

# Leadership in Cinema



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

## LADDER 49

Submitted by: David Barckhoff, movie/tv producer, director, screenwriter, actor, DCNR PA District-8 Hotshots firefighter .....E-mail: [bearcubproductions@hotmail.com](mailto:bearcubproductions@hotmail.com)  
Studio: Touchstone Pictures, Beacon Pictures, Buena Vista Pictures..... Released: 2004  
Director: Jay Russell  
Genre: Disaster/Thriller.....Audience Rating: PG 13  
Runtime: 115 minutes

### Materials

VCR or DVD, television, laptop computer or projection system, Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles handouts (single-sided), notepad, writing utensil (pen or pencil)

### Objective

Students will identify Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles illustrated within Ladder 49, then discuss the leadership lessons learned with group members or mentors.

### Basic Plot

After saving the life of one of the civilians inside, firefighter Jack Morrison (Joaquin Phoenix) finds himself trapped in a burning warehouse with a broken leg. As his friend and mentor, Deputy Chief Mike Kennedy (John Travolta), tries to negotiate a rescue from, Jack flashes back to various events in his life: the first, awkward days on the force, meeting the woman (Jacinda Barrett) who would become his wife and saving a small girl from a burning building.

## Detailed Plot

The film opens with Baltimore firefighter Jack Morrison (Joaquin Phoenix) saving a man's life in a massive four-alarm fire in a 20-story concrete grain elevator/warehouse in the Canton waterfront neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland; however the grain being stored in the warehouse explodes, sending Jack falling through several floors, breaking his leg on landing. The film follows the efforts of the other men in his unit, Ladder Company 49, led by the commands of Deputy Chief Mike Kennedy (John Travolta), Jack's longtime mentor, to rescue him while Morrison tries to reach a safe area of the burning structure. Interspersed with the current rescue efforts are a series of flashbacks showing how Jack joined the fire department, his first meeting (at a supermarket) with the woman who would eventually become his wife (Jacinda Barrett), his relationship with his children, and the bonds he formed and the trials and tribulations he endured with his fellow firefighters.

After graduating from the fire academy, Jack is sent to work on Baltimore City Fire Department (BCFD) Engine Company 33, in the busiest firehouse in the city. Quartered with Engine 33 is Ladder Company 49. On Engine 33, Jack learns the ropes of firefighting. He quickly becomes close friends with his fellow firefighters, including Mike Kennedy, his Captain at the time. Jack's first fire takes place at a burning vacant rowhouse. Engine 33 and Ladder 49 respond and are the first companies on the scene. Jack and Mike enter the building with a hose line and tackle the blaze, with Jack on the nozzle of the hose. They quickly and triumphantly extinguish it.

After some time working on Engine 33, Jack arrives at the scene of another vacant rowhouse fire, where a fellow firefighter from Ladder 49, Dennis Gauquin (Billy Burke), dies after falling through a roof of the building. Jack decides, although it is more dangerous, to take his friend's position as a "truckie", a search and rescue member on Ladder 49 by transferring to the Truck.

As the years go by, Jack suffers some traumatic experiences, including rescuing a man from the ledge of a burning high-rise building in Downtown Baltimore, and witnessing another friend and fellow firefighter from Ladder 49, Tommy Drake (Morris Chestnut), burned beyond recognition following a steam explosion at an industrial building who continues firefighting even after sustaining such a terrible injury. He finds the work rewarding, but his wife initially worries about his safety and opposes the change. However, she eventually accepts his new role and even talks him out of taking an administrative position that Mike, who has now become a Deputy Chief, offers him.

One Christmas Eve, Jack and the members of Engine 33 and Ladder 49 respond to a burning apartment building. Jack is able to rescue a young girl trapped in an engulfed apartment, but is briefly trapped himself before being rescued by a fellow Firefighter from Ladder 49, Leonard "Lenny" Richter (Robert Patrick). Both men receive the department's Medal of Valor for their actions.

Back at the grain building fire that opened the film, Jack's fellow firefighters become extremely determined to rescue him, and Jack does his best to reach the only possible safe area Mike tells him about. However, upon reaching that room Jack sees that the only exit is cut off by raging flames and, out of air and with the heat intensifying, Jack realizes his situation is hopeless. He

radios Mike to pull his men back, so no one else will be hurt while trying to rescue him. Mike reluctantly agrees, and Jack accepts his fate to die in the fire, devastating Mike.

