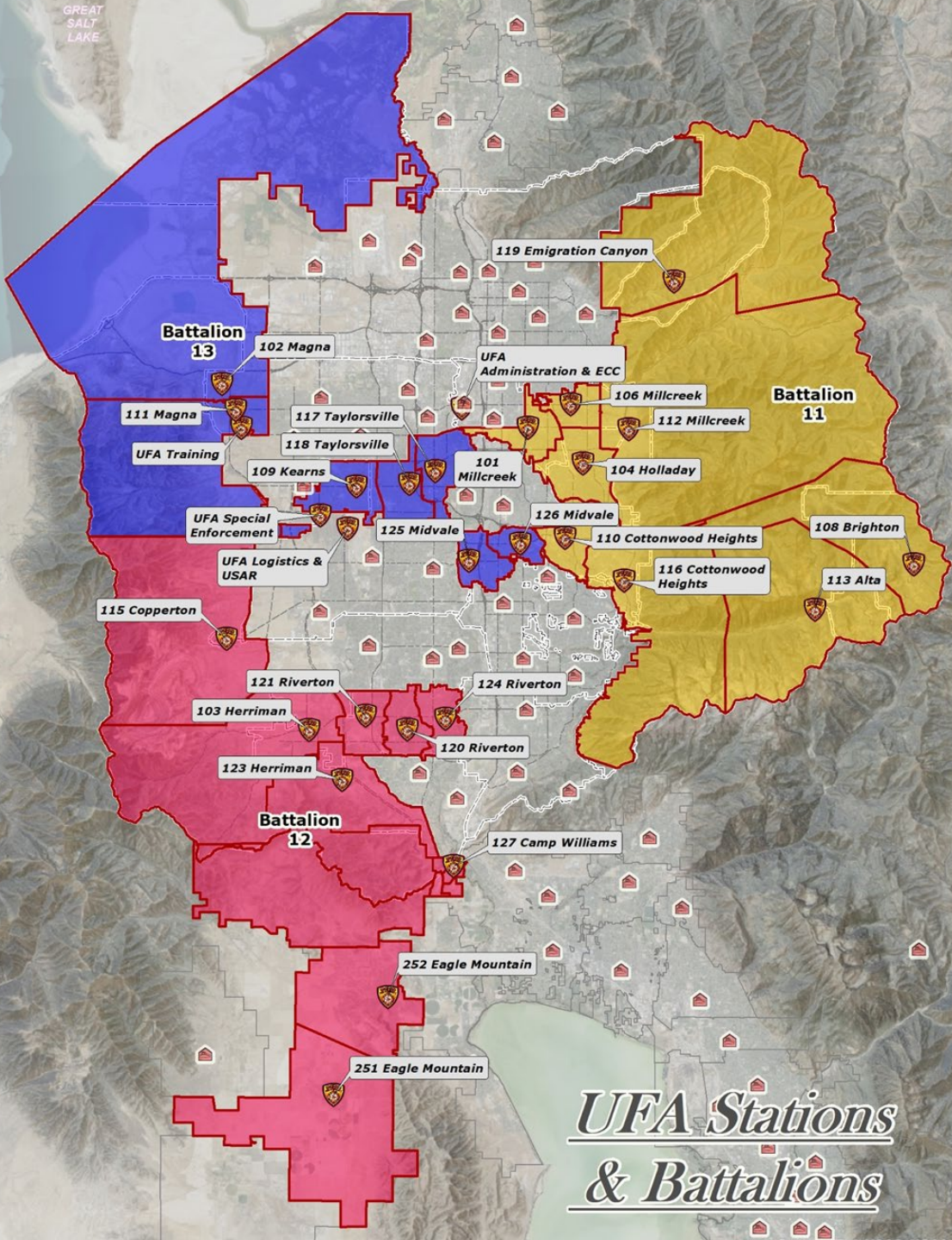


Righting the Ship *and* Thriving in Leadership

**League of California Cities
2023 Fire Chiefs Leadership Seminar**
December 13, 2023

Dan Petersen, Fire Chief (ret), Unified Fire Authority
AP Triton LLC Project Manager
dpetersen@aptriton.com





Unified Fire Authority

451,035 Population

15 Municipalities

694 Employees (460 Sworn FF)

25 Fire Stations

17 Member Board

80 Elected Officials

12 Months notice to separate



Salt Lake County Fire...1921 to 2004

- County Department under Public Works
- Cities growing and forming their own FD
- Cities wanted larger role in governance
- Unified Fire Authority was born in 2004



