



REDLINE

LEADERSHIP L.L.C.

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT COACHING FOR PUBLIC SAFETY LEADERS



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Tip o' the Hat!!

This month's "Tip o' the Hat" goes out to Mike R. Lawson, South King Fire (WA), for his promotion to position of Battalion Chief-Operations! Before I talk about Chief Lawson's fire service path, it's important to recognize his prior work. Mike worked for the Weyerhaeuser Corporation for 11 years, beginning as an intern while in High School. By age 22, he was managing the 24-hour international computer help desk with the responsibility of 40 employees! He filled several other roles at Weyerhaeuser, continuing to refine his leadership, teamwork and customer service skills which all directly translated to his work in the fire service.



Chief Lawson was hired by the legacy Federal Way FD (now South King Fire) in 2002 and has since worked his way through the ranks. One of his early mentors said "The day you stop learning in the fire service is when it's time to retire" and in that spirit, he developed a new educational plan for each year of his career, which has contributed greatly to his success.

Mike holds an AA in Fire Science, a Bachelor of Science in Fire Administration. Additionally, he has completed the King County Officer Development Academy and multiple FEMA funded classes including trips to the National Fire Academy. Closer to home, he completed the Federal Way Advancing Leadership program, a valuable experience sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce. Currently, Chief Lawson is identifying his next educational pursuits.

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"Apples to Apples...or Airports!"

I often hear the word "humility" as a value from those I am mentoring. Webster defines humility as "the quality or condition of being humble; modest opinion or estimate of one's own importance, rank, etc."

For some context, let me give you a little background. Recently, I was traveling to Denver from Helena, MT to help my daughter move. I was enjoying the peace of the terminal, along with the 13 other passengers in the airport, expressing my frustration that I was 20 minutes past boarding when I finally got an update. We're delayed. "Uh, yeah. Duh. Like almost 2 hours."

I received a text alert for the airlines that provided me with options; I could cancel, change to a different day, book a later or an EARLIER FLIGHT! "Yeah, that's what I want. An earlier flight." I grabbed a screen shot of the text that illustrated the stupidity of this airline indicating "that if I could turn back time" like Cher proclaimed possible, I would grab a flight more mid-afternoon. Maybe even one that's not delayed. How dumb can you be, you giant money grabbing airline profiting even while I suffer through a second "soda." I had to share with a small group of family and friends this atrocious display of horrible communication, lacking in detail, after all I teach leadership and effective communication is key to success as a leader and is a key component leading to firefighter fatalities in every NIOSH report I've looked at in the first 2 paragraphs I gotta take a breath!!! Ahhh...I'm ok. Sorry....

Today 18:05

Flight UA5784 from Helena to Denver is delayed because we need to avoid severe weather conditions. It now departs at 7:39pm on June 2.

You can rebook your flight to a different day, an earlier or later departure, or connect through a different city here: <https://gofly.united.com/wPxeNRX7hc>

If you want to cancel your trip, you may be eligible for a refund to your original form of payment. Visit united.com/refund to learn more about our cancellation and refund policies.

Confirmation number: E5T1NQ

"Apples!"

I'm ok. Now, let's think about this. I'm sitting here, at a tiny, regional airport, complaining about delays and the stupidity of the mega-airline. But....lets back it up a bit. In fact, let's "reverse order" this whole thing so you can get my full realization. Prior to sitting here, I walked through Costco, killing time as my wife shopped because....!

After being dropped at the curb, I walked to "TSA Pre-Check" like a celebrity, because I am. The agent was fun and engaging and I proudly presented my Real ID and stood for my photo. He told me, "Wait, something is wrong. The system, doesn't like something. Head for the counter and see what it is." I looked at my boarding pass and realized it was Denver to Helena...the opposite of what I was supposed to be doing. WTF....Where's The Flight! At that moment of realization, I recognized who the idiot is! Had there been a mirror, I could have gotten a good view of him.

I went to the ticket counter where the agent wasn't any help. "My god, is the world full of inept people?" I thought. Yes, and I'm the leader of the group. Recall....I booked my flight backwards!

I wouldn't be sitting here if, IF, **IF** only I had booked my flight correctly. Please understand, when I booked my flight, I accidentally booked it for this day but from Denver to Helena which is the opposite direction I'm going! All these people were doing their job, exactly their job, with sniper accuracy. Only one person in the whole formula was in error. Me.

