



Summary

Good non-operational leadership at the fire service

At the fire service, leadership is not just about what happens during an incident. Leadership is also provided on a daily basis outside the area of incident response. Within crews, at fire stations and at the level of the regional organisation, employees are supported, decisions are explained, changes are made and boundaries are set. This is referred to as non-operational leadership, also frequently described within the fire service as 'cold-phase' leadership. The Netherlands Institute for Public Safety (NIPV) has conducted research to find out what good non-operational leadership is in the fire service and how it is put into practice.

Introduction

Non-operational leadership is important for the performance of people, crews, fire brigades and the organisation as a whole. It is one of the factors that determine whether employees feel seen, take responsibility, have the courage to hold each other to account and are willing to go along with changes. At the same time, leadership within the fire service is dynamic and highly demanding. Managers are constantly walking a line between the interests of their crew or station, the frameworks set by the safety region and the expectations of the board of the safety region and society.

The research on what is considered to be good non-operational leadership in the fire service focused not only on managers themselves, but also on the people they lead. It brings together the experiences and opinions of crews, crew leaders, shift leaders, cluster commanders, fire-service commanders and directors of safety regions. A literature review was also carried out and stock was taken of the leadership initiatives of the individual safety regions.

Leadership follows from the fire service's purpose

The formal task of the fire service is to prevent, contain and fight fires, respond to incidents other than fires, warn the population and carry out tasks in the areas of disaster response and crisis management. Firefighters themselves describe the purpose of the fire service in broader terms. The fire service not only provides concrete assistance, but also contributes to a feeling of safety for citizens, to confidence in the government and to a sense of solidarity in villages and districts. Moreover, fire stations, especially those manned by volunteers, often have a strong connection to their local community. For people in these communities the fire service is not just an emergency service, but also a recognisable part of the society in which they live.

“More than anything, what we provide is a feeling: a feeling of safety.”

Non-operational leadership also serves an internal purpose. It must contribute to expertise, personal development, operational and social safety, and the efficiency of crews, stations, departments and the organisation as a whole. A good manager therefore always keeps two aspects of the fire service's mission in mind: the social task performed by the fire service and the conditions that allow firefighters to perform this task efficiently and responsibly.

The fire service context determines what works

Safety regions, fire stations and crews have different histories, compositions and dynamics. That means we cannot talk about a single culture within the fire service. What works in one place can meet with resistance elsewhere. Good leadership therefore requires knowledge of the local 'user manual', without losing sight of common standards and organisational goals.

The family culture is both a strength and a weakness

Many fire crews and fire stations are characterised by close relationships. Firefighters go through challenging, high-risk situations together, rely on each other during incidents and spend a great deal of time in each other's company. This creates trust, loyalty and a real willingness to help each other.

“We always help each other. If someone asks, ‘Can you help me? Can you come this evening?’, I’ll go. Even if I don’t yet know what the problem is.”

This family culture is a major strength. It supports collaboration during incidents, encourages people to look after each other and means that people are willing to go the extra mile. Crews and stations are therefore often very good at self-organising. If something has to be done, people get on with it together.

This strong sense of solidarity also has a downside, however. People sometimes find it difficult to hold a colleague, friend or family member to account. As a result, problems are left to linger for too long within the crew. Newcomers can struggle to fit in and unwritten norms within the

group can carry more weight than formal agreements. Moreover, managers who are not based on site do not always get to hear about what is going on in good time.

Good leadership therefore does not necessarily require managers to break through this family culture, but it should also not be romanticised. The sense of solidarity is worth protecting, whereas a lack of openness, exclusion and the avoidance of difficult conversations should be kept in check. .



Access case studies and practical tips for managers on working on a healthy family culture at nipv.nl/leiderschap.

Passion and commitment need to be acknowledged, but also directed

For many firefighters, the work they do is not just a job or a voluntary activity. Firefighting is part of their identity. This passion for their work gives them a strong sense of dedication, ownership and commitment to their crew, their fire station and the society in which they operate. It is precisely for this reason that changes can have significant repercussions. A change to equipment, working methods, specialisms or call-out areas can give firefighters the impression that they are losing something to which they feel a strong connection.

“Firefighters derive part of their identity from the work they do. This means that if, as an organisation, you want to change something, you are affecting people’s very being.”

Resistance does not necessarily mean unwillingness, but can stem from concern for the profession, the station or the quality of fire services. Managers therefore need to investigate what lies behind such resistance. Similarly, commitment can manifest itself in the form of foot-dragging, blocking or the continued contesting of a decision. At that point clarity is needed about what is still open for discussion and what is not.

A can-do culture also needs a handbrake

Firefighters are used to acting quickly and solving problems in a practical way. During incidents that is a necessity. Within the non-operational organisation, however, this same reflex can lead to solutions being decided on too quickly, causes being insufficiently considered or too many projects being tackled at once.