Changes in 2011

- Deputy Chief / County Councilman becomes Fire Chief
- Political influence and funding for UFA
- Goal to be “Big”
- Firefighters felt more secure
- Neighboring Fire Departments threatened

Drifting off course

- **County Councilman First ... Fire Chief Second**
 - Deputy Chief left to run the department
 - Friends appointed as AC's - BC's – Those who helped his campaign
- **Little to no transparency**
 - Three-page budget
 - Board Policies signed by Chief (Violation of Homeland Security)

Problems...

- Fire Chief not present; busy as a County Councilman
- Questionable hiring and promotional processes
- Wages and benefits neglected
- Firefighters continue delivering quality service, frustrated
- Loss of trust in administration

Changes in 2016

- UFA employees increasingly frustrated
- Some Board Members hearing stories
- Employees form “*Task Force*” to tell their story
- Small weekly paper begins telling the story in July
- Fire Chief, Deputy Chief, CFO, CLO gone by late August

State Audit confirms ...

- 400K in incentive payments for top leadership
- Deviation of policy to hire family
- Excessive travel and meals – Spring Training and Disneyland
- Board either loyal or afraid of Fire Chief
- Excessive technology purchases for personal use
- Refers case to the State Attorney General
- Recommends reimbursement and termination

New Fire Chief

- Senior Assistant Chief appointed Interim Chief
- 10-person Ad Hoc Committee, including IAFF Local
 - Engages Western Fire Chiefs Association
 - WFCA looks for someone who was dropped on his head as a kid
- Talks me into confidentially considering the job



Overarching goals

- *Rebuild trust – internally and externally*
- *Improve UFA reputation*
- *Demonstrate value to the communities*
- *Focus the staff on doing the right things*
- *Restore Honor and Pride (Don't tip into Arrogance)*

Immediate Actions

- *Display positive personal behaviors -*
- *Be very open about the audit*
- *Meeting with all crews, teams, labor and Managers*
- *Adopt fresh vision, mission, and values*
- *Adopt Leader expectations – give a chance to buy in*

First six months

- *Assess the organization and service levels*
- *Review Org Chart and Command Staff*
- *Professional Standards – Fact Finding*
- *Manage departure of one City from the Authority*
- *Increase transparency*
- *Start the Strategic Planning process*

Consistent actions

- Visiting all stations and divisions each year
- Weekly publishing of Command Staff highlights
- Monthly questions with the Chief – Video broadcast
- Monthly breakfast meeting with labor leadership
- Strengthen Divisions

Consistent actions

- Professional development for all ranks
- Strategic planning that drives the budget process
- Open and transparent budget process
- Engaged Board Members with productive public meetings
- Preparing for the next Fire Chief

Five Years later

- All audit recommendations addressed by 2018
- Finances are sustainable, building four fire stations
- Labor relations are positive and respectful
- Competitive firefighter wages, diverse and effective hiring, and professional development are happening
- Relationships with neighbor fire agencies is improved
- The communities trust and value the UFA
- Fire Chief selected from inside the organization



Five Years Later – Wicked Issues

- Hard to keep the Mayors thinking regionally
- Diversity of communities served – Conflict among Mayors
- Will the commitment to wages be sustainable?
- Behavioral health – Hard to find the right things to do
- DEI – Better...but still not great
- Less interest in OT = Mandatory Staffing ... Increasing FTE's

The Fire Chief position...

- Vastly different than Assistant or Deputy
- Have Vision - What could it look like?
- Accept criticism but have COURAGE to see it through
- There will always be wicked issues
- Not everyone will like you
- Is this job for you?



