and please share your thoughts on the insights.

## **TOP 3 WINNERS:**

*congrats!*



### **1st PLACE**

Jamie Howarth  
Battalion Chief  
Anne Arundel County Fire Department

**Transforming Leadership in the Fire Service by Embracing Change & Inclusivity**

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### **2nd PLACE**

Chris Paskett  
Battalion Chief  
Eugene Springfield Fire Department

**Overcoming Resistance to Change: A New Approach**

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### **3rd PLACE**

Chris Truty  
Fire Chief (retired)  
Tri-Lakes Monument Fire Protection District

**Different Thinking: How the Fire Service Adapts to the Changing and Complex World**



# TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP IN THE FIRE SERVICE BY EMBRACING CHANGE & INCLUSIVITY

*Jamie Howarth*

## *The Imperative Leadership Change*

The fire service, revered for its traditions, culture, and camaraderie, is a testament to bravery and selflessness. However, as society evolves, so must the institution's leadership. The need for change in leadership practice is not just about keeping pace with societal shifts; it's about enhancing the fire service's effectiveness, morale, and inclusivity. This essay will explore the strategies and benefits of changing leadership in the fire service by fostering inclusivity, securing buy-in from all members, and integrating the younger generation into the decision-making process during non-emergency operations, thereby valuing their contributions and giving them the confidence to make decisions.

The fire service historically fosters an environment of "being seen and not heard." This leadership position disables newer members, cripples their confidence and does not prepare them for future leadership roles. As a leader, utilizing the team to its maximum potential helps the organization move forward. Newer members who are not making decisions or allowed input, in as little as five years, will be expected to be promoted to a leadership position within the organization without any experience in this area. This skill is essential to responding to emergencies and fostering a team approach. The leadership position of the organization should shift to allowing members to be "seen and heard." As a paramilitary organization, the fire service operates under a rigid command and control structure, which will be effective in emergency operations. However, it can sometimes stifle innovation and inclusivity in less critical environments such as the firehouse or during training.

## *Fostering Inclusivity*

As demographics and societal norms change, the fire service must adapt to remain relevant, appealing as a career choice, and effective in serving diverse communities. As more community members see firefighters who look like them, they are more likely to apply. Once a part of the organization, they must feel included and heard. Inclusivity is a critical component of modern leadership. Encouraging diversity must involve recruitment focusing on underrepresented groups and fostering a culture celebrating diversity. Implementing inclusive communication channels that allow for free and respectful exchange of ideas

without fearing retaliation, especially in non-emergency situations.

### *Securing Buy-In From All Levels in the Organization*

Change can be met with resistance, especially in a tradition-rich environment such as the fire service. To ensure a smooth transition in leadership styles, securing buy-in from all organization members is crucial. To gain buy-in, the organization can use vision casting, pilot programs, succession planning, collaborative training, mentorship programs, and inclusive training and station life. Pilot programs are implemented on a small scale to allow members to see the benefits of a more inclusive leadership approach before implementing it department-wide.

### *Practical Application for Success*

Change should begin at the grassroots or "boots on the ground" level. The net should be cast from various levels of the organization, which will overlap as the organization grows and changes. It is essential to empower members to be actively involved in the change process from the brand new member to the most senior officer in the organization. Tangible solutions include curriculum design and deployment, discussion forums and workshops, station-level engagement with battalion-level collaboration, transparent communication, contextualizing decisions, and feedback mechanisms. Practical application should incorporate real-life scenarios, role-playing exercises, and feedback mechanisms.

Curriculum development should be structured leadership and interpersonal communications that cover essential topics. These curriculums should be experience-level-based but also overlap for the team approach. The rookie in recruit school, the front line officer, battalion chiefs, and executive level management should be exposed to this material, but it should be suited for each experience level. Additionally, before promotion, there should be an officer development program for those already beyond recruit school that incorporates these leadership ideas and organization expectations. As the newer generations promote, they will have the foundation to systematically affect change positively.

Promoting a leadership library for continuous learning and conversation for inclusion. I have implemented this program for my battalion. This program is curated by a comprehensive leadership library that includes books, articles, and other educational materials focused on leadership, communication, and best practices in the fire service. The library is accessible and available to all members, allowing for engagement at every level. It also allows for meaningful conversations and best practices while team building. Initially implemented as a

pilot at the station level, it has increased to the battalion level. As this program has evolved, members are contributing by donating materials to the library allowing everyone to grow and succeed together. This contribution also allows them to feel a part of the process and provides buy-in.

Feedback mechanisms should establish clear and accessible avenues for members to provide feedback on the changes and feel their voices are being considered. This avenue helps reduce anxiety that is fear-based. This feedback should be communicated with transparency and viable solutions.

By prioritizing inclusivity, communication, and continuous learning, the fire service can transform its leadership culture from passive compliance to active engagement, creating progressive leadership. Through these initiatives, organizations can build a foundation of trust, respect, and shared purpose, ensuring that every member understands the "why" behind their actions and feels empowered to contribute meaningfully to the mission of serving and protecting their communities.