So next time you see that you are "An island of excellence, surrounded by a sea of mediocrity," please take second to check it, check yourself, to see if **humility** really is one of your values. If it is, you might be the one that "has two thumbs and is wrong."



HUMILITY: *noun: the quality or condition of being humble; modest opinion or estimate of one's own importance, rank, etc.*

Do you recognize when you are not displaying HUMILITY?

Tip o' the Hat!! (cont.)

In addition to his duties as a BC, Mike has filled roles on the HazMat Team, Peer Fitness Team, with his IAFF Local and has volunteered outside of work.

Mike is married and has a son who recently completed his probationary period with Renton Regional Fire Authority.

Words of Wisdom: "80% of life is just showing up and it's what you do with the other 20% that matters!"

Congratulations Chief Lawson on your promotion to BC! You're going to do great!



I want to say Thank you to **Chris Boone** for sharing his journey with PTSD! Sharing the intimate details of what you have experienced took a lot of courage and vulnerability. I can't think a more important cause and I appreciate you helping to facilitate getting help for others that are struggling.

"A Mind on Fire!"

Since starting this series, I have heard from 4 different individuals that they, or someone they know has or is struggling. It's real. The thing you can do to help is to make sure those folks that need the help, feel recognized and supported. Walk with them, work to get them connected with the resources they need, let them know they are not alone. We all get busy with our job, our family, our hobby, whatever it might be. Watch out for those dreaded words, "I don't have time." But what could possibly be more important? Make the time.

“A MIND ON FIRE; What Are We Doing Right?” (Part 3 of 3)

When you're dealing with PTSD, it can be an incredibly lonely experience. The emotional highs and lows can be confusing, and learning to walk this new path—without a roadmap for yourself or clear policies for departments—can be difficult for everyone involved. Sometimes, when people don't know what to say, they say and do nothing at all. To someone already struggling mentally, this silence can feel like abandonment or a refusal to help.

Much like cancer awareness in the early days of the fire service, PTSD remains an awkward conversation around the firehouse. No one wants to think about it, and if you bring it up, some may question your commitment to the job. That stigma can leave firefighters feeling unheard, unsure of where to turn, or unwilling to speak up for fear of rocking the boat. Yet, over the years, I've learned something interesting from sharing my own experience: many of the same people who won't discuss PTSD at the beanery table will quietly reach out later to ask questions about themselves or a crew member. That reality reinforces what experts tell us—nearly 80% of first responders report experiencing signs and symptoms of PTSD.



So yes, the problem exists. We know it's there. Yet as an industry, we remain slow to discuss it openly. The good news is that conversations *are* happening—just in smaller, trusted circles. Not everyone wants to address these topics during formal training, with professional speakers, or in front of a room full of people. However, many are more than willing to talk within their tribe: the peers who stand beside them in the trenches and respond to the same traumatic calls.

Peer Support: A Game Changer

The IAFF Peer Support Program has been a game changer for the fire service. It trains IAFF members to serve as front-line advocates for their peers' mental health while creating a bridge to professional services. One of the most common complaints among first responders seeking therapy is that the therapist simply can't relate to the job. I've been there myself—I've had two therapists ask to end my care because they didn't know how to help me process what I was experiencing. That's assuming you can even get in to see a therapist in the first place.



When unions and departments committed to training “boots on the ground” to recognize crisis and guide members toward help, most people saw the positive impact immediately. The bond created through this job builds a level of trust that can take years to develop in a clinical setting. Peer support doesn't replace therapy; rather, it helps with the lead-up to seeking professional help.

Having peer support members work alongside Duty Chiefs to recognize burnout and promote emotional regulation time after traumatic calls is slowly creating a healthier culture. When senior members and officers talk openly about these topics, newer generations become more willing to carry that torch forward throughout their careers. Peer support is changing how the fire service responds to real-time trauma—but what happens when someone needs help beyond what a department can offer?

Expanding Resources

Thanks to social media and widespread internet access in fire stations across the country, resources are easier to find than ever. Most peer support teams now maintain extensive lists of websites, treatment centers, and training programs related to PTSD. One of the most notable is the IAFF Center for Excellence.

Continued



“A MIND ON FIRE” (cont.)