The first 100 days

- Display positive and calm behaviors
- Listen, listen, listen
- Communicate, communicate, communicate
- Be vulnerable and human – let them know who you are
- Review the service levels
- Build your senior leadership team
- Act on your vision
- **After 100 days, the problems are yours.**

How to become ineffective

- Try to make everyone happy
- Don't stay on the side of the community
- You don't really know your organization
- Don't change what needs changing
- Forget who you actually work for
- Lack openness – keep things too close to the vest
- Lack courage to do the right thing

Thriving in Leadership

- Understand your agencies value – share the story
- Be the Chief – Do your job
- Care, be kind, thoughtful, patient, and consistent
- Stay connected with your people
- Advocate for your staff and the community
- Think strategically and be extraordinarily transparent
- Develop relationships and grow your influence



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ASSUMING LEADERSHIP AND THRIVING AS A FIRE CHIEF

*Dan Petersen, Fire Chief (ret), Unified Fire Authority
Project Manager / Senior Associate AP Triton
dpetersen@aptriton.com | cell/text 541.778.4867 | [LinkedIn](#)*

This session will present ways for you to be successful assuming the Fire Chief position in an organization. Dan will provide real world practical concepts based on personal experience that can be applied by anyone interested in evolving their agencies leadership or taking on a leadership role in a new organization.

The discussion will help you prepare for the role, understand the selection process, things to consider in accepting the position, identify what you should start doing immediately after you have the job, and what you need to do to sustain your plan. Dan will discuss some realities of the Fire Chief role, identify how some Chiefs become ineffective, and share some thoughts about how to thrive in the role. Examples used at the Unified Fire Authority are available using this [Dropbox Link](#)

HOW PREPARED ARE YOU?

It's important for you to be as prepared as possible for the position. You will never be fully prepared; however, you may have some things to work on before you seek out and accept the responsibilities.

Why do you want to be the Chief? Be sure you can answer this question; don't compete for the Chief role because you think there is great power.

- Do you understand the expectations of a Fire Chief? [Dropbox examples: UFA Job Description](#)
- Do you have courage to be the leader? There is no one else to look at during the difficult discussions, especially when the Executive Team is divided on the issue.
- Do you have the ability to see what could be - not just what is or what is wrong with the now?
- Do you have the ability to communicate a vision at a basic level? You can't operate in the clouds all the time or focus on the minutia; mix it up.
- Have you worked hard at your relationships? Do you agree that people are the greatest asset in the fire service, not stations, apparatus, or toys?
- Have you done the right things for the right reasons for your entire career? (The Fire Chief is on double secret probation and your past behaviors will be spotlighted)
- Have you followed a development plan for yourself?

BEFORE YOU TAKE THE JOB

Take the time to look over the place before you decide you want this job. Every Fire Chief position is a little different; you may be effective in some cultures and not effective in others. There are several people on the Fire Chief testing circuit looking for the fifth bugle, some of these travelers are not even sure what department they are testing for. This is not typically what cities and districts are looking for.

Most cities and districts want a Chief who takes the time to check out the agency and can articulate what they can do in the role. They want to be sure you will be effective. Some organizations may not allow you to assess the organization in person. There may be valid reasons, however, it will be difficult for you to build a plan or determine if you would be successful if you cannot visit before taking the job.

- Assess the agency – existing challenges, culture, etc.
 - Whether you are an internal or external candidate, you need to do an assessment.
 - Talk to as many people as you can...Look, listen, ask questions, open doors, and look inside.
 - Identify where the challenges are and what the “good stuff” is. (SWOC)
 - What is the image of the organization in the community?
 - Learn where the power is inside the agency and/or city.
 - Dropbox examples: Assessment of Challenges facing the UFA
- Develop the vision you see for the agency and sketch out the plan
 - Do things really need to be changed or just nudged?
 - Be careful not to fix something that is not broken.
 - What leadership style(s) do you think will be successful?
 - How do you see the organization in 3-5 years? This is your vision.
 - How will culture affect the vision?
 - Where will the resistance come from?
 - What steps will you take to get there? Build a plan at the 10,000-foot level, unique for the situation, specific to the issues in that agency. (One pagers are great at this point)
- Prepare yourself
 - Be honest about your ability and energy to deal with the upcoming challenges.
 - Are you able to take bold action?
 - Will you be afraid of a decision or taking a position that would get you fired or censured?
 - Is your family supportive? Is this the right time in your life?
 - Are you fit emotionally or physically?

- What would it take for you to accept the job
 - Fair pay and benefits: Don't be greedy but don't sell yourself short.
 - Clarity of authority: What authority will you need to be effective?
 - Clarity on performance evaluation.
 - Can you get an employment agreement with severance package?
 - What does your spouse and family need?
 - Identify your minimum requirements – wage, vacation, etc.
 - Consider an attorney to negotiate your agreement or to review the details.
 - Don't be afraid to propose a change in policy; the people making the decision to hire you probably draft organizational policies now.