*"The fire service is stronger because of diversity – in thought, background, experience, race, gender and sexual orientation."  
-Paul Darley*

# OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE: A NEW APPROACH

*Chris Paskett*



As with most anything we do, practicing curiosity and understanding “the why” helps us ask the right questions and solve for the true problem (Schein, 2016). We already know some of the organizational barriers to change. We also understand change can evoke human emotions like fear, loss of control, and discomfort (Dahl, 2011, Stouten et al., 2018). Specific to the fire service, this might manifest as fear of minimizing the fire suppression part of the fire department, loss of what we knew to be true our entire careers, or discomfort as the fire department we grew up in, and the culture we love potentially morph into something different. This can present as leaning into the status quo, throwing up roadblocks, and resisting.

In my 25 years of trying to enact change in the fire service, my experience has been that failed change had nothing to do with the caliber and quality of the people involved or the solution itself. It was usually a barrier we did not plan or solve for, most often cultural and human resistance (Creasy, 2024; Hill & McNulty, 1998; Mengstie et al., 2023), poor communication (Hiatt, 2006; Somlea, 2023), or organizational process and technology (Lorenzi & Riley, 2000). Fire departments can be prone to make changes based on past practice, anecdotal experience, and a sense of “felt difficulty” (Wei Ma et al., 2018, p. 17), without the data, vetting, and best practice to support it. Change can be tricky because the individual components must be knitted together: define the problem, create and vet a solution, effectively communicate the solution, make the change, measure the change, and institutionalize that solution within our organizations. There are so many places where our change efforts get derailed, focusing on one area alone (like culture or communication) does not guarantee overall success.

## *A Fire Service Change Management Consortium*

If fire service organizations had a roadmap for change customizable to the institutional and interpersonal concerns of their specific organizations, it would be a game changer. The creation of a nonprofit fire service change management consortium could help. The purpose of a change management consortium would be to support fire departments in successfully landing their change initiatives by making low-cost change management consulting available. The consortium would be composed of fire industry and business leaders trained in change management, and who understand the unique industry challenges and dynamics when trying to enact change in the fire service.

The intent of the group would be to foster successful organizational change by helping create a roadmap for the change. Change maps or templates help an organization to clearly delineate the problem and why it is crucial to solve it (Anderson & Anderson, 2010). It identifies what the leadership message will be (Beer, 1980; Kanter, 1992), when and how often it will be delivered, and how to highlight small wins along the way to sustain momentum (Kotter, 1996 & 2005). This helps avoid false starts, sustains forward progress, and emphasizes solving for challenges as they arise. Whether the desired change is focused on culture, structure, people, or process, this consortium would be about giving departments the mindset, tools, and skills to overcome mechanical and psychological barriers that organizational change often presents.

### *How the Consortium Could Work*

In this model, fire departments looking to make significant change in their organizations would identify the root problem and several potential solutions to their issue before initiating the desired change. They could then contact the change consortium and consult with individuals capable and willing to help for a much lower cost than a private consulting firm. This could be guiding a training section through a new way to deliver classes, coaching a department who is crafting new mission and vision statements, or creating a change map for an agency who is considering a modified deployment approach in response to built infrastructure changes in their community.

This change management group would ask questions to ensure the correct issue is being addressed, help the department identify a proper change management template, and assist in mapping a realistic timeline for implementation. They would also point to common pitfalls, help tie the change to values already existing in the department (Burnes & Jackson, 2011), and help answer the inevitable question of "how does this change affect me?" In short, the consortium could help departments understand what institutional and interpersonal barriers may be present before the change initiative is implemented and make a plan to address those early in the process.

### *Summary*

Change can be complicated because people are involved. Focusing our efforts on one solution to the exclusion of others may not fix our industry wide issue with resistance to change. The fire service needs help to deeply understand how a successful, holistic change management process works, and a nonprofit change management consortium could be the mechanism that gets us there. I am confident there are individuals in our industry who possess the skills and

knowledge to make this a reality. I am happy to step forward in this arena to assist fire and EMS departments to arrive at vetted, sustainable, and reliable solutions faster. I truly believe this innovative idea has the ability to influence how the fire service approaches change globally, and set a new standard for positive, well-planned change regardless of the initiative.

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# DIFFERENT THINKING: HOW THE FIRE SERVICE ADAPTS TO THE CHANGING AND COMPLEX WORLD

*Chris Truty*



As fire chief, the city manager lets you know a new business is requesting an unusual type of participation from the fire department. You call your leadership team together and lay out the request. You watch your team dialogue respectfully reminding each other that the department's future vision and values statements include versatility. You are not surprised at the interaction as your leadership team's effectiveness scores for both the individual leaders and the group collectively have been rising over the past few years as you have spent a great deal of time coaching them on how to think differently. Eventually, the team eagerly accepts the challenge and develops a high-level outline of how to involve a broad part of the department.