At Jack's funeral, Mike delivers an emotional eulogy in celebration of Jack's life, which inspires a standing ovation from friends and family in attendance. Jack's body is then carried to his resting place, with full honors, on the back of Engine 33 in a typical fireman's funeral procession. The film ends with flashbacks of Jack and his fellow firefighters going to fires and a final shot of Mike and Jack coming out of Jack's first ever burning building in triumph.

## Cast of Main Characters

Joaquin Phoenix	Firefighter Jack Morrison, Ladder 49 (formerly Engine 33)
John Travolta	Deputy Chief (formerly Captain) Mike Kennedy, Deputy Chief 1 (formerly Engine 33)
Robert Patrick	Firefighter Leonard "Lenny" Richter, Ladder 49
Jacinda Barrett	Linda Morrison
Morris Chestnut	Firefighter Tommy Drake, Ladder 49 Tillerman
Balthazar Getty	Firefighter Ray Gauquin, Ladder 49
Billy Burke	Firefighter Dennis Gauquin, Ladder 49
Tim Guinne	Captain Tony Corrigan, Ladder 49
Kevin Chapman	Frank McKinney, Engine 33
Jay Hernandez	Probationary Firefighter Keith Perez, Engine 33
Kevin Daniels	Firefighter Engineer Don Miller, Engine 33
Steve Maye	Firefighter Pete Lamb, Engine 33
Robert Logan Lewis	Firefighter Ed Reilly, Ladder 49
Spencer Berglund	Nicky Morrison
Brooke Hamlin	Katie Morrison
Sam Stockdale	Himself
Paul Novak, Jr.	the Dispatcher
Mayor of Baltimore Martin O'Malley	himself

## Facilitation Options

**Ladder 49** illustrates an abundance of leadership challenging situations, values and principles in a city fire station. Students should have few problems identifying those that correspond to the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles. The objective is not to identify every leadership principle but to promote thought and discussion. Students should be less concerned with how

many principles they view within the film and more concerned with how the principles they do recognize can be used to develop themselves as a leader.

## **Facilitation Tips**

The film can be viewed in its entirety or by short scene clip selection, depending on facilitator intent and time schedules. Another method is to have the employee(s) view the film on his/her own and then hold the classroom discussion session.

## **Full-film Facilitation Suggestion:**

1. Review the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles with students.
2. Advise students to document instances within the film that illustrate/violate the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles on the handout provided.
3. Break students into small discussion groups.
4. Show students Ladder 49.
5. Be sure to give multiple breaks throughout the film.
6. Use time during the breaks to complete the guided discussion.
7. Provide a short synopsis with some “ticklers” to pay attention before beginning each segment of the film.
8. Resume the film.
9. Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that have difficulty.
10. Wrap up the session and encourage students to apply leadership lessons learned in their personal and work lives.

## **Clip Facilitation Suggestion:**

1. Review the Wildland Fire Leadership Value or Principle targeted for discussion. (May be given or ask students to identify the value or principle being illustrated after viewing the clip.)
2. Show the relevant movie Ladder 49 clip suggestions
3. Facilitate discussion regarding the selected clip and corresponding value and/or principle.
4. Break students into small discussion groups.
5. Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that may have difficulty.
6. Wrap up the session and encourage students to apply leadership lessons learned in their personal and work lives.

## Mentor Suggestion

Use either method presented above. The mentor should be available to the student to discuss lessons learned from the film as well as incorporating them to the student's leadership self-development plan.

Encouraging individuals to keep a leadership journal is an excellent way to document leadership values and principles that are practiced.

Suggest other wildland fire leadership toolbox items that will contribute to the overall leadership development of the student.

## References

Web links or other resources that will help in the delivery of this lesson plan. Links below are some commonly used examples.

- [Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center](#)
- [Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program](#) (WFLDP)
- [High Reliability Organizing – What It Is, Why It Works, How to Lead It](#) (information from the BLM Fire and Aviation Directorate, Division of Fire Operations, March 2010 HRO training session)

Hyperlinks have been included to facilitate the use of the [Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program website](#). Encourage students of leadership to visit the [website](#).

# DUTY

**Be proficient in your job, both technically & as a leader.**

- Take charge when in charge.
- Adhere to professional standard operating procedures.
- Develop a plan to accomplish given objectives.

**Make sound & timely decisions.**

- Maintain situation awareness in order to anticipate needed actions.
- Develop contingencies & consider consequences.
- Improvise within the commander's intent to handle a rapidly changing environment.

**Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised, accomplished.**

- Issue clear instructions.
- Observe & assess actions in progress without micro-managing.
- Use positive feedback to modify duties, tasks & assignments when appropriate.