- Discuss key issues with leadership and governance (Before selection if possible)
 - Listen carefully to their concerns and issues first.
 - Present your assessment, do they agree?
 - What are they looking for? Leader? Follower? Team Player? Hatchet Man?
 - They may not all be looking for the same thing
 - Meet with Senior Leadership and Union Leadership
 - **City:** City Manager, City Department Heads, and Council Members
 - **Fire District:** Board Members, CFO and CLO

- The Selection Process
 - Once you are in the room, it is less about the resume.
 - Do they think of you as a CEO or a Firefighter?
 - Do they like and trust you? How do you make them feel?
 - Meet and Greet – Very big deal. (Read several papers that morning for topics to discuss)
 - Presenting your 100-day plan can make a powerful impact for the decision makers.

- The Offer
 - Be patient, don't say yes unless you are truly ready.
 - Can you be successful now that you know what you know?

- Accepting the offer
 - Can you agree to the terms?
 - This is your first chance to stand firm on your non-negotiables.
 - If you can't advocate for yourself, how can you advocate for the organization?
 - Are you OK with becoming an "At-Will" employee?
 - One last chance...Why do you want to be a Fire Chief?
 - Are you the right fit for this organization?
 - Can you be successful? (Be honest)

THE FIRST WEEK

You should have already talked with them prior to this week; however, you were one of several candidates during those meetings. Walking into the office on the first day is a little nerve-wracking. Trust me, everyone is watching to see what you do first, who you talk to, and how you engage. You only get one chance to make a first impression.

- Introduce yourself on the way in, talk to people
 - Address the critical issues that will be present for you.
 - Begin the task of assuming the leadership role.
 - This is your first chance to let them really get to know you and for you to ask questions.
- Meet individually with your Executive Leadership and Labor Leadership
 - Make it personal, let them know who you are and what you stand for.
 - Be sure you have enough time
 - Listen to them, listen to them, listen to them. (What do they like/dislike)
 - Share your assessment – be honest and as blunt as you can.
 - Values – What is important to you?
 - Expectations – of yourself, your team, and your people.
 - Vision – where do you want the organization to be?
 - Share the big picture plan:
 - Move at a speed the organization can handle: Keep yourself at the 10,000-foot level, let the specifics become your team’s ownership
 - Identify your challenges/weaknesses – what will be difficult for you? (Be vulnerable)
 - Identify the current “Can’t wait” issues. What will you immediately tackle?
 - Help people focus on the future, not the past.
 - Don’t ask people to trust you, ask for an opportunity to earn their trust.
 - [Dropbox examples: Presentation to UFA and Labor, Vision-Mission-Values, Expectations](#)
- Communicate directly with all employees in your first week
 - Plan to be out of your office talking to people; consider an auto reply message on your email telling them what you are doing and why you are not quickly responding.
 - Make it personal, let them know who you are and what you stand for.
 - Share your assessment. (Consistent with hiring process)
 - Tell them your values, expectations, vision, plan, and challenges.
 - Large group meetings may be possible if your organization is small enough.
 - Video messaging can quickly introduce you and prepare them for the first on-site visit. Routine video messages will often be better received than email (monthly is good).
 - [Dropbox examples: Sample Monthly Questions with the Chief](#)

THE FIRST 100 DAYS

You have an exceptional opportunity during the first 100 days to set the course. After that, many of the problems in the organization become yours and you will have less opportunity to ask “Why”. Try your best to establish your Executive Team in the first 60 days. You need a strong and loyal team to work with.

Be cognizant that there may be a few people who are not happy that you are in the position. Be sensitive to this but don't let it change your approach.

