

PAYING IT FORWARD

Leading With Purpose

■ Volume 40

■ November 2025

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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 Cost of Winning

“Why Competing to Be Right Is Keeping Us from Doing What’s Right”

Leadership has never been simple, and in today’s environment, it’s anything but easy. Whether in business, government, education, or public safety, the pace is faster, the noise is louder, and the focus has shifted. We live in a time when winning has become more important than doing what’s right.

You can find it everywhere, in government, business, and education alike. In politics, it's no longer about solving problems, it's about scoring political points and defeating the other side. In the corporate world, quarterly gains often outweigh long-term impact on employee well-being and company sustainability. Even in education, we see school boards focused more on control than collaboration, arguing that parents should have little or no say in what their children are taught and what parents should be told. Across every field, we've turned competition into the goal and winning into the measure, elevating image, influence, and short-term results over integrity, humility, and service.

You see it in government when temporary funding measures are celebrated as victories while long-term solutions are ignored. In business, when companies roll out new slogans about "culture" but fail to fix the practices that drive employees out the door. In education, we add another policy instead of listening to parents, teachers, and students to understand what's really broken in the system. And in our communities, when we focus on appearances, cleaning up what's visible, while the deeper issues of poverty, addiction, homelessness, and mental health remain untreated.

The truth is, we don't change anything by managing what's on the surface. Real progress begins when we have the courage to face what's underneath, to confront the causes, not just the consequences. That's the kind of leadership this moment in time demands, steady, honest, and willing to do the hard work that others avoid. That's why the work of leadership is so important and why the development of leaders grounded in integrity, service, and accountability, who are ready to lead from the inside out, is more important than ever.

In my profession, we'd say the approach to fixing the main issues we're faced with today, trying today, is like treating a trauma wound with a simple bandage, it might make us feel better that we did something in the moment, but it does nothing to stop the bleeding. And

when we take that same approach to the larger challenges facing our country, our organizations, and our communities, it's the people we're called to serve, the citizens, customers, students, employees, and colleagues, who end up carrying the consequences.



The facts are employees are working harder each year, yet feeling less valued and more replaceable, only about 30% of workers say they're highly satisfied with their pay, and just about half feel good about their jobs overall; satisfaction with promotion opportunities is similarly low (Pew Research Center, "How Americans View Their Jobs," 2023).

Families are being priced out of their own neighborhoods while "revitalization" projects promise progress that never reaches them; in 2023, 31.3% of U.S. households were cost-burdened by housing, including 49.7% of renters, and concern about affordable housing has climbed steadily since 2018 (Pew Research Center, "Americans' Top Local Problems: Affordable Housing, Drug Addiction," 2023).

Parents are watching schools debate ideology while classrooms lack teachers and basic resources—51% of Americans say K-12 public education is going in the wrong direction, and four in ten teachers say these cultural battles have had a negative impact on their job (Pew Research Center, "Americans Are Critical of State of K-12 Education," 2024; "How Teachers View Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Schools," 2023).

Taxpayers see politics turn into performance rather than problem-solving, with only 22% trusting the federal government to do what's right most of the time (Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024").

And across our communities, more than eight in ten Americans believe elected officials don't care what people like them think, and seven in ten say ordinary citizens have too little influence in government (Pew Research Center, "Americans' Discontent With Government and Elected Officials," 2024).

Is it any wonder that the next generation is watching all of this unfold, left wondering what real leadership even looks like anymore? Trust and social cohesion have steadily eroded, only 34% of Americans now say most people can be trusted, down from 46% in 1972 (Pew Research Center, "Trends in Social Trust," 2018). And as half of TikTok users under 30 now say they use the platform to follow politics

and news, we're shaping a generation that experiences leadership less through example and more through algorithms (Pew Research Center, "TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat News Consumption," 2024).

"Each of these numbers tells a story — not of policy failure, but of leadership that has lost its way."

When you really stop and look at those numbers, they're not just data points, they're a reflection of who we've become. Somewhere along the way, we traded purpose for performance. We built systems that measure productivity but not people, that reward output but forget value. The result is a workforce that's exhausted, families who can't afford to stay in the communities they helped build, and classrooms caught in ideological crossfire, all while the next generation watches, wondering if leadership is even real anymore."

