Endorsements
Rising from Ground Zero:
9/11 and the FDNY's Path from Crisis to Transformation

Rising from Ground Zero is a masterful account of the response of New York firefighters to the calamitous events of 9/11 and the later rebuilding of their decimated ranks. Drawing on depth interviews with those who rushed to the World Trade Center on that fateful day, Greg Shea, Paul Brown, Andre Kotze, and Lauren Starkey provide a graphic and compelling account of the firefighters' "lived experience" and the enduring lessons for crisis leadership at its best.

***Michael Useem**, Professor of Management Emeritus, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, and author of The Leadership Moment*

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Rising from Ground Zero: 9/11 and the FDNY's Path through Crisis to Transformation belongs on every *Leader's Bookshelf*. It presents FDNY responder, on the ground, personal stories of 9/11 and what followed. Moving and inspiring, it is a story of crisis, endurance, and healing. It is also a story of transformation, of how to transform even the most elite of organizations. Any leader navigating stormy seas or facing the daunting task of organizational renewal should read *Rising from Ground Zero* -- carefully.

***Admiral James Stavridis**, 16th supreme allied Commander of NATO and author of 2084: A Novel of Future War*

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Rising from Ground Zero preserves what must never be lost: the lived truth of those who answered the call on September 11 and in the long decades since then. Some books inform. *Rising from Ground Zero* transforms. The unvarnished words of the 9/11 FDNY responders show us what leadership looks like when the ground itself gives way. This book is honest, humane, and quietly devastating. Read it slowly. Listen to the people's voices, their pain, their grief, their strength and their hope. If you lead anyone—a team, a company, a family—open this book, let these firefighters speak, and take to heart what only they can teach us.

***Annie Mckee**, bestselling author and leadership expert; co-author of Primal Leadership*

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A deeply human account of 9/11 and its aftermath, told by those who lived it. *Rising from Ground Zero* is as much about leadership, trust, and resilience as it is about tragedy—and offers enduring lessons for anyone leading through crisis.

***Laura Kavanagh**, 34th FDNY Commissioner (Ret.), Distinguished Visiting Urbanist, New York University*

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A powerful and fully immersive narrative, *Rising From Ground Zero* chronicles the most tragic event in the storied history of the FDNY. Through a gripping reconstruction of that fateful day—and the critical decisions that followed—the book offers a rare window into leadership under extreme pressure.

Drawing on firsthand accounts and rigorous analysis, the authors illuminate the sacrifice, bravery, and resilience of one of the world's premier first responder organizations. Both a tribute and a study in crisis management, *Rising From Ground Zero* is essential reading for leaders and aspiring professionals across public safety, government, the military, and beyond.

***John Sudnik**, FDNY Chief of Department (2018-2021)*

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This is the go-to book for firefighters and leaders--the definitive FDNY 9/11 book. This is the story of the survivors and leaders who brought the FDNY though unfathomable disaster and led the department into the future. Everyone who is or wants to be a leader should read this book, put themselves into an FDNY leader's shoes, and answer the authors' "whisper in your ear" question. It's the book every firefighter coming on the job over the next hundred years should read.

***Vincent Dunn**, FDNY Deputy Chief (ret.), author of Collapse of Burning Buildings*

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This book brings it home: the horror, the camaraderie, the heroism, and the lessons of that fateful day and after. From interviews and quotes of those involved, the intensity, heartbreak and courage are palpable. From the leadership reflections on the events, the wisdom and learnings we all can take from the FDNY are pivotal.

***Mark Turner**, Former CEO and Executive Chair, WSFS Bank, author of The Path to Sustained Excellence*

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Rising from Ground Zero is multi-layered and each layer has critical elements that contribute to the whole. First is the emotional first-person account of that seminal day in American history September 11, 2001 when America changed forever. As you hear the firefighters and other first responders relate their story, you weep and feel their pain, and you also remember every moment of that day. The next layer is a realization of the training and command structure that allows large organizations like the New York City Fire department, the military and others to function, even when they have been decapitated of leadership. Next, comes the leadership lessons and what we see is how well-trained women and men respond, adapt, and prevail in the most difficult situations imaginable. This is a book to be read, meditated upon and experienced. Well done.

***Thomas E. Beeman**, PhD, LHD (hon), LFACHE, FCPP Rear Admiral (U), US Navy*

Most books about 9/11 ask us to remember. *Rising from Ground Zero* asks us to learn, and that is much harder. Shea, Brown, and Kotze have made the FDNY's story useful without making it smaller or less personal. The firefighters speak in their own words, and what emerges is not a monument but a manual for any leader who has ever had to rebuild something while it was still on fire. But the lessons cut deeper than crisis leadership. After 9/11, a fantastic fire department transformed itself into a modern emergency management agency. That is exactly the challenge facing healthcare: to transform from smart, caring providers of care into a modern health assurance system. This book shows us the way.

***Stephen K. Klasko**, MD, MBA, Executive in Residence, General Catalyst; former President & CEO, Jefferson Health*

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What an incredible book! It transports you back to 9/11 and into the hearts and minds of the firefighters. Truly a page-turning read.

