

Eric J. Russell

In Command of Guardians

Executive Servant Leadership
for the Community of Responders

Second Edition

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For Pop

James F. Russell

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As a child, I never had to look for a hero

As a son, I never questioned if I was loved

As a man, I never had to seek a mentor

*As his witness, I never can say that granite
doesn't crack*

*A friend asked me years ago, "Besides your
Dad, who do you look up to?"*

My reply, "No one."

Foreword

The emergency services have a long history of being at the ready and fulfilling their missions by responding to crises of all sizes and magnitude. Today, the emergency services have developed into quite a diverse vocation ranging from volunteer responders who serve their communities with fidelity and courage to those who are highly trained professionals whose careers are emergency prevention, response, enforcement, and recovery. The emergency services have enjoyed a tremendous amount of development in the applications of science and technology in “the business.” However, the focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) has resulted in some serious side effects for both the responders and the citizens they serve.

As society at large moves at an ever-more fast pace and grows in technological complexity, the emergency services begin to require a different kind of leadership. Emergency services agencies have become complex organizations that have historically run on a paramilitary model of management, adopted from colonial times, and kept to muster, organize, and direct the responders on the chaotic scenes to which they were expected to renormalize. In early times, fire departments were mere assemblies of local men who responded when an alarm was made. Now, they have evolved into personnel and equipment that require many layers of responsibility and multimillion-dollar budgets. As a result, the focus for governments is to find those among the ranks who can manage the personnel, logistics, and budgets that provide services to the whole community. That is where, like business, the acquisition of technology in terms of computer record-keeping and communications becomes necessary to manage the affairs of the department within the context of the whole municipal organizational structure.

Governments are bureaucracies for the sole purpose of centralizing power, accountability, and maintaining control of public assets. For example, the Declaration of Independence, the foundation of America, expresses clearly that separation was needed due to the oppressions of the British Monarchy—skepticism, and even sometimes cynicism, about government is part of the fabric of American culture. In fact, it almost seems to make people feel “more American” when they speak about “the government” in derogatory ways. Bureaucracies are inefficient, at times

nonsensical, and the citizen typically interacts with the bottom ranks that have little or no power to do anything outside of the prescribed policies and protocols. Unique problems require unique solutions, and low-level bureaucrats are not empowered to innovate in their roles. But because bureaucracies are hierarchical in structure (and, I would argue, dominated by patriarchal perspectives, attitudes, and functioning), most of the messiness of community problems needs effective evaluation, equitable prioritization, and solutions that serve the citizens rather than the rote public policy book. Governments need both sufficient strength and flexibility in order to withstand the demands of an ever-developing and complex society.

Governments need to be resilient in order to serve the citizens under their care. The aforementioned ambivalent relationship citizens have with “the government” whitewashes over the fact that many societies are very decentralized in their governmental structures, particularly on the local level. But that does not change the mental models of the citizens whose most dominating lessons in civics come from major news outlets. Again, technology has enabled the news to not only report what is going on in the society but also shape society in its perspectives, attitudes, and values. As such, when a citizen walks into his or her local government center with a problem, bill to pay, or concern, he or she is met oftentimes with an objectifying experience, not simply because the low-level bureaucrat with whom he or she meets is an oppressor but rather that preconceived expectations are loaded into the hearts and minds of the citizens. Moreover, the pat answers of “that is not allowed by policy” or “you’re in the wrong line, you’ll need to move to that one” infuriate the citizen who has little time to serve the government rather than be served by it. The clerk does not enjoy this kind of interaction either; he or she would love to enjoy just a little bit of latitude to adapt and overcome some of the rigidity that is inherent in bureaucratic structures and processes.

The emergency services exist within the governmental bureaucratic structure but add to it the paramilitary styles that were found useful in managing emergency scenes. Rank structures are intended to provide clear lines of authority and levels of responsibility. Emergencies are those human events that are time-pressured and will likely result in several harmful consequences if conditions are not adequately mitigated in time. On the scene of a crisis or disaster, incident management system structures and functions have improved the efficiency and effectiveness of emergency response. The command and control style of leadership works well, and everyone understands that time constraints and threats of human life leave little room for deliberation or debate about incident operations plan. Therefore, it is vital to have a management team whose knowledge of emergency work and management systems produces the best outcomes that each situation will allow. Competent authoritative leaders are needed to serve in these roles.

Diversity and inclusion in the emergency services is a slow-going process. Even with the advent and development of advanced technology and training, the “big man” still seems to be the idealized responder in the mental models of the organizations and the communities they serve. But all things continue to evolve and emergency services are changing. Patriarchies position power centralized at the top levels that often encourage cronyism—a practice that tends to foster toxic leadership.