“If you want the fire service to sort something out for you, it’s best if you have a fire; then we’ll be right there. If it’s something else, however, things can take much longer.”

Good leadership makes use of the organisation’s dynamism, but also brings focus. Sometimes this means holding back from acting right away and instead analysing what the problem is first, then deciding on what has priority. It also means that managers should not automatically try to resolve every new challenge internally, but should make clear what is achievable with the people and resources available.

Authority does not automatically come with the position

A formal position comes with powers, but does not automatically confer authority. In non-operational practice, authority develops as a result of expertise, reliability, visibility, fairness and a recognisable contribution to the collective.

“Within our organisation, status is not about your rank or stripes, but about the contribution you make to the collective. Are you good at your job? Do you understand what you are doing? Do you contribute to smooth collaboration at the station? That is what counts.”

A background in incident response can help understand operational practice, but is no guarantee of good leadership. Conversely, a person with no experience in responding to incidents can be a good leader if they immerse themselves seriously in the profession, the people and the culture. Within this context, firefighters talk about the fire service being ‘in their blood’: that means having a genuine affinity with the work and an understanding of what drives firefighters.

Connecting and setting boundaries go hand in hand

Good non-operational leadership in the fire service is based around two different actions that go hand in hand: connecting and setting boundaries.

Connecting means that a manager is visible and approachable, listens, shows appreciation, is familiar with local practices and explains decisions from the perspective of the higher goal. It is also about translating local interests to the regional level, translating policy into day-to-day practice, and providing support and backing when needed. Trust is created by being present and taking a genuine interest, not just at times when you need buy-in from the team.

Setting boundaries means creating clear expectations and frameworks, prioritising, monitoring progress and holding people accountable for their behaviour. It also requires managers to monitor social and operational safety, intervene if informal influences are proving detrimental and make clear when ambitions are not aligned with capacities or budgets.

“Close enough to connect, firm enough to set boundaries.”

Both of these actions are necessary. Connecting without setting boundaries can lead to delays, a lack of clarity and failure to fix problems. Setting boundaries without connecting can undermine trust and increase resistance. Setting boundaries well is not the same as being autocratic: it means acting respectfully and clearly with the individual, the crew and the organisation in mind.

Giving people space is not the same as letting go

Many managers adopt a coaching and facilitating approach. They assign responsibilities low down in the organisation and make use of employees' knowledge and motivation. This increases ownership, allows custom solutions to be implemented locally and avoids every issue being passed up the line.

However, giving people space requires managers to make clear agreements, be accessible and maintain constant contact. The manager needs to know what is happening, provide support and intervene if safety, progress or collaboration are at risk. How much space is appropriate differs from one employee, crew and situation to another. The starting point is: standardisation where necessary, variation where possible.

“Leadership means letting go, but not letting people fall.”

Leadership develops between people

Employees are not passive recipients of leadership. They share their thoughts, take the initiative, carry out decisions, express opposition and exert an influence on both managers and colleagues. This followership can manifest itself in various ways: it may involve going along with decisions on an informed basis and offering constructive criticism, but may also take the form of blocking, dragging one's feet or seeking to exert an influence outside the formal line.

Commitment can therefore work in different ways. It can create ownership and bring about practical solutions, but can also lead to a great deal of consultation, to resistance or to problems being kept internal. Good leadership therefore also means organising good followership. This involves creating space for initiative and criticism, making clear where decisions will be made and setting boundaries if behaviour disrupts collaboration or implementation.

Informal leaders have an important role to play here. These are employees without a formal leadership role who nevertheless exert a considerable influence within the group due to their experience, expertise, seniority or position. They can create calm, support change and correct their colleagues. However, they can also slow down decisions or increase resistance. Effective managers know who these informal leaders are, take their influence seriously and involve them where possible, without relinquishing formal responsibility.

Every leadership position has different demands

Managers at all levels have to walk a line between different interests and expectations. They represent their people when dealing with superiors further up the line, but also have to translate and implement the organisation's decisions. They need to be part of the group, but also maintain sufficient distance to be able to lead people. How this sandwich position is handled differs from one level to another.

- > **Shift leader:** is familiar with colleagues and relationships, identifies what is happening at an early stage, shares colleagues' genuine concerns with the back-office organisation and translates regional decisions to the crew. Proximity is essential, but the shift leader also needs to be able to stand above the group and hold difficult conversations.

