



REDLINE

LEADERSHIP L.L.C.

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT COACHING FOR PUBLIC SAFETY LEADERS



Issue 35-February 2026

Tip o' the Hat!!

This month's "Tip o' the Hat" goes out to Pat Mertlich, South King Fire (WA), for his promotion to Battalion Chief-EMS! Pat's got into the fire service after a cousin and a "friend" of his were going to a local tech school to get an application to test for position of firefighter. Pat said "get one for me too" and the cousin and so called "friend" failed to bring one home, likely recognizing he was stiff competition for few positions. Despite the delay, the future Chief began volunteering (2007) with East Pierce Fire and Rescue where he remained for about 9 months until securing a position with SKFR in late 2007.

Chief Mertlich committed to a life of education and training, achieving the rank of Eagle Scout, not an easy feat. Additionally, he holds an Associate of Arts and Science-General Education from Pierce College in Puyallup, Washington as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Fire Service Administration from Eastern Oregon University.

Leadership isn't just in his newfound role as Battalion Chief. Across his career he has held the position of IAFF Local 2024 Secretary, is a longstanding member of the Strategic Leadership Planning Committee and currently leads the Peer Support Team. Outside of work, he enjoys volunteering with his kids' school mentorship program.

There are 3 important ladies in Patrick's life: wife Jennifer, Kellan-10 and Halle -11. Music, basketball and volleyball keeps them all very busy.

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"Ol' 1 Star!"

When I was a Battalion Chief, I had a young man on my crew that I referred to as my "1 Star Lieutenant." You see, he was a promoted officer but only had one Maltese Cross on his Class "A" uniform, signifying 5 years of service. Now, in all reality, that one cross can represent a day under 10 years as we only update them every so often. But in this case, it didn't. He was a young team member, that had done well.

Do I believe we should be promoting "1 Star" Lieutenants? Absolutely! And I'll tell you why, but first, a bit of a story.

I was starting class the other day, in the usual manner, with introductions. I have a slide that prompts the students to share their "Name, rank and experience." It usually sounds something like "My name is Kevin, I am a Lieutenant and I have been here 8 years." So often, they proudly emphasize their service time, believing that is what is meant by "experience." As firefighters, we are so proud of our service time, like the passage of time itself has developed us into just what the organization needs. And sometimes it does. But sometimes it doesn't. What's the difference? Well, that is easy....it's what you do with your time. Experience!

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When asked for his Words of Wisdom, Chief didn't hesitate for even a moment; "It never hurts to help, get involved!" Then he shared a story about something he used to say on every response. As the airbrake was set, he would say to his crew, "Let's go make a difference." Then one day, he forgot to share it and quickly, his engineer exclaimed, "Hey, you're supposed to say, 'Let's go make a difference.'" I guess his words had an impact after all!

Congratulations, Chief Mertlich on your promotion to BC! Well deserved!



"Ol' 1 Star!"

While this may seem obvious, it really requires much more intention than just hanging out at the station, the same station, for 20 plus years, as one person I mentored had done. One station, on the engine, over an entire 20-year career is one experience! When you are looking down the road, thinking "I'd like to retire as a Battalion Chief" imagine what that job might be, what you might have to do. The job will likely entail more experience than you will get just riding an engine. That job might involve planning, communication, staffing, knowledge gained working in the Fire Marshal's office, administrative expertise gained working in the front office while on light duty, learning about joint labor management experience you might gain as a union officer or committee member, etc. Go out get those experiences before the position opens to you so you are the best candidate.

Perhaps the role you want to hold requires some training, education, certifications or credentials. Again, go out and get them before that position opens up so you don't miss an opportunity to someone else who has prepared themselves better.

Be like "Ol' 1 Star" and get everything you need to be prepared to be successful in that role you want to hold.

"Help! But I don't know how!"

Hopefully you read part one of "A Mind on Fire..." and took something from it. In as much as the first part is out there, I wanted to take some time to share some of my experiences and thoughts on PTSD. I want to share so that others may realize that this isn't easy, for anyone. It's a tough topic on those that are afflicted as well as those that work with or lead them. But, before I share anything, I want to remind everyone I am not an expert in this field, have had very little training, and very little experience dealing with it.

