



Robyn Benincasa Leadership Interview Questions

Fire-Rescue International

International Association of Fire Chiefs

1. Tell us a little about yourself.

I'm a full time firefighter for the City of San Diego (14 years on) and have been competing in the world's toughest endurance races for the last 20 years. It started with Ironman Triathlons (x10), then progressed to 6-10 day non-stop team Adventure Races like the Eco-Challenge and Primal Quest (we've been on the podium in 25 of them and have been lucky enough to rack up a few World Championship Titles), and I'm now a competitive endurance kayaker and stand up paddler with several wins at the world's longest paddling races (Missouri River 340 and Yukon River Quest) and 2x 24 hour Guinness World Records for "longest distance paddled by a female in a canoe/kayak in 24 hours" (moving water and flat water--ocean is next!). (I never say a word about any of this on the job, so people reading this might be surprised. :). Based on a medical setback of my own, I founded the Project Athena Foundation, which helps Survivors of medical or traumatic setbacks (ie Breast Cancer) to live an adventurous dream as part of their recovery. It's the most amazing and wonderful thing I have ever done in my life. In my spare time I'm the CEO of World Class Teams, a teambuilding and leadership consulting company that delivers "Human Synergy" and "Why Winners Win" keynotes and creates outdoor team-based adventures for companies all over the world. Last but not least, I also wrote a NY Times Bestselling book in 2012 called "How Winning Works".



2. Your presentation will teach the 8 essential elements of human synergy, how did you develop this list?

When my teammates and I won Mark Burnett's (Survivor Producer) EcoChallenge in Borneo in 2000, we weren't one of the teams picked to win. We had never race together before, we were all merely "above average" athletes compared to the rest of the field, and we had never really trained together as a team before. But somehow, as we made our way through those 6 non-stop days and nights in the jungle, mountain biking, kayaking in native canoes, navigating caves and whitewater swimming uncharted rivers, we realized we had something pretty special as a team. We were not only making one another better athletes as we moved through the course, we were making one another better people. And our outcomes were so much greater than the sum of our individual strengths, and unlike most of the other teams, we weren't just hiking, riding and paddling to the finish line side by side, we were figuratively and literally carrying one another every step of the way. When we shocked the endurance racing world and won the World Champs as a team of mediocre athletes, I realized we had something pretty special as a team, so I started writing it all down in the hope that by studying our team dynamic we could reproduce it to win future adventure races. But what I ultimately discovered is that our team dynamic and leadership style was the formula for tackling any difficult and worthy challenge in life. We had basically stumbled upon "How Winning Works" .

When I was recruited by Fast Company Magazine to speak at an event in 1999 about how our team was so consistently high performing in such an extreme, dynamic sport with an eye toward what could be gleaned for business success, I massaged my notes into the 8 Essential Elements of Human Synergy. It



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has changed a little bit over the years, but how we make one another better and create greater outcomes than the sum of the individual parts is a universal goal and principal that remains the same. Using adventure racing is just a very fun, unique, compelling way to study it. :)

3. What inspires you to achieve greatness and want to help others find human synergy in their professional and personal lives?

I'm inspired to share what we have learned because the principles are so powerful and yet so simple. The greater your goal, the less likely it is that you can accomplish it alone. So understanding that building world class teams that allow you to capitalize on your strengths and outsource your weaknesses is the key to getting to the next level in many aspects of your life. Many people will simply readjust their goals so they're something that can be accomplished alone instead of building a world class team that can help them get to the next level. If you look at the sports greats, the business greats, the most well respected and innovative chiefs, I guarantee you they would tell you that their success is due in part to the people that they surrounded themselves with along the way. It's so much fun to lead people on treks across the Grand Canyon and back in 2 days for my non profit (Project Athena), or to facilitate our Survivors' and Fundraiser's success in paddling and riding from Key Largo to Key West because it makes people realize what they're truly capable of when they surround themselves with other great people and leave their egos at the start line.

4. In talking with leaders around the country what is the biggest challenge you see all leaders facing today?

Many of the executives I speak with are looking for new ways to keep their teams inspired in the face of changing and challenging times. Change really is the only thing that remains the same. Our success is a factor of our response to the challenges in our path. A couple of ideas I share with them are:

- * **Be ruled by the hope of success versus the fear of failure (focus on what it takes to win/succeed versus simply 'not lose')**
- * **Create new momentum and ownership of the outcomes by being a leader that asks for input from the team. We embrace that which we help create.**
- * **Speak to your teammates about "challenges" versus "roadblocks"**
- * **Tap into a higher purpose when the going gets tough**
- * **Never let the pursuit of perfection hinder progress (it's not always going to be pretty or the way you imagined it, but you go forward with a great attitude and do the best you can for as long as you can, with what you've got)* Don't be afraid to make a turn when necessary.**



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5. As a firefighter yourself, do you see any unique leadership challenges within fire departments specifically?

Funny, the biggest leadership challenges from my perspective as a boot have much less to do with fireground operations than with crew and interpersonal issues. I suppose we are like any family in that we often let our egos get in the way and forget that the people around us are our teammates and not our competitors. "We Thinking" is critical to the success of a team: Sharing responsibility for success and failure as a team, finding value in what everyone brings to the table, maintaining respect for and loyalty to one another, shutting down gossip, understanding that we are better together than any of us can be alone. In tough times, crews really tend to bond, but in the down times in between, people often go right back to taking a bite out of their teammates. In that way, we as crew members appreciate a strong leader--never a micromanager--but a leader that explains and strongly backs up their philosophy about how he/she wants his/her crew to operate. And a leader who definitely leads by example. We train our fire service leaders to be solid "managers" who are trained in command, how to discipline the crew, how to take care of the station, paperwork, etc, but it seems that we should also focus on inspiring and rewarding great "leadership" from our commanding officers...being the person we want to work with, learn from, honor, and be the best we can be for--and not just because they have the bugles or the gold.