- Display positive personal behaviors
 - Stay calm and provide encouragement.
 - Demonstrate a command presence.
 - Do the right things each and every time – even if it hurts you.
 - Make it OK to fail and take full responsibility when you personally fail.
 - Find opportunities to place yourself at risk for the right things.
 - Don't act like you know all the answers – use your advisors and ask lots of questions.
 - Caution: Some may give you just enough information to make a decision they want.
 - Don't tell too many stories about your past agency.
 - Don't speak negatively of the past leadership.
 - Don't take things personal – or at least try not to let it show.
 - Recognize that your “Savior” or “New Chief” status will wear off.
 - Communicate over and over and over again.
 - Have patience with yourself: It takes time for a first time Chief to find their groove. Don't expect to be awesome on day one and it may take more time to prepare than you expected.
- Work closely with your team (direct reports first)
 - Do you need to re-organize your top leadership team to accomplish your vision and plan?
 - You should get this done within the first 60 days if necessary.
 - Make sure you have people who will speak honestly and respectfully with you.
 - DO NOT SELECT OR ENCOURAGE “YES” PEOPLE.
 - After you have the argument behind closed doors, they need to carry the torch!
 - Make your expectations very clear to your direct reports, give them time to get on board.
 - Don't expect perfection but don't accept sub-standard either.
 - People are watching how you deal with disloyalty and incompetence.
 - Support and be loyal to your team, find opportunities for you to demonstrate that loyalty.
 - Ensure your direct reports will be loyal... deal quickly with those who are not.
 - Find soft landings (if possible) for those who will be loyal but are not effective in the role they have today.
 - Build this team, both socially and professionally; earn their trust and respect.
 - This group can make you successful or watch/help you fail.

- Fire District Chiefs:
 - Work closely with your elected Board of Directors.
 - Meet one-on-one to share your thoughts and listen to theirs.
 - Help your Board be successful as a team/partner; give them decisions to make.
 - It will help them if you provide a short list of viable options.
 - Respect the Board Chair but resist any move to isolate your communication from the rest of the Board.
 - Meet with Budget Committee members. Listen to them carefully, they may have some perspectives that they have never been able to adequately share.
 - Look for opportunities to demonstrate your leadership. They need to see you as their CEO, not just a smart firefighter.

- City Fire Chiefs:
 - Work closely with the City Manager/Strong Mayor, other department heads, and council.
 - Build a relationship of trust with the City Manager or Strong Mayor; learn their style and plan for the City: Be a team player as much as possible.
 - Learn how they really perceive the Fire Department. (This is the best time to ask)
 - Learn how other Departments view your Department: What is the history and who appears to have the power and influence at the Department Head level?
 - Meet with Council as soon as possible. Respect the relationship the City Manager or Mayor has with Council and do not compromise their relationship.

- Labor Association(s)
 - Read, understand, and respect the CBA.
 - Give them a chance to learn things and weigh in before the general population; don't surprise them.
 - Treat them with respect and give them a chance to be a partner.
 - Listen to them carefully, thoughtfully, and establish a routine meeting time. Keep the meetings even if you have nothing to talk about. (Build relationships)
 - Realize that past relationships may cause your efforts to take longer than you anticipate or want, be patient. (Or the past Chief gave them everything they wanted ...)

- Schedule personal meetings with all staff – Individuals and small groups
 - Communicate personally to everyone, don't immediately expect your message to be delivered effectively. "Skip in the message".
 - Dropbox examples: First Meetings with All Staff
 - DO NOT DO YOUR STAFF'S JOB! If people want change, they need to see the right person.
 - Protect the early adopters of your vision. People are watching to see if you or others in the organization "Kill" them.

- Review the Service Levels
 - Do you have a Community Risk Reduction program? Are your prevention inspections and plans review effective?
 - Operational staffing levels? (Minimum Staffing / Use of OT / Mandatory)
 - Station placement and coverage?
 - Response times and unit reliability? Do you meet your Standard of Cover or NFPA 1710?
 - USAR, Bomb, Emergency Management, or other services provided?

- Review the Finances
 - Dig deep into the details...are you sustainable?
 - Do you have enough financial controls, checks, and balances?
 - Would it be easy for someone to steal from the organization? Fix that right away – it will be your neck if something happens.
 - Do you need to make any substantial cuts quickly?
 - Be thoughtful, kind, and empathetic...but do it. Don't expect anyone to appreciate how hard it is on you or to have anyone thank you.

- Review your support functions: Legal, HR, Logistics
 - Meet with your legal representation.
 - Communicate your leadership philosophies...Build a strong relationship.
 - Do the organizational policies reflect reality? Do they have leaders' intent?
 - Set the stage to allow you to make the right decisions before you choose to challenge your attorney's advice. (Very important)
 - Review HR functions - hiring, promotions, discipline, etc.
 - Spend time with this team; discuss leaders' intent, be clear!
 - Does the hiring process select a diverse group of good humans?
 - Are you looking at the right stuff for promotions?
 - Do they conduct fact-finding on allegations and are you in the loop on appeals?
 - Is logistics taken care of? Listen to the people responsible and help them be successful. All the planning in the world may not help if the crews can't even get toilet paper.
 - Station visits will tell you the truth about logistics and fleet maintenance.