First, I will say that I haven't really suffered from PTSD; at least not significantly. And my trauma didn't come from calls; it came from some of those that I had to work for and with. I currently have and have had in the past some particular triggers that result in low level anxiety or disgust but even that is waning as I get further from those days and set clear boundaries of who I will and will not work with.

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EXPERIENCE: *noun: knowledge or practical wisdom gained from what one has observed, encounters or undergone.*

Are you getting the EXPERIENCE you need for your growth and/or success?

"Help!" (cont.)

Because I haven't suffered PTSD, I don't really understand it. Because I don't understand it, I don't know how to respond to it. My approach to understanding it better is to learn about it from multiple angles; from first hand experience of those afflicted and by developing my emotional intelligence. Obviously, I have been talking with Chris B. about his experience, but I recently had a conversation with another person who has suffered silently a bit over their career. By putting these articles out there, I hope to make myself available for the convo. It's bigger than we think. I worked with Chris back when his struggles started. I tried, but I feel like I failed him because I didn't know what to do. We chatted as openly as possible, I worked as his sounding board, but I don't think I pushed him toward a support system. Or didn't push hard enough. Perhaps I could have walked with him to get him in. I'm not sure.

Eventually, I moved away and we lost touch for a while as I could support from afar. I watched as he continued to struggle, and as a "helper," I felt powerless to help. I withdrew because I felt I had nothing to offer. I tried to support his family through minimal communication but looking back I could have checked in with his wife more, sent him a text every now and then to let him know I was still here. I'm trying to do better.

It's been nice to reconnect with Chris and to get his story out there. I hope this helps him heal and gives others a voice!

Graduation!!

I had the pleasure of traveling to Oregon to celebrate the commitment and success of the individuals from Redmond Fire Rescue in December of 2025 with graduation ceremonies. It wasn't fancy, but it represents the efforts of all and their willingness to reflect and question themselves in an interest of greater self awareness. Our conversations often reveal vulnerabilities these leaders have as well as areas of opportunity for growth. Congratulations to all and thank you for sharing your journey with me. I am forever grateful for our time together. And a big Thank You to Chief Ryan Herrera for entrusting me with, and making the investment in the growth of the members of the department.

I love this photo as it got everyone involved in the celebration, and the kids were a joy! Additionally, it represents all who were impacted by the commitment of their loved ones to personal growth! -K



Pictured Left to Right: Engineer Eli Peacock, Captain Rob Crye (plaid shirt), Engineer Aaron St. John (hat and lil boy), Engineer Brett Hulstrom (hat with glasses), Battalion Chief Josh Clark (blue plaid), Deputy Chief-Operations Dusty Miller, Me, Captain of EMS Luke Jerome, HR Manager Diane Cox, Captain-Training Matt Crawford, Battalion Chief Garrick Terry, Engineer Kyler Christiansen. Not pictured; Captain Kevin Broad-sword, Engineer Nick Addy. Also pictured: A whole slew of fun kids and supportive spouses.

“A MIND ON FIRE; Stepping Into the Scary Unknown ” (Part 2 of 3)

In my last article, I gave my firsthand account of dealing with PTSD in the fire service, how it uprooted my family, and almost ended my life. My goal in disclosing this very personal journey is for you to possibly see yourself in my story. If you're struggling, maybe you can relate. If you're in a good place, then maybe you can take the message and share it with someone who might be hurting.

Most people I've met struggling with PTSD will say that they needed to hit rock bottom before they were able to reach out for help. Sometimes they never get that chance. I realized that I needed help when I couldn't control the suicidal ideations that filled my head on the daily. Every situation led to the same "best possible solution" of removing myself from the equation. It is an irrational answer to the feeling of hopelessness and an easy out to ease our suffering. Our brain does not want us to suffer so it produces easy solutions to fix hard problems; suffering breeds desperation. I had gone from the feeling of not being able to control my thoughts to not being able to control my actions, and it scared me. It scared me to the point of finally realizing that I needed something more. Little did I know, the struggle would get worse before it got better.