What these numbers tell me is simple: this isn't a crisis of skill, it's a crisis of character. We have plenty of knowledge, technology, and policy, what we're missing is integrity, humility, and service. Until we're willing to lead with those, to listen before we speak and serve before we gain, nothing truly changes. Real leadership begins when we stop managing the optics and start mending the trust. It's not about holding a title, it's about holding ourselves accountable to the people we serve, and leaving things better than we found them.



Our Challenges Are Interconnected ...

So Must Be Our Solutions.

Leadership doesn't exist in isolation. The way we govern affects how we educate; the way we do business influences how we serve; and the way we serve determines the level of trust that holds communities together. When leaders in any sector lose sight of their purpose, the ripple effects are felt everywhere.

We've seen what happens when those connections break down. When public institutions become more focused on politics than people, citizens lose faith. When corporations prioritize quarterly profits over long-term responsibility, employees and communities pay the price. When education turns into a battleground instead of a bridge, the next generation inherits division instead of direction. Leadership is the common thread, and when that thread unravels, everything built on it begins to fray.

That's why we can't treat leadership development as a side project or a "soft skill." It's the foundation upon which every other success depends.

What Can You Do?

If you've read this far, chances are you feel it too, the tension between what leadership could be and what it's become. Maybe you've seen the consequences firsthand. Maybe you've felt the fatigue of trying to do the right thing in a culture that rewards the quick win over the right one.

If we're rebuilding a failing foundation, it won't happen overnight, and it won't happen by one person alone. It's done one brick at a time, one act of integrity, one honest conversation, one courageous decision. And the more bricklayers we have, the more leaders willing to take responsibility, tell the truth, and serve with humility, the faster we'll get the job done.

That's how we rebuild what's been lost.

Not through talk or titles, but through steady hands and strong hearts, leaders who choose to heal, not hurt.

Here's the truth: You don't need a title to lead, and you don't need permission to make a difference. Leadership is influence, and every one of us has it. The question is how we use it?

Start where you are.

Look at your circle, your team, your family, your community. Ask yourself, What needs healing here? Sometimes stopping the bleeding means simply showing up, listening longer, or giving someone a voice who doesn't have one.

Do the inner work.

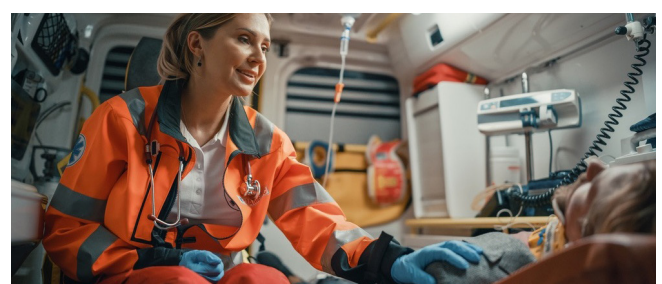
Strong leadership starts with self-leadership. Reflect on your values. Clarify your purpose. Be intentional about how you show up, especially when no one's watching. The greatest credibility you'll ever have comes from consistency.

Commit to growth.

Read. Learn. Seek mentors who will challenge you, not just affirm you. Invest in your own development, not for advancement, but for impact. When you grow, everyone around you benefits.

Be a model of courage and kindness.

The world has enough critics. What it needs are positive examples, people who choose courage over comfort, empathy over ego, and service over status. That's real leadership.



Restoring What Leadership Broke

Start with yourself.

Leadership always begins within. Before we can lead others, we have to lead ourselves, with honesty, discipline, and humility. That means owning our words, our actions, and the example we set every day. It means asking the hard questions: Am I building trust or breaking it down? Am I leading for others or for myself? True leadership requires self-awareness before it ever earns authority.

Demand accountability, transparency, and honesty.

We can't fix what we refuse to face. Every sector, public, private, and personal, needs leaders willing to speak truth, even when it's uncomfortable. Accountability isn't about blame; it's about responsibility. Transparency builds trust, and honesty restores credibility. When leaders stop spinning the story and start telling the truth, real progress begins.

Invest in people, not positions.

We stop the bleeding when we value people over titles. Great leaders build others up, even when it's inconvenient. They mentor, coach, and open doors for others to rise. Because when people grow and feel valued, our country, our communities, and our organizations begin to heal.

Model integrity in the small things.

Culture doesn't collapse overnight, it erodes one compromise at a time. Every decision, every promise, every quiet moment of choice either strengthens or weakens the foundation. Doing the right thing when no one's watching isn't optional; it's how we begin to rebuild what's been lost.

Choose collaboration over competition.

