



# VITALS

A Weekly Safety Newsletter For Medical Transport Professionals

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## Looking for Better EMS Leadership? Consider a Behavioral Science Approach 1

People notice... When your EMS organization lacks credible leadership; patients, the community and your employees... they all notice. Under performing supervisors and mid-level leadership creates a predictable outcome: Unreliable Service. When you think about it, in EMS, we are in the business of outcomes. Outcomes can generally be measured objectively. People, specifically their behaviors, can also be measured objectively. Interestingly, many managers or supervisors are promoted through a process of tests that measure nothing of consequence or worse, promotion decisions are subjective, based on intuition. Fortunately there are better approaches that can lead to more predictable leadership outcomes.

### What Happened? You Were Such A Great Paramedic?

To a large extent, an EMS supervisor is a gatekeeper to an employee's organizational resources, and that power must be used as a straightforward, cultivating, non-bias tool. To understand who will likely succeed in a leadership or supervisory role, we must first understand which behaviors can specifically contribute to failure. For example, there are easy-going and relaxed supervisors and managers who may tend to overlook administrative details. Or, supervisors who are fine at managing daily problems but flame-out when asked to quickly solve a difficult challenge. Sometimes others seem great for a supervisory role, but once promoted, exhibit very little enthusiasm for administrative tasks. Still others are tough-minded leaders, but become pushy and overly blunt, creating a sense of distrust. These are just a few examples of behaviors that eventually can lead to poor leadership outcomes. The behavioral science questions become: Can these behaviors be changed? How can we determine which behaviors would positively or negatively affect the success of a newly promoted supervisor? Can we accurately predict a successful emerging leader based on past behaviors?

There is a substantial amount of research which suggests "effective leadership advancement realizes that leaders develop and function within a social context; and, although individual-based leader development is necessary for leadership, it is not sufficient" (*Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 1, 2007, pp. 76-91, Olivares, Peterson, and Hess).

### In English please!

The point here is that some competencies (behaviors) can, and should be, enhanced through education and leadership development. However, some behaviors, such as values, motivation and personality are inherent and cannot be changed. Therefore, when choosing a leader, we should start by identifying and screening those inherent negative behaviors that cannot be changed.

Many Fortune 500 companies figured this out years ago. In the early 1990's companies like General Electric and Merck pioneered behavior-based leadership acquisition strategies. James Collins, in his book "Good to Great" (2001) noted a study of 11 companies that exhibited 15 years of below average growth, followed by 15 years of above average growth; the first step in the process of going from "good to great" was hiring the right leadership.

### The Clues are in Job Analysis

The key to predicting successful leadership begins by defining exactly what we expect our leaders to accomplish and which behaviors drive those accomplishments. Human Resource executives and Industrial/ Organizational Psychologists use detailed job analysis to document key job requirements and validate corresponding behaviors. This is an extremely important and comprehensive process. But consider this; most EMS Supervisors are promoted from within an organization. They leave a somewhat conventional world of episodic medicine dictated by protocol. They enter an environment more concerned with administering and managing policies. They are now required to drive organizational goals. In the field, a successful Paramedic made quick decisions and completed short job-tasks (in segments of minutes). Once promoted, a new supervisor manages multi-layered tasks which may take longer to achieve (normally ranging from a day to a year) and require the coordination of several organizational resources.



### About the Author

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The Articles Continues Next Week