I had gone through multiple therapists, many of them unable to understand the job and the emotions. I even had two different therapists quit our practice because they felt unequipped to handle what I was going through; nothing says you are broken like getting "dumped" by your therapist. Many struggling First Responders experience the same issue. A lot of therapists don't know about PTSD and most departments do not want to talk about it at a real level. Most people in the First Responder world mean well but legitimately lack the training, education, and skills to deal with emotional fatigue and PTSD as a reality we face. And if we are being honest here, there is still a sizable amount of people in the industry that refuse to accept the toll that this profession has on the members. An even smaller fraction of the population still can demean and condemn those who speak up. HR is still catching up with how to manage PTSD claims and in my experience will go out of their way to discourage and complicate the process.

The feeling of struggling alone or reaching out to someone and not receiving support is the number one reason we do not ask for help. We feel like we will be professionally and personally shamed or worse yet, have it affect our career. For those working in law

enforcement, the concern about losing their badge and firearm is rooted in longstanding historical realities. In the past, First Responders speaking up about their struggles were seen as a liability and while it's getting better, we still have a long way to go.

All these thoughts and feelings were swirling in my head when I decided to reach out for help. So began the lonely and bumpy road to recovery my wife and I would navigate mostly alone.

Asking for help should be a relieving feeling of hope but putting your faith in the hands of another in your most vulnerable time and saying "I need help" in a humbling and humiliating experience. Being met with blank stares and radio silence only compounds that feeling of shame and self-loathing. For me, it gave me the feeling of being alone on a sinking ship with no signal flares or life preserver. It was scary and painful.

Luckily for me, I found a therapist that was worth a damn and I had a wife that wouldn't take "no" for an answer. The moment I made the decision to get help, acknowledging we'd figure out the work stuff later and making my life the priority, the ball started rolling. I was

put in contact with Deer Hollow Wellness and Recovery out of Draper, Utah. An in-patient treatment facility, Deer Hollow specializes in PTSD treatment and recovery for military and First Responders. They are not alone in this field as there are dozens of facilities across the U.S. popping up as the mental health epidemic in First Responders skyrockets. The I.A.F.F. Center of Excellence was another option I considered, and I spent hours on the phone with them as they were immensely helpful. For me, the choice came down to wanting to remove myself from any fire service or fire union affiliation to try and ensure I could relax and let go of the stress I felt at work. I made the call and within 36 hours I was on a plane heading towards Utah and a chance to heal.



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“A MIND ON FIRE” (cont.)

Of all the tasks and challenges I’ve faced on the fireground, none were as hard as walking through that door into the unknown. Surrounded by strangers, in a strange land, I gave myself to the process with the hopes of a new life. Over the next 45 days, I worked 12 to 14 hours per day at becoming “okay” with my past and present traumas. We acknowledged and processed. We disclosed and practiced holding space for others. Myself and the thirteen other brave men and woman shared our lives and our struggles with one another, all of us with the hopes of removing the stigma and shame we carried upon our shoulders. The stories I heard and the growth I witnessed shaped my soul and opened my eyes. More importantly it cracked the veil I was living under, and it showed me I am not alone in my struggle. I grew as a man, as a husband, and as a father. Things got better for me, until they didn’t.

The skills and momentum I gained at Deer Hollow were powerful but short lived. Short lived, not because they were not valuable, but because I was missing the bigger picture. I learned the skills, but I didn’t put them into practice when I needed them most. Helmets only work if you wear them and emotional regulation only works if you practice it.

I felt good for 9-12 months after attending treatment. Riding the positive vibes and forward momentum all the way until I hit that first obstacle. To me, I had been to treatment, did the work while I was there, so to find struggle in front of me again was earth shattering. Repeating to myself that “it didn’t work” or “I guess I failed again” became my new motto anytime I felt less than happy. Not realizing that skills don’t get rid of life’s stress but simply help you to deal with it, I went right back to the daily fight for survival. At times, it was worse than before as I went back to working “the line” for almost two years. Two more years of sinking into the hole I had just climbed out of, not only still feeling the shame of my past, but also now I had the shame and guilt of putting my family through this once again. Having to make “that call” to HR again, having to deal with the “looks” or absence of looks from those I worked with. To deal with the embarrassment of it all again was panic inducing in and of itself. I could feel my life slipping out from under me again and that feeling of isolation and abandonment started to shade my judgments with a lack of self-worth.

