

Monthly Message from the Chief

Team is a word that is overused. The popularity of this positive term is understandable, but I find that it is often used to simply define a group of people with a common purpose. A team is much more than that.

While preparing a presentation for the opening of the Ventura County Fallen Firefighter Memorial last year, it struck me that firefighters embody the true meaning of the word team. We have a defined mission. Within that mission we have goals and objectives. We train to achieve them. We seldom act alone. We are most effective when each of us does our part and are confident our teammates will do theirs.



CAL FIRE is comprised of many teams, but the overall team includes the management, supervision and support of those that deliver emergency and routine services both externally and internally.

Like a professional sports team, our department's complexion reflects the influence of its ownership, management and coaching. Governors, agency secretaries, directors, chief deputies/fire marshals, deputy directors/region chiefs and unit chiefs/staff chiefs shape our programs, regions and units by invoking philosophies, values and systems in which they believe.

We experienced a number of shifts in organizational philosophy during the tenure of Chief Grijalva. I believe those shifts were beneficial and have chosen to build on them. Three philosophical elements I believe to be of particular significance in addition to my already-voiced belief in a recognized chain-of-command are:

1. Everyone in CAL FIRE should feel free to respectfully voice their opinions and ideas without fear of retribution.
2. Everyone should have an avenue to contribute to the improvement and success of CAL FIRE.
3. CAL FIRE should have strong centralized policy and decentralized authority to implement policy in order to effectively deliver services.

While I believe all of these are necessary for the development and maintenance of a healthy team, I am going to concentrate on the third element.

Recently, I made some clarifying comments regarding my expectations of adherence to chain-of-command. These clarifying comments elicited further

questions. These questions focused on the interaction between the roles, responsibilities and authorities of program, region and unit personnel.

In describing chain-of-command in my April message, I stated, "Our programs have program managers at the Sacramento and Region levels. Any time the services of a unit or region employee are requested, or direction is given by Sacramento staff, the request or direction should be channeled through region and unit management. Correspondingly, region program managers are expected to go through unit management."

My primary concern is that I do not expect any supervisor or manager to give direction to an employee at any level who is not a direct report that interferes with the priorities established by that employee's supervisor absent some exigent circumstance.

That was taken by some to infer that program managers were somehow disempowered. Far from it! This goes back to the philosophy of having a strong centralized policy. I expect program managers to be the guardians of policy. It is their responsibility to shepherd the process that establishes policy, evaluate the effectiveness of it and maintain vigilance over the implementation of it. When policy is established via publication in our issuance system, I expect that it has been vetted appropriately and that all of our managers and supervisors are responsible for compliance.

I expect Region and Unit Chiefs to be intrinsically involved in establishing and evaluating our policies, as well as implementing them. They are to be held accountable for them. Successes and suggestions for improvement should be shared with program managers in order to improve our practices.

Our strength as a team and how successful we are ultimately depends on cooperation, coordination and communication.



Del Walters, Chief
Director