Those in power tend to self-insulate by surrounding themselves with like-minded people.

Changes always happen with a certain amount of energy, tension, and pressure between forces. Traditions are used to stabilize organizations and groups so that their evolution is manageable and sensible. One thing that we know from trauma studies is that one's restored sense of stability and control is a vital aspect of recovery from a critical incident. Innovations are called for when the traditional, customary, or established doctrines and rituals no longer suffice. The more conventional the organization, the more discomfort and direct dysfunction from obsolete policies and procedures must be endured before the necessity of innovation becomes inevitable. As such, the innovators and early adopters of new ideas seem to come up against formidable resistance from the conventional-minded when trying to make changes in the organization.

For one to be a citizen of a nation is a sacred thing. For one to be a member of a community is wholesome and cultivating. Our national ethos was once about citizenship but has been steered toward consumerism. Advertising jingles as old as "hold the pickles, hold the lettuce, special orders don't upset us... have it your way" have enchanted the citizen because the "customer is always right." Certainly, business figured out that it could better serve its customers through being flexible in its production, sales, and delivery of its commodities. Public services needed a boost in public relations but not when this is merely a reification of propaganda and the manufacturing of consent. Rather, the government as a whole needs a new relationship with its citizens. The anti-governmental sentiments that the founders of America expressed and promoted were based on aristocratic command and control. Undoubtedly, Benjamin Franklin was a man of liberty and innovation. So too, emergency responders must be prepared, supported, and empowered to serve citizens. Being a taxpayer does not make one a customer of the government any more than does being a citizen of the USA endow him or her with the inalienable rights of a human being. Public servants must come into their roles with a desire to serve rather than a desire for power and control, even when power and control to renormalize a situation are needed.

In the current state of affairs, the dominant bureaucratic ethos advanced with technocratic speed and has made government more efficient in many ways but less and less personal for the citizens and those who serve them. Bureaucracy still functions to ensure stability, accountability, and control of public assets. Technology allows for many systems of management and communication to move faster than ever before. But, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the emergency services are part of the helping professions. We cannot lose sight of the fact that emergency services are about serving people. We cannot lose sight of the reality that emergency responders are citizens and come from among the citizenry to serve their communities.

Some of the innovations now needed in the emergency services must come from some other disciplines. We need some new ideas and perspectives to improve the lives of our responders to make them more resilient and personally and professionally efficacious. Seemingly, the best leaders for the emergency services are ones that

come into leadership with a desire to serve. Leadership must cultivate, care, and empower its people so that services rendered can best aid our citizens. With a priority on caring for responders first, the responders will deliver the services efficiently, efficaciously, and with equity to the community.

We must build and sustain a better emergency responder for today. It is not just about making them work faster, harder, and longer than ever before through management systems and applied technology. Rather, it is about re-humanizing them in the context of their missions. So often, people do not even look past the uniforms. It takes a photograph in a magazine at the scene of a terrorist event or natural disaster, a grief-stricken responder holding an injured or dead child, to remind us all of their humanity and of ours. The traditional ethos of the emergency services tells us that these are the narrow and appropriate times to see our tough responders cry. But there needs to be more.

The latest literature on stress and resilience in the emergency services indicates that the leading source of stress for responders is organizational hassles—bureaucratic mechanisms. The objectifying process is said to offer fair, equitable, and accountable management of agency functions. All too often, however, the wheels of a bureaucratic process roll over the top of responders. Instead of doing the right thing, higher-ups often “do things right” within the parameters of the policy and procedure manual but are (in the very least perceived to be) executing personal agendas of power and control. This erodes social support and often fosters toxic competition for promotion, special assignment, and status among the ranks. The ethos of command and control drowns the desire to serve, and responders can, and will, lose sight of their mission. We do not hire apathetic, cynical, and depressed responders—we create them.

What emergency workers know is that they desire to become a firefighter, paramedic, emergency medical technician, police officer, etc. Like other caring professions, the knowledge, skills, and abilities are practiced in a way that often transforms the citizen into the rescuer, protector, and caregiver. Responders know that regardless of how vast and full their preparatory training is, they become the firefighter by fighting fires, the police officer by enforcing the law, the paramedic by providing prehospital care, and the hazardous materials or advanced rescue technician through engaging hazardous environments. For leaders to be servant leaders, they need to practice it. Like anything else, it does not come all at once, and many executive officers, administrators, and mid-level supervisors may be skeptical and hesitant about resurrecting their desire to serve and live it out bodily. It takes a lot of courage to set aside command and control in the office and replace it with service. All of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in the world cannot replace the values of care, compassion, and empowerment of human beings.