To this point I had tried just about every treatment option out there; EMDR, IFS, brain spotting, medication, group therapy, talk therapy, psychedelics, conventional medication, and more. All of these have their place, but something was still missing for me, nothing to this point really resonated with me deep down in my belly. I knew the science as to why I felt the way I did but nothing was helping me feel better about myself as a human being. Nothing until I found the Warrior PATHH program in March of 2025. I’ve often told others that Deer Hollow probably saved my life, but Warrior PATHH changed my it.



Warrior PATHH is a peer led “re-training” program. Peer led because it’s taught by veterans and First Responders who have all dealt with struggle of PTSD, and who have all been through the Warrior PATHH program themselves. Whereas at Deer Hollow, I spent most of my time talking to therapists and doctors who had never been in a fire station or in combat, at Warrior PATHH, I spent 7 days with men and woman that have seen, heard and smelled the same carnage I had witnessed over the years. They used the same descriptive words I do when talking about my struggles. They knew the pain and sadness that is this life. I felt like I was finally having the conversations I needed back in 2019, and releasing the suffering I was holding on to. What Warrior PATHH gave me that I was needing, but didn’t know I needed, was a community of like-minded warriors, people who weren’t afraid to be open and vulnerable about the reality of the jobs we do and how it affects our home lives. It gave me the confidence I was lacking during my bouts of negative self-talk. The program is designed to help us learn how to “retrain” our brains and behavior patterns. As First Responders, we are trained to work as machines, and rightfully so, as we need to be able to work through the stress and emotions of witnessing tragedy. While responding, we must be able to momentarily shut down that part of us that feels shock and horror to give our all to the public we serve. It’s part of the job and it’s what makes the people that do the work so special. Continued

“A MIND ON FIRE” (cont.)

The problem lies when we take that training and apply it to our personal life. If we learn how to shut off all our emotions so we don't feel the pain, we simultaneously shut off all the good emotions too. We've all heard the term of feeling "numb" used when dealing with emotions and while it works for us in very small doses, it works against you when it wipes out all feeling. Warrior PATHH taught me how to be vulnerable around others and to be just as comfortable telling coworkers, friends, and family that I'm struggling as I would with my own therapist. Struggle is real and we do it every day, so we need to learn to struggle well, not poorly. It is not shameful to struggle, it's normal. Game changer! Once I realized the difference, I was able to shift my perspective on everything. The person who cut me off in traffic wasn't targeting me, he's struggling with his own issues. The rude barista at the coffee shop wasn't mad at me, she was fighting her own demons. We walk around feeling alone, yet feeling and thinking the same exact thoughts and feelings. We just don't talk about it, especially at the fire station.



Welcoming others into my life, and into my struggles, took the secret shame right out of my fight. I could stop worrying about what other people thought of me for having PTSD and started thinking about how to be the best dad and husband possible while continuing to educate myself on the science and treatment of my mental health condition. PTSD is not my life; it is just what happened in my life. Most people dealing with PTSD suffer equally from shame, guilt, and embarrassment as they do the physiological and mental effects. Breaking down those barriers clears out space for healing.



While not every day is perfect and I still struggle, I don't expect anything else now. I know I am going to struggle in life, but I know I have a community of people to fall back on, who don't judge me for anything I say. Having that back up in my pocket is a new and welcome feeling. A feeling of acceptance and grace for my old past so that I can focus on my new future.

In my next article, I'd like to finish out this series with what the fire service is doing right when it comes to mental health awareness and where the future of healing is going for First Responders. There are more options than ever for healing, we'll explore some of those, and talk about my hope for the industry.

- Chris Boone

This space left blank for you to journal some thoughts if you like. —K