Alpha Wolf

Iconic Symbol for Leadership and Status

Or Just Another Social Media Lie

The picture above is one that has gone viral on many of the social media pages. Chances are that many of you have seen it and were inspired by the picture and by the story told in the caption. Unfortunately, that inspiration that may have been felt from this post is based on false information. The picture that I am referring to is of a pack of wolves traveling in a long, single file line through some deep snow. The caption states that the wolves in the very front are the old and/or sick wolves of the pack setting the pace so that they do not get left behind. The next group are the strongest wolves, “the front line”. In the middle is the rest of the general population followed by another set of strong wolves. Finally, bringing up the rear is the Alpha Wolf. It states that from this position the alpha wolf can see everything and can control everything. All of which makes a very inspiring and motivational metaphor for leadership if it were true but in fact, none of it is.

Researchers who have spent their entire professional career studying wolves completely disagree with virtually everything about this story. In his 1999 paper, “Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs,” wolf expert L. David Mech writes that in natural wolf packs, the alpha males or alpha females are “merely the parents of the packs.” Mech states that the term alpha infers that there was some form of dominance that earned them that status. However, the truth is that there are minimal to no dominance contests among wild wolves. Another piece of false information is the statement that the old and/or sick wolves leading and setting the pace. These wolves are some of the strongest wolves cutting a path for the rest of the pack to save energy.

I discovered that all the perception of this picture and caption to be false when I was trying to come up with a logo for my social media page. I looked up the picture because it made an impact on me. Seriously, what is cooler than an alpha wolf logo? So, I started digging and was a little disappointed when I kept seeing website after website debunking the concept of the alpha wolf and the wolf pack mentality. However, the more I researched wolves and the false social media post, the more my thinking began to shift. Maybe the truth is more inspiring than the lie. Here are some points that have caused me to totally rethink why I thought so much about the original caption-

* Weak and/or Sick Setting the Pace – At first glance you might think its’s an act of respect that wolves would keep this group in the front to protect them. Let’s analyze this concept deeper and then apply that concept to a crew or team atmosphere. When doing so this concept quickly becomes a terrible idea. Do you want the lazy and unmotivated crew member(s) setting the pace for your crew? Absolutely not! I want my motivated and hungry members setting our pace. I think this totally mirrors strong human leadership and a spirit of empowerment. Weak leadership is wanting to put yourself in the front or other weak leaders that will support their agenda even if there are others more talented and skilled that could do a better job. If you have members that are fired up about the job and in bettering themselves, send them out and see what they can do. I honestly do not want to work for a department that is lead only by the “old and sick”. I’m using that as a metaphor for those that are threatened by progressive thinking, stuck in old ways, and/or those that push weaker leaders into high roles to further their own agenda. Those to me are truly sick mindsets.
* The Alpha is the Last One Overseeing Everything – Once again, seems like something that you could compare to strong leadership. But is it really? Or is it the very definition of micromanagement? Going back to the L. David Mech’s stance on the term “Alpha Wolf”, he describes the pack leaders as just the parents of the most offspring. Instead of their status coming from pushing their physical strength and will on the other wolves, it comes from growing the pack or strengthening it by numbers. This is where things really started to click with me, and I began to look at that from an organizational viewpoint. Weak leadership relies on pushing its rank and positional power on their subordinates to prop up their leadership status and agenda. Whereas strong leadership relies on mentoring and empowering their subordinates in order to prepare and build the leaders of tomorrow. This would also be strengthening the organization by numbers of strong future leaders. The only agenda of a strong leader is to help those that they are responsible for reach their full potential. At this point I absolutely like the details of the true wolf pack much more than the fabricated details. That’s the pack mentality that I have been striving for since day one of becoming a station officer.
* Researchers have also discovered that unlike wolves in the wild, wolves living in captivity do often show signs of aggression and a status model in which a dominant alpha does exist. So, following the pattern that I have been laying out so far how can we correlate this to human leadership? To me the easiest way to compare our organizations to wolves living in captivity is if you’re in an organization that buries its people in cumbersome policies, weak- and closed-minded leadership, and micromanagement. When you have strong leaders that want to do good things, want to create mentoring programs, and that look for outside training opportunities to better themselves; being confined by leadership that constantly squelches these attempts will make them feel like they are being forced to work in captivity.

What does this type of leadership create? It creates a breeding ground for rebellion, deviance of normalcy, and turns your best employees into bitter veterans that no longer care to put the energy into building others up. It’s no different from the proverbial adage of what happens when you corner a wild animal. Pinning someone in a corner that has passion for the job and wants to do good things leads to no good outcome. These people would literally make your job easier if you would allow them to so why aren’t we. Why are we micromanaging our very capable crews instead of giving them a mission and letting them blow your mind at how well they get it done? Why are we punishing our best crews by splitting them up because there is a turd at another station that no one gets along with and it is easier to move them then deal with the problem? I feel it’s safe to say a scenario like this is a perfect storm and creates a dying department.

The only time that wolves exhibit behaviors of fighting for dominance are in captivity. Most of what we have ever been taught about wolves and wolf packs have been based strictly on studies done on captive wolves. If we are going to apply the concept of the wolf pack to our crew, then we need to be the wolf pack based off the accurate description of their behavior in their natural habitat. I ask our leaders; which environment are we creating for our team? Are we leading our crews using some style that may have worked decades ago? In other words, are we basing our leadership data on outdated and disproven leadership styles or are we willing to go outside the comfort zone of the “always has been this way” thinking we have in our fire service to lead in a new way? Are we growing a crew to do bigger and better things? Alpha wolves may not exist, but I ask that you approach leadership with that alpha attitude. Not the false perception of alpha dominance but with a true attitude of building and growing a powerful team. I have no interest working for those that choose to lead by pushing their positional power on me, that means nothing to me. I will lead with a fierce drive and I will not apologize for doing so because I truly believe that I have been called to do so. I will do everything that I can to build up the future leaders of the fire service and I will no longer ask for permission to do so. The question is, do you have the strength to be that Alpha Leader that your team, your crew, and your department needs?