Dr. Eric Russell began his journey decades ago serving as a fire and rescue specialist for the US Air Force (USAF). His start did not begin in the usual paramilitary environment that most community firefighters serve in but rather in the military. He learned to understand and promotes the values of a command and control structure in the context of combat, emergency, crisis, disaster, etc. However, he experienced some of the by-products of the patriarchy that offended his

sensibilities as one who came into the work with a desire to serve. Dr. Russell is one who describes himself as an innovator balanced with a reverence for tradition. He recognizes the value of stability while acknowledging that life is an ever-changing dynamic process. That is, evolution is a process that requires a certain degree of energy, intellect, and fortitude to get static structures and systems to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

Dr. Russell is an educator, researcher, and scholar in the emergency services. Not content with the current state of the command and control ethos, he sought to become an expert in servant leadership so that its application could benefit the emergency services. But the lessons Dr. Russell learned and the paradigmatic shift he experienced have actually led him to see that his initial vision could be broader and deeper than he imagined at first blush. In the continual dialogue about increasing the professionalism and efficacy of emergency response, Dr. Russell's work actually lends itself to initiating sustainable organizational change. Changes that can occur at all levels of emergency work but also transform the relationship that the public has with its responders.

In the past, various leaders in the emergency services paved the way for people like Eric to go to college and advance their education to accompany their work experience. Many leaders secured business degrees and began importing the ethos of business with concepts such as customer service, performance-based evaluation, risk management, human resources, zero-balance budgeting, and more. While well-intended, the principles of business came in the form of spreadsheets, quantified measures for everything, and data-driven decision-making. Now, this all sounds good and certainly works to some degree in business, but the objective of business is not just to protect the bottom line but also to profit and grow it. Public service is about serving citizens, not customers.

Salt Lake City, UT, USA

Rodger E. Broomé

Preface

Over the past decade, empirical works discussing servant leadership for the emergency services have been published; however, they primarily focus on the responder. This book advances these works, focusing now on how the practice of servant leadership actually works within the emergency services and the benefits derived from it. Though this work can be used at all levels, it is specific to command level leaders within the emergency services career field.

To bring the power of this philosophical approach toward leadership to life, this work grounds itself in the foundational aspects of identified servant leadership characteristics (Spears 2010), virtuous constructs (Patterson 2003), and attributes (Laub 1999). The text demonstrates how the many aspects of the philosophy come together as a system in order to strengthen the community of responders. Additionally, this work attempts to make the case to industry and academia with regard to increasing servant leadership-specific curriculum for current and aspiring emergency services officers.

The second edition expands *In Command of Guardians: Executive Servant Leadership for the Community of Responders* by infusing research findings into relating chapters throughout the text in order to bring to life the philosophy. This is done to merge current research and theoretical ideas involving responders and servant leadership.

Aspects of a qualitative research study involving the interpretation of company-level fire and emergency services officers regarding the role and characteristics of leadership are used in multiple chapters of the text allowing for a richer understanding as to why the philosophy matters. Russell et al. (2015) originally published the research findings in the journal *Servant Leadership: Theory & Practice* which are used in areas of this book with permission of the journal's editor. Russell et al.'s (2015) grounded theory study involved 15 uniformed and sworn fire and emergency services officers as participants. An overview of the study is given in Chap. 4 to spotlight the background of the research as well as a short discussion of the findings as they relate to servant leadership literature. Because the nature and the impact of this research project enhance the heart of this book, the author is thankful for the permission to reuse the work.

In this second edition, new chapters have been added to discuss the concepts of the responder's cycle of trust and fostering responder servant-followership: concepts in need of cultivation throughout the professions. Each chapter goes in depth on the different aspects as they relate to executive-level leadership, how servant leadership impacts responders, and the successes realized by those who chose to be servant leaders.

Additionally, chapter summaries offer case studies and questions as meditative exercises, giving the reader a rich secondary learning experience that comes from the reflective critical-thinking process. The second edition of *In Command of Guardians: Executive Servant Leadership for the Community of Responders* grounds itself in existing empirical works involving both servant leadership and its place within the emergency services profession. It is the goal of the author to present the philosophy in such a way so the reader not only gleans a rich understanding and applicability of the concepts but also is inspired to foster servant leadership within their own organizations.

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To my wife, my happiness, and soul mate. You encourage and strengthen me to always strive to be better than I was yesterday. You are my gift, the love of my life.

To God goes all the Glory.