

PAYING IT FORWARD

Leading With Purpose

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After 40 years in the fire service, Chief Randy Bruegman founded The Leadership Crucible Foundation to reshape future leadership with a focus on fostering courage, empathy, and humility in leadership positions.

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The True Measure of a Year: Leading Where It Matters Most

As this year comes to a close, I've been thinking about what really defines a successful year. Too often, in organizations, businesses, and government, we measure success by the numbers, budgets balanced, projects completed, goals achieved. We point to the roads resurfaced, the new facilities built, the contracts closed, or the calls handled.

All of that matters, but when you look at where we are today as a nation, divided in too many ways, struggling to find common ground, and questioning what leadership really looks like, those numbers only tell part of the story.

The real measure of success isn't found in reports or spreadsheets; it's found in people. In how we show up for one another. In the moments of courage, compassion, and connection that remind us who we are and why we lead.

Think about your own team for a moment. What moments stand out? Maybe it was the new employee who stepped forward when no one asked, or a supervisor who took time to listen instead of reacting. Maybe it was the morning a crew covered for a coworker who was struggling, or the conversation that helped someone regain confidence after a setback. Those moments don't make the annual report, but they define the culture you build every day.

Moments That Define Us

We've seen this play out across the country. From our firefighters and first responders in California who faced another devastating wildfire season, to the floods that swept through Texas and the tornadoes that tore across parts of the Midwest, men and women stood shoulder to shoulder, leading with courage and grace, even as some were on the front lines knowing their own homes had been destroyed.

We saw it in small business owners who kept their doors open when the numbers said they shouldn't, doing everything they could to support the people who depended on them. In the trades, crews worked through record heat, material shortages, and long hours, taking care of one another on the job site and refusing to cut corners just to get it done. In manufacturing, companies adapted production lines to meet new safety standards, choosing integrity over profit and setting an example of what responsible leadership looks like in action.

And in every one of those moments, whether it was a firefighter in the field, a foreman on a scaffold, or a business owner at a kitchen table, leadership wasn't defined by title or position. It was defined by purpose, courage, and the willingness to do what's right when it's hard.



You see it in the classroom, in hospitals, and across the nonprofit community, teachers, nurses, and volunteers showing up day after day, leading through compassion, not authority. That's leadership. It's not about a title or position, it's about showing up, serving others, and leaving things better than you found them.

We also see it in the quiet acts of kindness that happen in every community, not the ones that make headlines, but the moments that restore faith in who we are. For me, when I was chief, it showed up in the simple things, like being part of the Toys for Tots campaign, or working with the Family Justice Center during the holidays. Those efforts weren't about publicity; they were about people. I remember the faces of parents who came through our doors unsure how they'd provide a meal or a gift, and the relief that came when they realized they weren't alone.

Those moments stay with you. The boxes of food and toys were important, but what mattered most was what they represented, hope, dignity, and community. It reminded me that leadership isn't always found in boardrooms or briefings. Sometimes, it's found in the hands that pack a food box, the officer who volunteers after shift, or the neighbor who quietly shows up to help. That's the kind of leadership that sustains a community, one act of kindness at a time.

When Leadership Is Missing

The past several years have also reminded us of the other side of leadership, the void that's created when it's missing. We've seen organizations falter not because they lacked funding or skill, but because they lacked trust. We've watched communities drift when leaders stopped listening or started blaming, when fear replaced courage and accountability gave way to excuses. We've seen what happens when communication breaks down, when people retreat into silos, and when ego overshadows purpose.

We've seen it in government too, not just in politics, but in practice.



When collaboration gives way to competition, when long-term vision is sacrificed for short-term gain, and when the focus shifts from solving problems to assigning blame, everyone loses. The best public servants, whether they wear a badge, run a city department, or sit behind a council desk, understand that leadership is service. It's about doing the right thing for the people you represent, even when it's not easy or popular.

The Power of Service

I recently interviewed Craig Culver, co-founder of Culver's restaurants, on The Leadership Crucible Podcast, and our conversation left me thinking deeply about what it really means to measure success. Craig shared that after four decades of building one of America's most beloved restaurant brands, the true reward isn't found in sales figures or store counts, it's found in people.

"At the end of every year, it's not the sales numbers or store openings that matter most; it's the people who chose to stay, to grow, and to believe in what we're building together. That's the real measure of success."

— Craig Culver, Co-Founder, Culver's Restaurants

His words capture the heart of what leadership is all about. Success isn't defined by how much we achieve, but by how we lead, serve, and invest in others along the way. When we focus on building people, not just performance, the legacy takes care of itself.

When leadership at any level forgets that principle, progress stalls. Trust erodes. And the people who depend on that leadership are the ones who pay the price.

The Legacy We Leave

As we move into the holiday season and take time to reflect, I'd encourage every leader to look beyond what was accomplished and focus instead on how you led. Did you lead with empathy? Did you create space for others to grow? Did you help your teams find meaning in the work when the days grew long?



Those are the questions that define not just a good year, but a lasting impact.

At the end of the year, the true measure of success and leadership isn't found in what we built or earned, it's measured by the people we strengthened, the trust we earned, and the example we set. It's what endures long after the year is over. When our focus stays on what truly matters, people, purpose, and integrity, the outcomes have a way of following.

Whether you lead a firehouse, a business, a classroom, a construction crew, a nonprofit, a city department, or a team at the local grocery store, positive results follow naturally when you invest in the right things first. When leaders choose integrity over image and people over profit, success becomes more than something we achieve, it becomes something we leave behind.

As we turn the page on another year, I find myself reflecting not just on what was accomplished, but on what truly lasts. Each December, I think back on the projects completed and the goals achieved, but more importantly, I measure the year by the people I may have helped along the way. The doors that were opened for others to grow. The conversations that offered encouragement when someone needed a steady voice. That, to me, is the true measure of a year well lived, and of a life that leaves something meaningful behind.

