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Leadership becomes easy to grasp

A program offers new opportunities for training leaders

Training the topic "personnel leadership" is essential in fire departments' leadership training. The future leaders must experience and grasp what leadership is and the effect that no leadership can have on the success of a deployment. For this purpose, with the "InterLAB" software, the regional fire department academy in Baden-Württemberg has introduced a tool that makes leadership easy to grasp and reveals the effects of leadership strategies. This article presents the program.

If a person is in an unfamiliar situation that he finds threatening, he experiences stress. Under stress, a person's ability to think can sink to a level of just 20% of his normal ability to think - and this is especially detrimental on duty.

Since nearly every deployment of the fire department is unknown, both with respect to time and with respect to the situation on-site, there is stress that is greater for the leader the less he can rely on his own experiences. In addition, the team expects decisions and specifications for leading the deployment.

The topic "personnel leadership" has therefore been part of the fire department's leadership training for years; not just in order to make the leaders fit for handling the teams they are leading, but also in order to learn (personnel) leadership at the deployment site. In addition to theoretical trainings, team tasks are often used for this. For this, the instructors at the regional fire department academy Baden-Württemberg in Bruchsal teach the so-called SHELL(L) model, which includes the topics perception, communication, group dynamics, and personnel motivation.

However, "leadership" was usually very difficult for the participants to "grasp" - and this in the truest sense of the word. The necessity of leadership in the fire department, and also leadership techniques such as delegation and checking in the sense of trusting one another were only insufficiently included in the previous instruction and learning methods - at least

in the opinion of the instructors at the regional fire department academy.

InterLAB makes leadership easy to grasp

"InterLAB", software with roots in aviation, offers the solution. It is available by the Swiss company Ninecubes, also for other target groups, since 2002. The regional fire department academy Baden-Württemberg in Bruchsal (Germany) has been regularly using the software for leadership training since January 2012 - it is the first German institution in the fire safety sector to do so. Its initial experiences with a leadership training course for professional firefighters and a career training course for upper fire department technical service members are positive. Based on these good experiences, the idea is to use the software not just for

the training of the primary professional firemen, but also for the leadership training of the volunteer fire department (starting with the course for squad leaders).

For this, two employees of the regional fire department academy were trained as certified trainers. The regional fire department academy became aware of the software during a visit at the Andelfingen training center in the Swiss canton of Zurich, where Zurich's professional fire department members (search & rescue) practiced with the software financed by building insurance companies. The integration into the training course in Bruchsal (Germany) then took place with the financial support of the accident insurer "Unfallkasse Baden-Württemberg".

At first glance, "InterLAB" may seem like a pure waste of time for the fire department employees: on a spaceship mission, a maximum of four four-person teams must perform repair work on the spaceship. Thus the question many participants ask is what this has to do with fire department training. However it quickly becomes clear: a whole lot! For after just a few minutes, you are in the midst of the SHELL(L) model and thus the topic of personnel leadership. This model is also the framework for the mission.



With increasing duration of the mission, stress takes its toll on the team members. Communication can cause stress. The closest screen is designed for the fifth space of the leader.



The "operation" of the program alone does not result in learning success. Important is a professional assessment of the missions by certified trainers like the two trainers from the regional fire department academy.

After just a few minutes, the participants in this program (originally developed for non-technical pilot training to prevent human error) notice what stress means and how it affects the mental and physical capabilities of one's own body. Shrill alarm sirens and tasks to read and perform that show up constantly are additional stressors and urge the participants on.

The goal is to put the participants in a position to be able to handle people (and especially themselves) better and thus to achieve better performance. This takes place automatically the better one feels and the less stressed one is. "The better the environment is for each individual, the better a person's performance," is how the initiators of the program introduction at the regional fire department academy Baden-Württemberg, Bernd Balduf and Michael Seidt, summarize the learning success striven for.

The personal behaviors with the pressures of time and responsibility are revealed to the participant intensively and relentlessly - just as on the site of a deployment - by the role he plays in each training cycle of the program and by the program-controlled evaluation. Here the communication, coordination, decision-making, and leadership behavior on the team as well as of the individual are trained and the participant learns how he can consciously

influence his own behavior to increase efficiency.

PRACTICAL TEST: EXPERIENCE THE PROGRAM

The program offers a total of five "missions" (as the simulation sequences are called), of which three missions are approximately comparable. The two last missions are much more difficult and require strategies for action developed by the participants in advance. Before the start of the first mission, an approximately 20-minute introductory film is shown, which explains the mission, the task, and the operation of the easy-to-use computer screen.

In practice it is noteworthy how relaxed the participants are while they are watching the introductory film and how quickly stress becomes a factor in the program routine as a result of technical problems due to human error, loud alarm bells, and the ticking stopwatch. In addition, the four teams working against one another create a competitive situation. This is clear not just from the results of the evaluation, but also from the participants' facial expressions, which become more strained the longer the game continues. For in the end, the mission to be completed is a complex task similar to a deployment without preparation time.

Although the missions are comparatively easy and only take ten minutes, they

require extensive communication and coordination. The necessary information flow can only be guaranteed through clear communication; anyone who does not heed this gets caught in an alarm spiral in the end.

To achieve learning success, the same mission is repeated by the team after a short break. Anyone who has used this break to develop a strategy and a communication concept within the team will complete the mission more successfully. The team concept is thus encouraged as is the leader, who learns to delegate and to trust. Leadership thus becomes something the participants can grasp; similarly, they learn what it means not to lead, not to regulate tasks clearly, and not to communicate with the team members.

However, for this the mental model must be the same for all team members; all peripheral tasks need to be put on hold so that the team members can concentrate on the main task. This gives the participants mental capacities and reduces stress - in the mission as on duty. The third mission shows how successful this is; it is essentially the same, but it moves faster. Nevertheless, all teams succeeded in achieving a better result.

The participants were pleasantly surprised by the training: they reported that you learn necessary leadership yourself, but perception problems (which can also crop up on duty because you are focused too much on something) also become apparent. Based on these experiences, the regional fire department academy has already expanded the program: in order to formulate the leadership role still more clearly, a fifth team space that is equipped only with a screen was introduced. A leader is supposed to sit there and very consciously learn to delegate. Delegation is based on trust and offers room to act so that the speed and thus stress in the high-performance system "fire department" is reduced.

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