- Your Actions
 - Communicate, communicate, communicate.
 - Take action on the "Can't wait" issues you promised to tackle.
 - Celebrate the wins and be mindful of the culture that exists now.
 - Broadcast your failures and be honest about what isn't working well in your plan and tell them how you are adjusting. Make it OK to fail but not OK give up or not try at all.
 - Begin developing relationships with community stakeholders – City Managers, County Officials, Law Enforcement, Forestry, Rotary Club, Chamber, industrial community, etc.
 - If you start a program, you have to continue it and be consistent. Be careful.

FIRE CHIEF REALITIES

Being the Chief has some realities that you cannot fully understand until you do the job. Your world can change after a single fire or letter to the editor in a way that you have never experienced. Here are a few key realities to consider:

- The Fire Chief role is vastly different than any other position in the organization. Don't think you understand it until you do it.
- You will be accountable for the sins of your predecessor, accept it.
- You have to be open enough to listen to criticism and other ideas but have enough bearing to see things through. However, all this listening takes energy and humility.
- At lower ranks you "lose" a few friends when you promote...when you become Fire Chief, you find out there may only be one or two people in your career that really are your friends...the rest left long ago.
- No matter who you are or how talented you think you are, sooner or later you will face an issue you can't solve easily. These are Wicked Issues...everyone has them and you will lose sleep over this stuff.
- You will face a period where your desire to do the job is low when compared to all the stressors (it's not worth it) ...if you don't feel this eventually, you're probably not listening enough to the organization.
- You may face a toxic or excessively abrasive elected official who has set their sights on you. Stay calm, talk quietly and flatly, stay on the side of the community, and be well equipped with valid data. Most likely, they will lose steam and/or the other elected officials will take care of the issue for you. However,
 - If that does not work, you will need to decide when enough is enough.
 - You will probably lose in a head-to-head argument during a public meeting.
 - Consider meeting with the Mayor or Board Chair to discuss the issue.
 - Consider ignoring them unless they get traction with other elected officials.
 - This will be a wicked issue for you...reach out for help.
 - If you manage this well, that abrasive elected official could become your biggest fan!

HOW LEADERS BECOME INEFFECTIVE

Some leaders begin their career strongly then lose their effectiveness as time goes on. The decisions and challenges can weigh heavily on the Fire Chief. All of us will experience a few of these during our tenure as Chief.

CONSIDER SHARING THIS LIST WITH YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM AND POSTING IT IN YOUR OFFICE AS A GENTLE REMINDER.

- You are in over your head; you are not ready for the job.
- You have weak communication skills; both in sharing and listening.
- You try to make everyone happy.
- You don't stay on the side of the Community.
- You fail to read the culture or control internal politics and agendas.
- You don't change what needs changing...or change what doesn't need it.
- You trust your staff too much with little verification, or you try to do everything.
- You don't watch the finances close enough or you spend too much money.
- You have unreasonable expectations; too low or too high.
- You don't know what is going on in your organization.
- Too busy outside, listening to the wrong people, and stop visiting with crews.
- You forget who you work for; you begin to think you are a dictator.
- You lack openness; keep things too close to the vest.
- You begin spinning small stories, lies, fabrications, or exaggerations.
- You slowly drift off course.
- You fear for your job and lose your nerve or your passion.
- You don't have a support network or a confidant to talk with.
- You make it about you.

THRIVING AS A FIRE CHIEF

The following thoughts are not a comprehensive list of everything you need to do as a leader, these are my core beliefs about being a successful Fire Chief.