Historically, the fire service has relied solely on physical prowess to be the defining attribute of a good firefighter to the exclusion of the nurturing and development of the mind. To meet the challenges and complexities of the future and embrace change, the fire service must create a new culture, starting with its leadership, developing strategies to integrate tradition (where much resistance is rooted) with new ways of thinking.

What are the new ways of thinking? How does leadership learn them and then promote them? They are the creation of maturing mindsets that translate to strong forward-looking organizational outcomes and a readiness for the complex future while simultaneously strengthening an individual's mental health. It is strong leaders learning to take a deep hard look at themselves to know who they are and how they currently think (self-awareness) and what in their own mindsets needs to change before the expectation is placed in front of subordinates.

To create an environment that is ready for change, fire departments must address four dimensions: individual and collective thinking, and individual and collective behaviors. If leaders' thinking capabilities (or mindsets) are not matured, the success rate for behavior change will be limited. Leadership studies over the past several decades have shown a correlation between leadership effectiveness and mindset development. (It is unsurprising that most current leadership efforts focus on behavior as they are perceived easier to address.)

Adult development thinking is a growing and research-based leadership belief that strong and positive organizational change outcomes are correlated to the mental and emotional development of the minds, especially an organization's leadership. Most leadership models today focus on skills and competencies and while both are required for strong leadership, prolonged effective leadership that guides change must also include a developed or matured mind. Most adults do not have adequately developed mindsets for change. The positive of adult development is, unlike personalities, it is not stagnant. Any individual can personally and professionally grow, meaning that nearly everyone in the fire service has the potential of growing into a person or leader that is prepared for the versatility that the future fire service needs. Leaders capable of promoting and leading through healthy, successful, and sustained change need to have reached the stage of development which only approximately 25% of adults have attained.

So how does one go about developing its membership, especially its leadership, to a point where change and versatility are embraced, if not valued, as a positive?

- 1) Create a strategy for developing a department's leadership mindset.
  - a) Include versatility as a department value and promote it as an individual value.
  - b) Be aggressive about making values and a proper mindset a norm within the organization by using challenge coins, including it on department documentation, incorporating accountability, and recognizing when the values are upheld.
  - c) Create voluntary peer groups that meet frequently to offer support and coaching to each other strengthening themselves individually to manage group dynamics in a healthy way.
- 2) Communicate the vision, the strategy and the reasons for both.
  - a) Make sure that strategic planning processes include elements of a new value system that includes versatility and leadership development.
  - b) Provide regular communications that offers background on decision-making and the complexities of strategy development.
  - c) Promote and advocate your strategy and desired outcomes to elected officials.
- 3) In addition to competency development, prioritize and provide opportunities for change-related mindset development.
  - a) Include annually or bi-annually assessing where leadership staff is currently at in their adult development. Using the Leadership Circle Profile (or something similar), measure the current leadership's effectiveness both individually and collectively which can now be measured and set as a

baseline. Set baseline Leadership Quotients (a leadership measurement) for each rank.

b) Minimize rank structures by including people at all organizational levels with demonstrated interests and skills in specific areas of focus and change.

4) Be flexible about the strategy. Changing a culture takes time.

a) Role-play scenarios that require the department to embrace change and think differently.

b) Start from where people are currently. Be patient and flexible about speed and breadth of change regularly adjusting the speed based on regular surveys and feedback monitoring.

c) Work within the existing culture. Guide the existing ship in the right direction. Don't throw everything overboard and try to move everyone to a new ship.

5) Prepare for resistance. All change has its resistors.

a) Be ready for resistance by preparing how you will respond to their efforts.

b) Make an effort to understand perspectives and include the resistors to help them grow in their mindsets.

c) Respectfully challenge or reframe the traditional views when they appear as obstacles to change.

6) Set realistic goals

a) Create an internal committee that regularly assesses the ability to change and grow.

b) Provide methods of accountability such as feedback and coaching so people can see measurable progress and set development goals.

7) Celebrate efforts that recognize a successful change.

a) Clearly identify when a need to think outside-the-box should be considered. Don't hide it.

b) Include adult development benchmarks in promotional criteria. Make sure that new or climbing organizational leadership has the effectiveness to carry out the department's vision.

To overcome resistance to change for the purposes of the future, leaders must address all the elements of successful change management starting with mindsets. For the fire service to embrace change, it will be about fostering personal and corporate mindsets that are ready for the challenges of the future.

*STAY TUNED FOR THE 2025  
ESSAY COMPETITION UPDATES  
& FUTURE THOUGHT  
LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES!*



THE FIRE SERVICE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP COMEPTITION WAS CONCEIVED BY GARRY BRIESE AND BROUGHT TO FRUITION BY DARLEY'S COMMITMENT TO THE FUTURE OF THE FIRE SERVICE.