Leading Forward

If the past year reminded us of anything, it's that leadership is less about what we achieve and more about how we lead through what's given to us. No matter what your profession is, the challenges keep coming. The pace doesn't slow. But in the midst of the clatter of opinions and outrage that too often replaces understanding, the best leaders keep their focus where it belongs, on people, purpose, and integrity.

As we move into 2026, the challenges before us won't be solved by louder voices or stronger egos, they'll be solved by leaders who remember why they lead.

Leadership has never been about power or position; it's about service. If we're going to address the problems we face today, we need leaders who aren't self-righteous, but self-aware. Leaders who will do the right thing for the people they're there to serve. Who lead with honesty, transparency, and integrity, and who put service over self every single time. That's the kind of leadership our communities, our organizations, and our nation need now more than ever.

Five Ways to Lead Where It Matters Most

1. Lead with Presence, Not Position

Leadership isn't about power, it's about presence. The people around you don't need another manager; they need someone who shows up with consistency, compassion, and clarity. Presence means walking the floor, not just watching the dashboard. It means checking in, not just checking boxes.

"Leadership is about being there when it matters most—not for the applause, but for the people."

2. Build Trust Before You Need It

Trust is the single most valuable currency a leader holds, and it's built long before it's tested. Be transparent, take responsibility quickly, and give credit freely. When people trust your intentions, they'll follow your direction, even though uncertainty.

"When trust is strong, challenges unite us. When it's weak, even small issues divide us."

3. Put People at the Center of Every Decision

Before making a decision, ask: Who will this impact? Numbers matter, but people matter more. Leaders who understand that create environments where others thrive, and when you take care of your people, they'll take care of your mission.

"'People first' isn't a slogan—it's a strategy for long-term success."

4. Protect the “Why”

Across every sector, business, nonprofit, and government, the pattern is the same. When organizations lose sight of their purpose, they grow disconnected from their purpose and the people they serve. The focus shifts from people to process, from service to self-interest, and from integrity to image. Over time, trust erodes, culture weakens, and the mission that once inspired others becomes little more than words on a wall. Staying anchored to the “why” is what keeps leadership authentic and impact lasting.

“When leaders protect the ‘why,’ they give their teams a reason to keep believing in the work.”

5. Lead for Legacy, Not Applause

Legacy isn’t built at the end of a career, it’s built in the everyday choices that define how we lead. The most respected leaders don’t chase recognition; they build people, create trust, and leave things better than they found them.

“When leaders choose integrity over image and people over profit, success becomes something we leave behind.”

Final Thought

As we move into 2026, I believe most people in our country, our communities, and our organizations are searching for something steady, something real. They’re looking for leadership

that unites rather than divides, that can debate without demeaning, and that listens long enough to truly understand.

We may not agree on everything, but we can agree on this: we’re stronger when we remember why we serve and who we serve. If we lead with that in mind, if we put people before politics, purpose before process, and integrity before image, then 2026 can be more than just another year. It can be the year we start to rebuild the trust, respect, and unity that hold everything else together.

Leadership has never been about titles or applause, it’s about impact. It’s about showing up with integrity when no one’s watching, about serving others when it would be easier to serve ourselves.

The world doesn’t need more volume; it needs more vision, leaders who steady the course when others lose their way. If we can lead with empathy, humility, and purpose, we’ll do more than strengthen our organizations, we’ll strengthen and empower the people within them. We’ll help heal our communities, rebuild trust, and remind others what real leadership looks like. Because in the end, that’s the work that matters. That’s the legacy worth leaving.

“The real measure of leadership isn’t found in what you accomplish—it’s found in what continues to grow after you’re gone.”

— Chief B



Chief B's Key Leadership Takeaways



- We don't have to agree on everything to move forward together. Unity isn't about thinking alike, it's about caring enough to listen, learn, and find common ground.
- Strong leaders don't avoid tough conversations; they engage them with respect. Debate should sharpen ideas, not divide people.
- Listening long enough to understand, not just respond, is one of the greatest acts of leadership in a noisy world.
- Trust is built quietly, in the follow-through, in the honesty, and in the moments when no one's watching.
- When we put people before process and character before results, the outcomes have a way of taking care of themselves.
- Protect the "why" behind your work. Purpose keeps us anchored when the pace quickens, and the noise gets loud.
- In the end, the legacy of leadership isn't what we accomplish, it's the lives we strengthen and the example we leave behind.

Leaders Are Readers

I believe that to be a good leader, one must be on a continuous quest to gain more knowledge. The leadership benefits of reading are wide-ranging. Evidence suggests that reading can improve intelligence and lead to innovation and insight. To that end, we provide a few suggested titles below for you to consider:


The Motive: Why So Many Leaders Abdicate Their Most Important Responsibilities
Patrick Lencioni

The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership
James C. Hunter

Dare to Serve: How to Drive Superior Results by Serving Others
Cheryl Bachelder

Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting Out of the Box
The Arbinger Institute

Lead Yourself First: Inspiring Leadership Through Solitude
Raymond M. Kethledge and Michael S. Erwin



As this year comes to a close,
I want to extend my heartfelt
gratitude for your continued
support and partnership.
On behalf of our Board
of Directors and National
Advisory Council, I wish
you and your family a joyful
holiday season and a new year
filled with health, purpose,
and possibility.
Thank you for all you do to
lead with integrity, to serve
with heart, and to make a
difference in the lives of
others. Each time you mentor,
encourage, or lend a helping
hand, you're paying it
forward in ways that ripple
far beyond what you see.
Together, we'll continue to
build leaders who lead with
purpose, serve with humility,
and leave it better than they
found it.