- **Understand and articulate the value your organization provides to the community.**
 - Be able to define the value your organization provides; How do you make life better for the people living and visiting the area you serve? Stay focused on the vision and define performance measures.
 - Don't focus on the details that don't result in meaningful change. Focus on what matters.
 - Make decisions based on the value to the community first, staff second. Learn how to say no to things that are not valued by the community but fun for Firefighters to do.
 - Provide routine reports to the organization and your governing body and city leadership. Prepare them for future needs, don't surprise them at budget time!
- **Be the Chief – Do your job.**
 - Have the courage to do the right thing, no matter how much it hurts. Stand firm once you have determined what the right thing is. Be OK with people not liking you when you do your job.
 - Establish and hold people accountable to your expectations.
 - Go to the hospital when your people are hurt, attend funerals, speak at events, be in parades, send thank you cards, present chief coins, etc. Be the face of the organization.
- **Care, be kind, be thoughtful, be patient, and be consistent.**
 - No matter how difficult the issue or frustrating the person across from you is; be kind and consistent in the way you treat everyone. Don't assume the first story you hear is right, get the facts from all sides, have patience, then act. Be curious about the truth and don't spin anything.
 - Be on the "Right Side of Arrogance" ...maintain your humility and admit your mistakes.
- **Stay connected with and visible to your sworn and civilian staff.**
 - Your organization needs to know who you are, what you stand for, and what you expect from them.
 - You cannot lead from your office alone – they will not come to you. Visit them in their space and listen to their struggles with an open mind and ask questions. (Not just your favorites)
- **Advocate for your staff and the community.**
 - You are in the best position to find the balance between taking care of the people and the community...don't be one-sided in your approach.
 - Be politically engaged, but do not become a politician. Your governing body sets policy and determines the risk tolerance for the community.
- **Think strategically and be extraordinarily transparent; see the big picture.**
 - Build a sustainable transparent organization that is prepared to provide value to the community well into the future. (Initiatives, people, infrastructure, budget, etc.)
 - Hire and promote good people at all ranks. Prepare the organization for your retirement.
 - Be sure people can easily learn or find out what you are doing by being open and transparent.
- **Develop relationships and grow your influence.**
 - Be curious about your community, your city, your neighbors, your labor leadership, etc. and forge alliances with people who share your vision of helping the community win. Help others when you can, and they will help you when you need them.
 - Use your growing powers for good...not evil. Your job is political, but you are not a politician.

CLOSING

Being a Fire Chief can be the best and worst job. You can do everything right and still lose your job. You can be clairvoyant and see the train coming but not be able to stop it. You are on double secret probation every day. The first 100 days are challenging but the newness wears off quickly. Thriving in leadership requires you to continue what you started and keep your initiatives fresh. As you make decisions your honeymoon will end, and the organizational problems will become yours.

A Chief who created and published her 100-day plan when she was hired shared with me that her organization expected something magical to happen on day 101. Consider providing a report or message to the organization as you near the end of your 100 days. An annual poster of accomplishments can be a great way to help the organization and the governing body see the progress. I included the “Wicked Issues” and some initiatives for the next year on the poster. After five years, the leadership team and the Board of Directors created a poster capturing the progress since the 2017 UFA audit. I’ve placed examples of the annual posters in the [Dropbox folder](#).

Do your best to provide value through your kind and principled leadership. Watch your behaviors to be sure you are not developing a blind spot. After a while, you may get the feeling that this job is easy ...you are the most vulnerable at that moment in time. If the governing body wants to change leadership, accept that with grace, that is their right. If you feel you are being seriously wronged in the process, fight for your job but don’t let the community lose in the battle.

As you embrace leadership, you will find times of doubt or concern about your decisions or even your vision for the organization. You will be in a position where you have very few people inside your organization that you can discuss this with. Develop relationships with your peers in the Fire Service, they will understand. Look for people with experience who want the best for you and yet will be honest with you. Don’t look for people who want to solve your problem and don’t look for the silver bullet...it’s not there. Look for people who will help you process your own decisions. If I can be one of those people that can help you process, just call.

The five years I spent as the Fire Chief for UFA were the most challenging and rewarding years of my career. It stretched me farther than I thought I could manage, and I could not be happier to have accepted the challenge.

This is an incredible journey. Enjoy the experience!

Respectfully,

Dan Petersen

Dan Petersen

Fire Chief (ret) | Unified Fire Authority

Project Manager / Senior Associate AP Triton LLC

Case Study: Unified Fire Authority

Presented by Dan Petersen, Fire Chief for UFA from 2017-2022

Project Manager / Senior Consultant AP Triton LLC

dpetersen@aptriton.com | [LinkedIn](#)

The Unified Fire Authority in Salt Lake, Utah melted down in 2016. By the end of the year, the four top administrators were no longer employed, morale was at an all-time low and the organization was the subject of a state audit that threatened the very fiber of the UFA.

The UFA provides service to 450,000 residents in 15 municipalities and unincorporated areas in Greater Salt Lake. The UFA is governed by a 17-member board of directors. Each of the 15 municipalities appoint an elected official to represent their cities interests, the County Council appoints one elected councilperson and the County Mayor either serves in the position or appoints a Deputy Mayor.