**Develop your subordinates for the future.**

- Clearly state expectations.
- Delegate tasks that you are not required to do personally.
- Consider individual skill levels & developmental needs when assigning tasks.

**Know your subordinates and look out for their well-being.**

- Put the safety of your subordinates above all other objectives.
- Take care of your subordinate's needs.
- Resolve conflicts between individuals on the team.

**Keep your subordinates informed.**

- Provide accurate & timely briefings.
- Give the reason (intent) for assignments & tasks.
- Make yourself available to answer questions at appropriate times.

**Build the team.**

- Conduct frequent debriefings with the team to identify lessons learned.
- Recognize accomplishments & reward them appropriately.
- Apply disciplinary measures equally.

**Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.**

- Observe human behavior as well as fire behavior.
- Provide early warning to subordinates of tasks they will be responsible for.
- Consider team experience, fatigue & physical limitations when accepting assignments.

**Know yourself and seek improvement.**

- Know the strengths/weaknesses in your character & skill level.
- Ask questions of peers & supervisors.
- Actively listen to feedback from subordinates.

**Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.**

- Accept full responsibility for & correct poor team performance.
- Credit subordinates for good performance.
- Keep your superiors informed of your actions.

**Set the example.**

- Share the hazards & hardships with your subordinates.
- Don't show discouragement when facing setbacks.
- Choose the difficult right over the easy wrong.

# RESPECT

# INTEGRITY

## LADDER 49

1. Document film clips illustrating the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles.
2. Discuss leadership lessons learned from the film with group members or mentor.

### Duty

- Be proficient in your job, both technically and as a leader.
- Make sound and timely decisions.
- Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised and accomplished.
- Develop your subordinates for the future.
- What scenes from the movie relate to “Duty”?

### Respect

- Know your subordinates and look out for their well being.
- Keep your subordinates informed.
- Build the team.
- Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.
- What scenes from the movie relate to “Respect”?

### Integrity

- Know yourself and seek improvement.
- Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.
- Set the example.
- What scenes from the movie relate to “Integrity”?

## LADDER 49

### Guided Discussion Questions

As you watch the movie or selected video clips, make some notes as to what scenes, actions, leadership decisions, firefighter interactions are comparable to or different with the following wildland leadership discussion questions. Then discuss why you feel they are similar or deviate from leadership values.

1. Give examples of situations in wildland firefighting where pressure from leadership can be a factor in the decision making of firefighters?
2. Which element(s) of the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles does John Travolta's role as Captain exemplify in the beginning of the movie?
3. Which element(s) of the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles does John Travolta's role as Deputy Chief exemplify in the end of the movie?
4. How does Travolta's Character leadership progress and handle the various situations throughout the movie?
5. How can a supervisor or firefighter use or maintain situation awareness in order to anticipate needed actions?
6. Does being a leader allow for improvising within the ICS Fire commander's intent with regard to handling a rapidly changing wildland fire environment?
7. When faced with a large wildfire or a four-alarm fire as depicted in the movie Ladder 49, what are some of the challenges and similarities that the leadership could encounter?
8. How is leadership different when supervising new or inexperienced firefighters as compared to veteran or more experienced firefighters?
9. How does babysitting compare to (leadership of) and supervising firefighters?
10. When faced with adversity and tragedy (movie death of firefighter Jack – Joaquin Phoenix's role), how should a leader (Deputy Chief Mike Kennedy – John Travolta's role) respond to help the other surviving firefighters?
11. A good leader praises in public and criticizes in private. Give a movie scene example of each of these. Discuss how the actors in the movie handled these situations from a leadership perspective?
12. How would you handle these situations from a supervisor/leadership perspective?
  - Captain/Deputy Mike Kennedy -Travolta's breaking up the bar fight of firefighter Jack – Joaquin Phoenix's role?
  - Firefighter's Jack and Leonard saving the young girl's life from the fire on Christmas Eve, and then receiving the Medal of Valor?
13. Given the following situation as depicted in the movie, how do these actions and decisions compare to the Watch out warnings, LCES and the decision-making of

determining whether or not to deploy your fire shelter from a firefighter and a supervisor leadership perspective?

*Back at the grain building fire that opened the film, Jack's fellow firefighters become extremely determined to rescue him from the control room, but Jack does his best to reach the only possible safe area Mike tells him about. However, upon reaching that room Jack sees that the only exit is cut off by raging flames and, out of air and with the heat intensifying, Jack realizes his situation is hopeless. He radios Mike to pull his men back, so no one else will be hurt while trying to rescue him. Mike reluctantly agrees, and Jack accepts his fate to die in the fire, devastating Mike.*