The International Association of Fire Fighters Center for Excellence

Working with a third-party mental health and addiction recovery organization based in Maryland, the IAFF Center for Excellence provides mental health, substance abuse, and addiction recovery services for active and retired members. While I chose not to attend the Center myself, I spent countless hours on the phone with their team. They listened without judgment and worked closely with my local union to ensure I received the help I needed.

I’ve spoken with many firefighters who attended the Center and experienced powerful post-traumatic growth that reshaped their outlook on life. For me, the decision not to attend came down to one simple reason: the dorms and classrooms are designed to resemble a fire station, complete with fire service décor. While some find that environment comforting, when I was struggling the most, the last place I wanted to be was another firehouse.

Beyond its East Coast facility, the IAFF Center for Excellence offers extensive online training for firefighters, peer support members, and clinicians who work with first responders. Topics range from substance abuse to emotional regulation, all tailored specifically to the fire service. Education—about symptoms, stress responses, and how to start uncomfortable conversations—is critical to personal and departmental growth. Normalizing these discussions allows us to show up for one another. This is about *us helping us*.

Not the Only Game in Town

Because every firefighter reacts to stress differently, the fire service has begun diversifying how it treats job-related PTSD. Not everyone needs inpatient care or intensive therapies like EMDR or CBT. Many just need information and a safe space to acknowledge what they’re feeling.

Peer support teams that emphasize preventive care—rather than focusing only on aftercare—can have a tremendous impact. Walk into a fire station today and you’re just as likely to see someone practicing yoga, breathing exercises, or meditation as lifting heavy weights. Through social media and platforms like YouTube, first responders are becoming more aware of the long-term damage of unmanaged stress—and learning how to counter it.

Flyers, resource lists, podcasts, books, and online communities are now common forms of PTSD education. Many departments allow physical training time not just for strength and conditioning, but also for self-care. Some have even approved out-of-service time after difficult calls so members can shower, work out, or call home. These moments allow the brain to catch up with what the body has experienced, resulting in clearer thinking, greater confidence, and better patient care on the next call.

Bridging Work and Home

Recognizing that this job affects more than just the firefighter, some departments now offer marriage retreats and family counseling. Many of us assume we should shield our families from the horrors we witness. While age-appropriate considerations matter, I believe our families should be the first people we educate.



“A MIND ON FIRE” (cont.)

My family saw me come home exhausted and irritable, but I never explained why. I never gave them the context for my behavior. I hear the same story from first responder spouses again and again: *“I had no idea what was going on.”*



As departments return to family events post-COVID, these gatherings offer vital opportunities to strengthen the work-to-home connection. Open communication leaves less room for shame and guilt to grow. When sharing becomes part of the culture, healing follows.

Spread the Word

Communication keeps us safe on scene—but for years, it stopped there. Once the fire was out or the wreck cleared, we went home and moved on. As the fire service has evolved, After Action Reports and debriefs have helped us learn from each call. Now, that mindset is crossing into emotional regulation as well.

Peer support members are increasingly reaching out after difficult calls—not just to review tactics, but to ask how those calls

felt. I know some people roll their eyes at that idea, but unless you’re devoid of human emotion, this job affects you. Talking about it doesn’t make you weak—it makes you honest.

Lessons Learned

I regularly meet with a group of retired firefighters, and every one of us shares the same regret: *we wish we’d spoken up sooner*. We need firefighters who are just as willing to teach stress management as they are ladder throws. Departments are bringing in respected leaders to bridge generational gaps in emotional healing. Being tough no longer means staying silent. Silence is dangerous—and sometimes fatal.

Local training consortiums are leading the way with up-to-date, science-based mental health education. Giving firefighters with lived experience a platform to teach others proves that PTSD doesn’t only happen in “other” departments. Honesty builds trust, and trust saves careers—and lives.

Wrap It Up

This article was both challenging and deeply personal to write. If I could leave you with one piece of advice, it would be this:

Talk about what’s bothering you with someone you trust.

Shame, guilt, and grief don’t disappear when ignored—they grow. Find your people. Be that person for someone else. PTSD is hard, but isolation makes it harder. Advocate for yourself. Advocate for your peers. We are in this together.

Thank you to Kevin Body and Redline Leadership for the opportunity to share my story. If you have questions, feel free to reach out to me at Caboone01@gmail.com.



- Chris Boone