The public began to learn about the problems at the UFA in early July 2016 when a local reporter published a story titled "*Money to Burn*" that presented information about incentive pay for the Chief, Deputy Chief, Finance Officer, and Chief Legal Officer. Most Board members did not know about the incentive awards until late 2015. Records showed that over the previous five years the total extra pay distributed to these four administrators was \$411,400. The Fire Chief stated there was a critical difference between the UFA and UFA which warranted the incentive pay for him and his staff. He believed that he and other UFA officials earned their keep and that his services were a bargain.

In addition to serving as the Fire Chief for the UFA, the Fire Chief was also an elected member of the Salt Lake County Council and received \$51,000 in compensation for that position as well. The Salt Lake County Council has nine members; three of which serve on the Board of Directors for the UFA. This proved to be a significant concern for a few Board Members, however they were unable to sway to the Board to deny the Fire Chief approval for seeking his fifth four-year term on the council.

The IAFF local stated that the issue of incentive compensation is a contentious topic that has eroded morale among the firefighters of Unified Fire Authority. A key sticking point was the denial of a 1-percent longevity bonus in 2015 due to lack of funds. A UFA Board member stated "*It's very hard on morale in organizations like this when you tell them you can't afford to pay a longevity because we don't have the money in the budget, but we can afford almost the exact same amount in an incentive package to the top four individuals in your organization, that's just not right.*"

The local reporter continued digging. During successive articles, he reported on excessive gas expenditures on their take home vehicles, expensive meals for UFA officials, and questionable travel and purchases. The Board of Directors accepted the resignation of the Deputy Chief in late July and the Fire Chief in mid-August. The Board commissioned an internal audit and the State of Utah launched a formal Audit of both the UFA and the UFA in August.

The senior Assistant Chief was appointed as interim Chief and began communicating with the Firefighters. This new open style was welcomed by the Firefighters who historically did not hear or see the Fire Chief. The Board formed an ad hoc committee with professional recruiters to search for a new Fire Chief. With the trust of the UFA recruiter, the UFA Board, and the IAFF local, Dan Petersen was offered the opportunity to lead the UFA out of its current challenges and toward the future in December of 2016.

Dan spent 37 years in the Oregon fire service with considerably smaller agencies; however, the last six years were spent as the CEO in a regional fire agency that had also suffered five years of turmoil prior to his hiring as the Fire Chief.

Chief Petersen's started work on January 17, 2017. At 0730 hours on his first day the State Auditor presented a 68-page scathing audit during closed session. A few of the 126 specific recommendations were suggesting prosecution of previous administrators and termination of additional Chief Officers. On January 18, the audit was presented to the Board of Directors during an open public meeting with numerous media present.

Chief Petersen will provide an overview of the events that led up to the meltdown and discuss the actions taken over the last five years to restore trust and improve the UFA reputation. Chief Petersen will share his 100-day plan for new Fire Chiefs and provide practical concepts on how to thrive in your leadership role; whether you are evolving your current organization or having to "*Right the Ship*".

In preparation for the session, students are asked to review the following articles and audit documents to truly understand the issues that UFA was facing during this difficult period.

[City Weekly: Money to Burn - July 6, 2016](#)

[City Weekly: Smoke Signals - July 21, 2016](#)

[City Weekly: King of Fire - August 12, 2016](#)

[City Weekly: Fire Starter – August 17, 2016](#)

[City Weekly: Family Business – September 14, 2017](#)

[City Weekly: Flame Keepers – November 6, 2016](#)

[City Weekly: Direct Burning - January 18, 2017](#)

[State of Utah: UFA Audit - January 17, 2017](#)

[KUTV: New Chief - January 18, 2017](#)

[City Weekly: Fire Line – January 25, 2017](#)

The following Dropbox folder has handouts for the session. Chief Petersen has provided these documents as examples of the work done at UFA in the hope that you would look them over prior to the session. The first document to open and review is "Assuming and Thriving in Leadership". For the FSEDI program, we will walk through this document after the Case Study PPT Presentation. For a shorter conference presentation, Chief Petersen will provide an overview of the case study and highlight parts of the assuming and thriving in leadership handout.

[Dropbox Folder: Assuming and Thriving in Leadership Handouts](#)