We've spent too long building silos and chasing wins at any cost. The future de-

pends on our ability to work with one another, business with government, education with community, public safety with the private sector. Real leadership unites rather than divides.

Reclaim purpose as the compass.

Every organization needs results, but without purpose, results mean little. Leaders must return to the "why" behind their work: to serve, to improve, to make things better for those who depend on them. Purpose gives direction when the path gets hard, and reminds us who we're really leading for.



A Call to Those Who Still Believe

If you still believe leadership can be better, or even if you just want to believe, it starts with you. The titles, systems, and organizations will change, but the principles never do. Integrity. Courage. Service. These are the anchors that hold when everything else feels adrift.

There are a thousand what-ifs in the news every day, moments when a leader had the opportunity to make a difference and chose not to. What if they had spoken up instead of staying silent? What if they had served others instead of protecting themselves?

- What if that CEO had stood with their employees instead of protecting the bottom line?
- What if that elected official had chosen country over party, and truth over convenience?
- What if that school board had listened to parents and teachers instead of fighting for control?
- What if that public servant had done the hard thing—the right thing—even when it cost them personally?

Because that's what leadership is supposed to look like, doing what's right, not what's easy. Choosing service over self. And having the courage to lead when it matters most.

That's the kind of leadership our world is starving for, leadership grounded in courage and service, not self-preservation.

Because in the end, protecting yourself may save your image for a moment, but serving others builds your legacy for a lifetime.

The truth is that the next generation of leaders is watching. They're learning every day, not from what we say, but from what we do. When they see adults in positions of authority choose politics over principle, profits over people, or silence over integrity, they start to believe that's what leadership looks like.

If we don't change that example now, we'll raise a generation that mistakes power for purpose and influence for impact, and the cycle of broken trust will only continue.

Maybe you've grown disillusioned. Maybe you've seen what happens when ego replaces empathy, when winning matters more than doing what's right. You're not alone. But every time someone chooses purpose over pride, things begin to change—even if only by an inch. And inches, over time, move mountains.

So, wherever you are, on the line, in a classroom, in a boardroom, or around your kitchen table, lead from there. Show what it looks like to care deeply, to listen before speaking, to stay grounded when the noise gets loud. Be the kind of leader you once needed, or the one you wish you had.

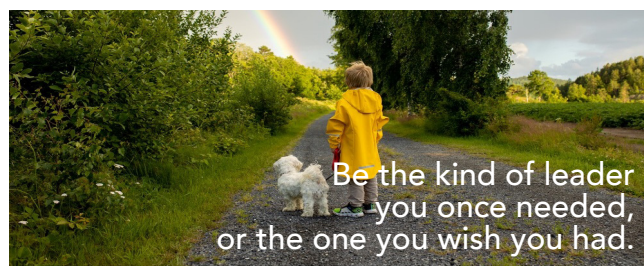
Because leadership isn't waiting on someone else. It's waiting on you. And the moment you choose to lead with integrity, humility, and heart, you've already begun the work of stopping the bleeding.

Chief B's Final Thought

At the end of the day, leadership isn't about winning the argument or protecting the image, it's about doing what's right when it's hardest to do. We're rebuilding a failing foundation, and that work won't be finished by one person or one generation. It'll take all of us, brick by brick, choice by choice, rebuilding trust, restoring purpose, and showing others that character still matters.

So, wherever you stand, lead from there. Bring your brick. Because the future isn't waiting on someone else to fix it, it's waiting on all of us to start building again.

"We don't need more leaders in title—we need more bricklayers of character."





Chief B's Key Leadership Takeaways

Winning isn't leading—when image or influence becomes the goal, integrity becomes optional, and that's where leadership fails.

Service comes before self—leadership isn't about protecting your position; it's about improving the lives of the people you serve.

You can't fix what you won't face—real change begins with the courage to confront hard truths, not just patch over problems.

Integrity isn't situational—doing the right thing when it costs you something is what separates true leaders from everyone else.

The next generation is watching—they're learning what leadership looks like from what we model, not from what we say.

Leadership starts where you are—you don't need a title to make a difference, only the courage to lead with integrity, humility, and heart.

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:

Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness

Robert K. Greenleaf

Dare to Lead

Brené Brown

The Motive

Patrick Lencioni

Leading with Character: 10 Minutes a Day to a Brilliant Legacy

Jim Loehr

Integrity: The Courage to Meet the Demands of Reality

Dr. Henry Cloud