



FIRE & EMS BULLETIN



RESILIENCY BUILT INTO YOUR ORGANIZATION - A LEADER'S GUIDE

Leaders in fire and EMS play a pivotal role in shaping the culture of resiliency within their organizations. While individual routines are essential, it is the leader's responsibility to model, reinforce, and institutionalize resilient behaviors across the team. This guidance helps leaders understand the value of resiliency and take deliberate steps to build it into daily operations and formal training programs.

Resiliency is not simply the ability to "bounce back" from adversity — it is the capacity to adapt, grow, and perform effectively in the face of ongoing stress, trauma, and uncertainty. For fire and EMS leaders, investing in team resiliency produces measurable benefits:

- Reduced turnover and burnout. Resilient personnel are better equipped to manage cumulative stress, reducing the likelihood of burnout, early retirement, and attrition — all of which are costly to the organization.
- Improved operational performance. Teams with strong resilience habits communicate better, make clearer decisions under pressure, and recover more quickly from setbacks, both on and off the scene.
- Lower rates of behavioral health crises. Departments that proactively build resiliency report lower rates of PTSD, substance misuse, and suicide, outcomes that protect both individuals and the organization.
- Stronger team cohesion. Resiliency-building activities, team meetings, shared physical activity, and after-action reviews build trust and psychological safety, the foundation of high-performing crews.
- Organizational credibility. Leaders who prioritize personnel well-being earn loyalty and respect, which translates into a more engaged, mission-focused workforce.

How Leaders Can Build Resiliency in Their Teams

Model the Behavior

Resiliency starts at the top. Leaders who openly practice self-care, acknowledge their own stress, and demonstrate healthy coping strategies give their personnel permission to do the same. Avoid the culture of "toughness" that discourages help-seeking. Normalize conversations about mental health and well-being during routine interactions — not just in crisis moments.

Make Routines a Leadership Priority

The pre-shift, during-shift, and post-shift routines described in this resource are most effective when leaders actively champion them, not just permit them. Leaders should:

- Participate in team meetings and debriefings rather than delegating them to junior officers.
- Recognize and reinforce crew members who demonstrate strong personal routines.
- Protect time for physical activity, learning, and after-action reviews even during busy operational periods.

Create a Culture of Psychological Safety

Personnel will not seek help or admit vulnerability in environments where doing so carries professional risk. Leaders must actively work to create a culture where it is safe to say, "I'm struggling" or "I need support." This includes:

- Responding to disclosures of stress or difficulty with empathy, not judgment.
- Connecting personnel with peer support, chaplains, or Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) without stigma.
- Addressing toxic behaviors — blame, ridicule, or hazing — swiftly and consistently.

Use After-Action Reviews as a Resiliency Tool

AARs are among the most powerful resiliency-building tools available to leaders, but only when leaders conduct them intentionally. Leaders should frame AARs not as performance evaluations but as learning opportunities. Reinforce what went right before addressing what can be improved. When personnel see that their contributions are recognized and that mistakes are treated as system issues rather than personal failures, they develop the confidence and trust needed to perform under pressure.

Recognize the Signs of Resiliency Breakdown

Leaders must be trained to recognize when resiliency is eroding, in individuals and in the team as a whole. Warning signs include:

- Increased irritability, conflict, or withdrawal among crew members
- Declining participation in team activities or training
- Increased sick leave or requests for shift changes
- Verbal expressions of hopelessness, cynicism, or detachment
- Changes in performance or decision-making on calls

When these signs appear, early intervention, a private conversation, a referral to peer support, or a temporary adjustment in duties is far more effective than waiting for a crisis.

Integrating Resiliency into Training Programs

Resiliency should not be treated as a one-time training topic. It must be woven into ongoing professional development. Leaders can take the following steps:

- **Include resiliency content in recruit and new hire orientation.** Set early expectations that self-care, routine-building, and help-seeking are professional competencies—not signs of weakness.
- **Incorporate controlled stress into drills and exercises.** Realistic, high-pressure training scenarios build the mental and emotional "muscle memory" that personnel draw on during actual emergencies. Debrief these exercises with attention to both tactical and emotional responses.
- **Schedule regular behavioral health training.** Bring in peer support specialists, mental health professionals, or behavioral health educators to deliver training on topics such as stress recognition, sleep hygiene, grief, and trauma. Make attendance mandatory.
- **Train officers and supervisors in resiliency strategies.** Front-line supervisors are the most influential people in a responder's professional life. Invest in leadership development that includes emotional intelligence, active listening, and crisis intervention skills.
- **Celebrate resiliency milestones.** Recognize personnel who complete behavioral health training, participate in peer support programs, or demonstrate leadership in building team culture. Public recognition reinforces that resiliency is a valued organizational competency.

The demands placed on fire and EMS personnel are extraordinary. The physical dangers, emotional weight, and operational complexity of emergency response take a cumulative toll that no amount of individual toughness can fully offset. Resiliency is not a personal trait that some people have, and others lack. It is a skill leaders can teach, practice, and strengthen over time.

As a leader, you have the authority and the responsibility to build an organization where resiliency is not an afterthought but a core operational value. The routines described in this resource are a starting point. Your role is to make them standard practice and to create the conditions where every member of your team can show up, perform, and go home whole.