The honor to have worked for the Washington D.C. Fire Department has been the greatest opportunity of my lifetime. It is and will forever remain the greatest job on earth regardless of the lean times and low moments.

Of my 34 years of service, 29 years have been in the capacity of an officer. It wasn’t easy overseeing subordinates who had more years of experience on the job and who were much older and wiser in years. They say experience is a tough teacher because she gives the test first and lesson later. One thing is for certain, failure will humble you and cause you to examine who you are and what you’re made of.

An ardent respect for the job and holding true the traditional importance of passing down good information has compelled me to share with the rank and file some lessons learned along the way. I also feel duty-bound to underscore concerns for recent changes in our operations, and the importance of maintaining the core principles and traditions that have sustained our city fire department for nearly 150 years.

1. **Humility & Patience.**

Humility with a dash of patience were ingredients that helped me gain the respect of my veteran firefighters and guide me into the officer I became. The humility was because I didn’t know a fraction about the job that my veteran subordinates knew. Humble yourself and accept the fact that your men can be your greatest teacher.

Patience. My father expressed to me on many occasions, “Things worth having don’t come easy.” It took years of mistakes and miscalculations on my part to navigate the road toward trying to be an effective leader. It takes a lot of work and
commitment and your progress is not easily measured, be patient and remember, “Things worth having don’t come easy, and it won’t happen overnight”.

2. **Protect Your Team.**

Another thing I have learned has been that being a good leader is not much different than being a good dad, my men have taught me this. Your crew are your kids and the fire department your family. If you take care of your kids and set the good example for them to follow, you build a bond and a cohesive relationship that nothing can breach, and you lay the foundation for a strong family that can succeed in fulfilling any mission. Your family will protect the family name at all cost and will always be loyal to the mission. The alternative however is creating a culture of fear and uncertainty where your people don’t feel protected by their leader, *(Dad)* or valued by their fire department, *(Family).*

3. **Knowing When to Break the Rules.**

Effective leadership goes beyond simply issuing orders and directives. It implores the individual to lead by example, to carry out the mission while taking care of his team. I have always expected my men to follow the rules…except when those rules get in the way of accomplishing our mission. The Rule of Law is used to govern and maintain order, to keep us safe. However, if one of your kid’s life hung in the balance would you not break every traffic law there was to get them to the hospital? If you intend to lead firemen and expect them to think and solve the unforeseen problems that lay before them, you must provide the latitude for them to make decisions without fear of retribution. The responsibility of a leader is to provide a shelter from the managers above for their working team below and to establish a work environment of trust. When the team feels that they have the control to do what’s right in order to accomplish the mission, even if it means breaking the rules, then they are more inclined to do the right thing and not abuse this fragile responsibility. Courage comes from within, however, our confidence to do what’s right is only limited by how trusted we feel by our leaders. When this is accomplished your team will give all they have to protect you, each other, and the organization. This same philosophy applies to officers. If officers are conditioned to work in a culture of micromanagement and punishment, they will be afraid to confront problems, take initiative, and will become stale officers. They will be
more concerned about following the rules out of fear of getting in trouble rather than doing what needs to be done for the greater good. And when that happens, mission failure.

We need to cultivate and foster leaders who know when to, at times, break the rules as they focus on accomplishing something more important, the mission of saving lives and putting out fires! The alternative is to develop puppet leaders who will blindly follow the rules despite the cost and will never make the difference for the greater good.

**Service & Sacrifice.**

It’s all about service and sacrifice. Our greatest icons in human history have been those mortal men and women who have served and sacrificed for their fellow man. From Mother Teresa to our beloved Dr. Jordon of the Burn Unit, these people have touched so many in a positive way that it’s hard to really measure the effect. Their selfless service and sacrifice have left an indelible mark that will be immortalized in every human being they have touched.

Deny yourself and always put others before you. The service and sacrifice to your team and those you serve in the community will be the legacy that you leave long after you have gone. This is the type of legacy that others will want to emulate and hold dear to their hearts.

**Integrity.**

The shortest lesson, however, the most important.

Integrity requires doing what’s right when no one’s looking, it’s that simple. This entails telling the truth, always. You will not gain the trust of your team nor your superiors if you can’t be honest and trustworthy. Everything is built upon this code.
Operational Concerns

SOGs.

