

PrepTalks Discussion Guides provide a framework for community leaders to translate insights from the PrepTalk into community planning and outreach. Community leaders can use the PrepTalks materials at meetings, workshops, and conferences to address critical emergency management topics with whole community partners.

Chief Brian Fennessy – Building a Mission-Driven Culture

Brian Fennessy is fire chief in Orange County, California, and has held executive leadership positions in other wildland and metropolitan fire services. He is qualified at multiple Incident Command System positions, served on National Incident Management Teams, and developed one of the first All-Hazard Incident Management Teams in the country. He currently serves as the representative for the nine Western Division FEMA Urban Search & Rescue Task Force Sponsoring Agency Chiefs, vice-chair of the California Fire Chiefs Association Metro Chiefs, vice-chair of the FIRESCOPE Board of Directors, and a National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Leadership Committee primary member.

In periods of chaos, uncertainty, and ambiguity, our standard command and control doesn't work.

— Brian Fennessy

In his PrepTalk, Chief Fennessy shares his leadership journey and why he firmly believes that a mission-driven culture is critical to organizational success, both in times of chaos and during daily operations.

Partners for the Discussion

Your organization's entire leadership team, from directors to supervisors to group leaders and legal counsel, must be committed to making a change to a mission-driven culture. Chief Fennessy suggests bringing leaders from all levels of your organization together to be a part of this conversation. Watch his PrepTalk, and then use the discussion guide and slides to facilitate a conversation about your current culture and how it may benefit from a mission-driven approach.

Discussion Topics

Topic 1: What is Mission-Driven Culture?

The Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program, which Chief Fennessy helped develop, defines a mission-driven culture as a system of decentralized decision making, guided by a leader's intent and combined with the authority and expectation to act.



Most emergency management and public safety organizations follow a traditional command and control model, where those closest to the situation must follow strict policies and procedures or risk significant consequences, even if a deviation from policy would result in an improved outcome. Mission-driven culture is a change in an organization's management strategy—it involves leaders providing clear intent (task, purpose, end state) and guidelines within which individuals or teams make well-informed and safety-conscious decisions on the most effective way to approach the situation.

For a mission-driven culture to be successful, leaders at all levels must support and model the new approach. Also, leadership must make it clear that all decisions made within the leader's intent will be supported by leadership, even if the outcome is not what was intended.

Questions for Discussion

- In his PrepTalk, Chief Fennessy shares examples of how a command and control management structure can lead to inaction and even tragedy. What examples have you seen or experienced where critical decisions were constrained by adherence to policy?
- What examples have you seen or experienced of a mission-driven culture, either within your organization or other organizations?
- How would you describe the differences between command and control vs. mission-driven culture?
- How would a shift to a mission-driven culture change how your organization achieves its goals? How would it benefit your staff? Your community?
- If you know of an organization following the mission-driven culture model, consider inviting a leader from that organization to speak about their experience and what lessons they have learned.

The values of a mission-driven culture include:

Service for the Common Good

- A commitment that all actions and decisions should contribute to the desired team result.

High Trust State

- Developing trust in systems and people, which lays the foundation for effective decision making.

Pursuit of Truth

- An emphasis on maximum situational awareness through detailed questioning, active listening, and confirmation.

Form & Function Defined by the End State

- A willingness to refine the framework based on evolving needs.

Individual Initiative

- Promotion of individual actions to take advantage of opportunities and solve problems within the bounds of the leader's intent.

Continuous Improvement

- Promoting continuous learning and improvement, both organizationally and individually.

Topic 2: Accountability in a Mission-Driven Culture

A commonly asked question is: How does a mission-driven culture handle staff who made a decision that results in a poor outcome? Chief Fennessy says that accountability in a mission-driven culture should be higher than in traditional command and control. Each operator needs to be able to explain their actions so that leadership can understand how and why a choice was made. Employee performance in a mission-driven culture isn't simply "I followed protocol" or "I did what I was told to do." Instead, staff make responsible judgement calls in difficult or rapidly evolving situations.

Any organization making a change to a mission-driven culture must involve legal counsel in the process. Legal counsel can help communicate potential administrative or operational changes to your team. Legal involvement also shows staff that leaders will support them in situations that require difficult judgement calls. Leadership should also discuss with legal counsel where the boundaries are, where the line is between good decisions with bad outcomes, and simply bad decisions. Leadership may be fully on board with the change, but if legal counsel isn't willing to adapt to the new culture as well, there may be challenges.

An organization with a mission-driven culture will still have consequences for improper actions—such as decisions made outside of the leader's intent and other guidance, without proper training or knowledge, or outside of the scope of practice of the decision maker.

Questions for Discussion

- What are some examples of decisions that your organization's leaders may be nervous about delegating to your staff? What decisions are staff nervous about making?
- How are staff held accountable for their actions in your organization?
- What ethical or legal concerns do you have in changing to a mission-driven culture?
- How can you partner with legal counsel to provide clear guidance to your staff?
- If a decision causes a controversial outcome, what process will you use to review the decision and the outcome?

Topic 3: Implementing a Mission-Driven Culture

Culture change is difficult. Leaders should remember their own journeys to leadership: When were they in a position where they knew what the right decision was, but felt unable to implement? What rules or protocols prevented them from

There are going to be mistakes—hopefully not a lot of big ones, but there will be mistakes, and who hasn't learned more from their mistakes?

— Brian Fennessy

It's no good if we at the top all agree that this is the way to operate, but we've got an operator mid-level that is not bought in.

— Brian Fennessy

making the “right” decision? Leaders at all levels should understand why the shift is necessary and be able to feel personally invested in the change. Modeling mission-driven culture begins with the establishment of a regular use of **leader’s intent**: task, purpose, end state.

Chief Fennessy describes how the transition to mission-driven culture requires trust and reassurance. Staff must believe that management “has their back” and supports their judgement. In a shift to mission-driven culture, everyone in the organization must understand that this is a move away from the “blame game.” Organizations must build a culture where individuals feel safe reporting failures so that these failures can be opportunities for learning, and not excuses to place blame.

The change must also be embraced by leadership at all organizational levels. All leaders need to understand the need for, benefits of, and new approaches necessitated by the shift. This can be accomplished by clear communication and modeling from executive leadership.

Leader’s intent is a clear, concise statement about what people must do to succeed in their assignments.

- **Task** – State the objective or goal of the assignment
- **Purpose** – Why the assignment needs to be done.
- **End state** – How the situation should look when the assignment is successfully completed.

Questions for Discussion

- How can you ensure staff understand leader’s intent? Do you have a process to evaluate whether your staff feel empowered to make independent decisions?
- What are ways that you can recognize and celebrate independent decision making to underscore management’s commitment to mission-driven culture?
- How can you track the benefits of implementing a mission-driven culture? What are some measurements you could use?

For the companion Facilitator Slides and Resource List for this PrepTalk, visit:

<https://www.fema.gov/blog/preptalks-brian-fennessy-building-mission-driven-culture>