6. What is one mistake you witness leaders making more frequently than others?

*Oops. I think I just answered this one, above. :) Being a manager instead of a leader. As a manager, you are a facilitator of your team's success. You give your crew/team everything they need to be successful and make sure the day runs smoothly and things get done. This is the rules enforcement/let's make the chief happy side. But being leader is a completely different job. A leader inspires their crew to be better, sets solid expectations, consistently builds the team, acts like a great leader even if they don't feel like one, gives respect as a gift and not a grade, mentors the team, and is always the "us" in the us and them scenario (and not solely a watchdog for the gang at headquarters :). In my opinion, the best captains/chiefs aren't just getting their paperwork done on time and making sure the kids in the stations toe the line. The best, from my firefighter's perspective, are those that really focus on true leadership, being a great teammate and mentor, versus pulling out their bugles to demand respect. I have had some exceptional leaders in my career and some pretty awful ones. And it really makes a huge impact on how everyone around them feels about coming to work, how much they want to drill, how well the crew bonds, and most importantly, their performance in the heat of battle. It's important to headquarters that you manage, but it more important to the crew and the citizens you serve to be a leader. Just my two cents from the back seat, Sir/Maam.



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7. How can leaders encourage creative thinking within their organization?

We are trained in the fire service to be top-down managers. But in the sport of adventure racing, we learned the power of a democratic leadership style, in which everyone is asked for the input, no ideas are crazy, and brainstorming together is the fastest way to the finish line. Four brains is always better than one! We definitely have a team captain, but that role is administrative in general. When your whole life/career/race involves a series of unique challenges to overcome, day in and day out, one person, captain/chief or not, can't really have all the answers. There are a LOT of smart people on the crew with experience in different aspects of life.

The best and brightest leaders will view asking those people for input and ideas as a strength, not a weakness. I once worked for a captain who would never accept any help from the crew (this person felt like it was a weakness for the captain to not have all the answers--all out of insecurity) and literally screamed at the engineer to "shut up!" when he offered his input as to potential strategies as we rolled up to a wall of flames as a first in engine company on one of the biggest campaign fires in San Diego history. He did. He spoke not one word for the next 6 hours. And we lost the wisdom and experience of a 20 year veteran during the toughest firefighting situation in my 15 year career. It didn't go well for us that day. In fact, our engine was ultimately pulled from our original strike team. If this person had relied on the crew a little bit more, left their ego/insecurities/fears back at the station and focused on the success of the mission and the experience of the team members, it could have been a much different story. I always tell people that "a great leader doesn't need to know how to handle EVERYthing (in our job, that's not even possible)...they just need to build and inspire a team that they know can handle ANYthing".

It doesn't take much to encourage creative thinking. For the most part you just have to ask, and be open to the answers. Funny, the other day my new captain was casually telling me how hard it was to continue to come up with drills and kept putting this pressure on herself to "be creative" with our training. When I said "why don't you just ask each of the four of us to come up with a drill each week?", she got quiet for a few seconds as though she was taking the time to process such a foreign suggestion. It hadn't crossed her mind to take the pressure off herself and utilize the 40 years of experience among us to mentor one another. But then it seemed like a pretty good idea. :)

8. What advice would you give someone going into a leadership position for the first time?

Remove the pressure that because you are the leader you should have all of the answers. Yes, your knowledge is important, but more than anything you are there to facilitate the success of the team and the safety of the community. You don't need to be the great and powerful Oz. Everyone on your crew has something valuable to bring to the table. Let them teach the team something, help them mentor on another, ask for an accept help from them--because asking for help and accepting help from your team is a GIFT to them, and not a weakness. The respect for leaders is acquired by their title, their years of hard work, their vast experience and how well they did on the test, but it is continually EARNED by their actions and who they are for their team and their community every day. Also, this may sound funny, but



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it's more important to suck down than to suck up. Be there with and for your subordinates first and foremost and they will be there for you.

9. What do you do or suggest to others to ensure continued growth and leadership development even as an experienced leader?

First of all, it's extremely important to really care about the kind of leader you are. No matter how many years you have under your belt. When you stop caring about how you are perceived by the people that work with and work for you is the day you should retire. Again, just my two cents from the back seat. :) We have some AWESOME leaders in the fire service. But just as in any industry, oftentimes our experienced leaders are completely fine with the philosophy of "well, that's just the way I am. I have the title/bugles/gold badge so deal with it." And in accepting that, we excuse bad leadership. So to combat that, I'm about to suggest the scariest thing on earth: that is, an annual anonymous 360 feedback survey from the troops about their leaders' performance. Every year, our evaluations come from the top down, but unlike many civilian organizations, we never give our leaders feedback from the bottom up. When I worked in sales for a major pharmaceutical company, we used to do this every other year, but I have never yet been asked to do this in the fire service. The you-know-what only rolls one way. :) With the right attitude, these can be really enlightening and helpful tools to become a more in-tune and responsive leader to the needs of your team. And the survey doesn't have to be a formal evaluation that's instituted company wide; it can be something as simple as creating questions on a program like Survey Monkey and receiving averaged anonymous results. Trust me, if you're the kind of leader that would go the extra mile to show your team you want to be better for them, I guarantee you're going to like what you discover in the results, and maybe learn a thing or two that makes you even better. It's the other kind of leader that needs to worry. :)



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