The revised SOGs were implemented to allow company officers to take control and make command decisions in the absence of a BFC and the delay of responding companies. We have managed to take what was otherwise a good adaptation to an already great platform and turn it on its head. We have abandoned all common sense and turned this into a “check the box” exercise. It was never intended to substitute the SOGs that the D.C.F.D. has used for years but rather augment an already great system. NFPA 1561 establishes the framework for departments to follow and allows complete autonomy to shape the model that fits the department. Rural departments do not have the luxury of more resources and fast response times like we do in the District, so segments of NFPA1561 would be considered as more of the standard for them from which to operate. The D.C.F.D. on the other hand has the luxury of a minimum manpower standard and good response times. However, there are times where we may be operating with an abnormal box alarm assignment with increased response times and a BFC that is responding from a greater distance. This would be the situation where we would need to operate in stricter adherence to NFPA 1561. So, in actuality, “The primary factor in determining the fire department management style is the time it takes units to arrive on the scene”. That statement is taken directly out of the D.C.F.D. SOG manual. We cannot see the forest for the trees…

Two Block Staging.

GO-2020-16, Staging-Box Alarm Responses, OFC. “It’s common to have nothing showing on large buildings. Staging units two blocks out and not allowing them to carry out their regular assigned duties equates to lost time on the fire ground. This condition creates a more hazardous situation not only for our members but for potential victims that may be trapped in the structure. We have a window of opportunity to make an interior push on a fire and search for victims. The occurrence of fires burning faster and hotter and with the increasing characteristics of lightweight construction, our window of opportunity has narrowed exponentially”.

The above statement has been included in subsequent after-action reports. To date, no response received or explanation from the powers that be.
Managers must not only depend on the feedback from their rank and file but encourage it if they want to provide the best for their members and the community. Ignoring the rank and file while convening pretentious town hall meetings on core values is insulting to firefighters and unproductive. Engaging only leads to improvement when you are willing to listen and respond to your members.

Another important element that this order is detrimental to is the training aspect. Box alarms are our everyday training ground that has always provided an opportunity for our members to practice their trade of stretching lines and throwing ladders. GO-2020-16 removes this practice and it is starting to show on the fireground; it breeds complacency. This order was implemented to slow companies down and make the fireground a safer place. However, since its implementation it has had the opposite effect. It has already proven fatal to one of our citizens and remains an unforgiving impediment to our firefighters.

Driving fire apparatus safely is our duty and a requirement if we want to help those during their time of need. If you have more than 15 years on the job you have already seen a change for the good. The cultural change in our driving is coming about through education, training and the example demonstrated by responsible technicians. If the elements of your cultural change have a negative impact on the mission, you will not have the confidence of your rank and file. These changes must come about without compromising any of the highly valued aspects of our profession or by having a negative bearing on the mission.

Management does not like the phrase, “The job will always be inherently dangerous.” Nonetheless, it’s a sobering fact that will never change because we put ourselves in harm’s way to save and protect others…That is the mission.

A Closing Message:
I have always expressed to chief officers that the morale of your men and women will always be your greatest attribute in the fire department. When morale is high, job performance is high, and POD is low. We used to be a department that set the standard for others to follow and now we are quick to emulate what others do because some of our managers lack direction and confidence.

Their micromanaging work environment breeds complacency, low morale, and ineffective leadership.

We must adopt a management style that encourages our officers to be leaders and not puppets. We need to get back to the tried and true method of recruiting and cultivating smart aggressive firefighters and stop viewing the fire department hiring process as a social experiment, an experiment that will advocate a cadre of employees that resemble the moral decay of our society. We do not need firefighters that are confused about their sexual identity or who feel compelled to protest to the departments EEO officer when they have their feelings hurt. Their feelings are not protected by the constitution and it certainly does not rise to the level of workplace discrimination. I don’t know about you but if I have fallen through a floor trapped between burning floor joists of a basement fire, I’ll put my faith in the aggressive firefighter to come get me out. Sensitivity and feelings never put out a fire or saved the day, but the grit of a hard charger has! You may conclude that this statement is that of an old dinosaur, but I have always admired that passion and yearning desire of a firefighter that gives 110% on the fireground and then bears a bright smile through the soot and ash when done! Having a back step that possessed those worthy traits was an officer’s dream but make no mistake, it was a challenge. A challenge in the sense that you had to control and direct that passion, to know when to pull the reins in and when to let them go.

I encourage those of you who hold the traditions and values of the D.C.F.D. in the highest degree, to push yourself to be the best you can at the level you choose to serve. Consider taking the promotional exam and challenge yourself to be the best. 

**Become a leader with heart and sincere ambition, yet don’t let your ambition cloud the way of your principles.** Serve with dignity, pride, and serve with a purpose and I promise you this, the traditions and values of the D.C.F.D. will remain sovereign and protected, and the job will forever remain the greatest job on earth.

Stay low and listen…Godspeed!