- > **Cluster commander:** forms the bridge between fire stations and the region, supports shift leaders without taking over their position and provides support with difficult decisions. Visible feedback (both to the station and the management) is needed to demonstrate that signals from local level are being passed up to the region.
- > **Fire-service commander and director of the safety region:** provide direction, set priorities and create framework conditions. They ensure cohesion, monitor responsibilities, represent the fire service and explain the possibilities and limitations of the organisation to the board of the safety region and stakeholders. They also have to set boundaries if new ambitions are not aligned with the available resources.

Strategic managers cannot be present everywhere in person. This means they are also responsible for structuring the organisation in such a way that the 'shop floor', management, staff and the board of the safety region are connected on an ongoing basis.

Making changes while respecting the culture of the fire service

When changes are made within the fire service, this often has a bearing on expertise, identity, familiar working methods and local history. A decision that is factually justifiable can therefore still meet with considerable resistance. Good change-oriented leadership starts with gathering knowledge from practice and taking impacts and risks seriously. At the same time, it must be clear in advance what employees can influence and what frameworks have been set.

The shift leader translates the change into everyday practice and flags up any questions. The cluster commander links local and regional interests and provides support with sensitive discussions. The commander and director organise the process, keep track of the course and ensure consistency along the line. Informal leaders can be involved at an early stage, although their influence must not carry more weight than the formal decision-making. If resistance continues to disrupt the implementation process, it may be necessary to set boundaries, for example.



Access case studies and practical tips for managers on making changes while respecting the culture of the fire service at nipv.nl/leiderschap.

What is leadership specifically in the context of the fire service?

The basis for good non-operational leadership is generic to some extent. Trust, clarity, attention, expertise and a combination of task-oriented and relational management are also important outside the fire service. What makes leadership in the fire service specific is the combination of circumstances in which these principles have to be applied:

- > direct relationship with incident response (including follow-up) and operational safety;
- > family culture and strong dependency on each other;
- > local identity of crews and stations;
- > combination of volunteer and professional firefighters;
- > influence of informal leaders and group dynamics;
- > 24/7 organisation and geographic spread;

- > position of the fire service within the safety region;
- > administrative responsibility and limited resources;
- > constant tension between local freedom (custom solutions) and regional uniformity.

To apply the principles referred to above in this specific context, managers need to be able to switch between proximity and detachment, local individuality and regional cohesion, participation and decisiveness, as well as operational reality and non-operational control. Cultures, structures and tasks have a significant influence on what is considered good leadership within the fire service. This means that there is no standard recipe for leadership that can be applied uniformly across all crews or stations.

Conclusion

Good non-operational leadership within the fire service does not have a fixed style and does not start from a person's rank or position. It develops in the day-to-day interaction between people, based around a common task and within the specific context of the fire service. This context means that leadership assumes its own particular character.

At its core, leadership is about both connecting and setting boundaries. Good leadership requires managers to take a genuine interest, be present, show appreciation, explain things and build trust, but also to provide direction, set clear frameworks, hold people to account, prioritise and show resolve. Managers need to create space for expertise and local differences, without letting go of people or losing sight of necessary common standards.

In the fire service, a good leader is not therefore a focal point on whom everything depends, but a bridge in a dynamic environment that is characterised by tensions: between people and the organisation, between the station and region, between operational reality and non-operational control, and between local freedom and common frameworks.

Significance for leadership development

Rather than providing a blueprint for the ideal leader in the fire service, the research creates a shared language for selection, training, supervision, peer-to-peer coaching and organisational development. Leadership can be developed when experience is combined with reflection, feedback and practice. When it comes to recruitment and selection, consideration should therefore not only be given to professional experience and seniority, but also to relational skills, the ability to reflect, clarity and the language and courage needed to conduct difficult conversations.

Questions that managers and teams can use in this context include:

- > How do you stay close without becoming part of unhealthy group dynamics?
- > When do you give people space and when do you intervene?
- > How do you acknowledge local individuality, while at the same time keeping an eye on regional agreements?
- > How do you allow people to put forward dissenting views without making decision-making a never-ending process?
- > How do you build authority without falling back on your rank or formal powers?

Further reading

This summary is intended for interested parties inside and outside the fire service who would like to find out about the key results, insights and conclusions that emerged from the research. For more in-depth information, we refer you to the **full research report** and the **publication listing the leadership initiatives** within the safety regions.

Putting the insights into practice

This publication is accompanied by two documents containing **tips for leaders**: 'A healthy family culture' and 'Making changes while respecting the culture of the fire service'. Through relatable case studies and practical tips, these publications support managers and teams with leadership development in their own working environment. A **leadership game** has also been developed that allows managers at regional level or at fire stations to enter into dialogue about leadership dilemmas.

Publication details

This summary is based on the report 'Goed beheersmatig leiderschap bij de brandweer' ('Good non-operational leadership at the fire service') (NIPV, 2026). This report can be downloaded (in Dutch) from www.nipv.nl/leiderschap.