I hope that every management PhD student reads this book to see what top of class research looks like. *Rising from Ground Zero* deftly presents a multiple decade, carefully researched case study in the words of the people who lived the case. The lessons matter in their own right, but the depth of research centers and grounds the book. It is a case study of how to construct a case study.

The book lays out poignant, concrete advice for any leader facing acute crisis, prolonged hard times, or organizational change. Leaders will find many invaluable, to-the-point takeaways here.

R. Edward Freeman, Bachand University Professor, The Darden School, University of Virginia

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9/11 devastated the FDNY. Starting with the events of that day, this work delivers a truly unique account of how the FDNY reacted, adapted, and implemented sustainable change in the years following. Telling the story through first-person accounts and ample documentary evidence, the book reveals the closeness of connections between personal lives and organization and offers insights applicable to more ordinary days.

Abstract concepts like organizational commitment, trust in leadership, and collaboration so often get measured with a few survey items. Understandably so. But constructs like those are nowhere more real and vivid than in this book.

***R.A. Guzzo**, Workforce Sciences Institute (co-president); co-editor, Psychology and Economics of Work: Interdisciplinarity for Theory and Practice, Oxford University Press (2026)*

"Drawing on personal vignettes from New York firefighters, the authors capture both heroism and humanity on a day that redefined a generation of first responders. While poignant and heart-rending, this book also offers powerful lessons for how high-performing organizations confront unimaginable circumstances and emerge stronger."

***Michele L. Malvesti**, PhD. Former senior counterterrorism official on the National Security Council staff at the White House.*

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An inspiring and informative read for anyone interested in leadership under uncertainty, crisis management, and the power of continuous learning to create sustained change. This compelling book traces the FDNY's journey through crisis and renewal, honoring the voices of the leaders that built a stronger, more resilient department while preserving its heart and soul.
***Todd Henshaw**, LTC US Army (R), Former Academy Professor and Director of Leadership at United States Military Academy (West Point); Senior Fellow Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management*

Rising from Ground Zero presents one of the most important stories of our generation. The legacy of the book and the way the authors constructed it will live on long past its authors. Rising from Ground Zero is a masterclass in letting the Firefighters of 9/11 tell their story, in their own words, while also helping the rest of us glean learnings from their lived the tacit knowledge that would otherwise die with the operators who hold it. That is not a small thing. That is the whole thing. Read this book. Then go tell someone the story.

***Dr. Preston B. Cline, Ed.D.,** Co-Founder, Mission Critical Team Institute; Senior Fellow, Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania*

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"Rising from Ground Zero is a rare, inside look at how a world-class, purpose-driven organization chose to evolve its culture and improve rather than rest on its reputation. Through the FDNY's own voices, you see an accomplished, proud, tradition-bound department confront unimaginable loss and rethink how it leads, learns, and cares for its people—guided always by its mission to save lives and protect one another. For leaders facing culture change, this is an unflinching, practical study in aligning structures and behaviors with a clear sense of purpose under the most demanding conditions imaginable."

Colonel Russell Williford, USAF (Ret), Leader of multiple successful Air Force-wide organizational culture change transformations

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Even though many of us believe we already know the story of 9/11, *Rising From Ground Zero* offers a vivid and compelling account drawn from the firsthand experiences of the brave

individuals who lived through the attacks on New York City and the difficult days that followed. The authors do far more than preserve an important oral history. They reconstruct the timeline of events with remarkable detail and, just as importantly, distill the critical lessons learned from one of the most consequential tragedies in modern American history.
This is a must-read for first responders, emergency managers, and public officials, as well as military, intelligence, and government leaders charged with leading large, complex organizations through crisis, uncertainty, and transformational change. While 9/11 may seem like distant history to some, the lessons of that day—leadership, resilience, preparedness, and unity in crisis—are as timely and relevant today as ever.

W.R. Gade, U.S. Army (retired) and Intelligence Community senior leader

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From an operational and leadership perspective, this book is a fantastic debrief of the incident and post-incident organizational change that any leader in an emergency services organization should read. As a first responder, I found the personal stories and vignettes from the responders especially impactful. A team of first responders without a strong organizational culture and ethos is just a collection of trained individuals who share a location during a shift. There are plenty of lessons to be learned from what went well and not-so-well during the massive 9/11 response, but this book is an inspirational testament to the first responders out there that when an organization's leaders instill a sense of duty, team belonging, and shared mission and purpose, those responders will rise to the occasion as a team and navigate the unthinkable with courage.

***Michael Carunchio**, NRP (Paramedic), The World's Okayest Medic Podcast (Host)*

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"I'm a retired San Diego Firefighter who competed for 17 years in the ultra-endurance sport of Adventure Racing in the most challenging terrain on earth--so I know a little something about professional challenge and risk. I'm also the Founder of the 501c3 Project Athena Foundation (CNN Heroes 2014), which helps survivors live their adventurous dreams as part of their recovery; so healing and building an organization dedicated to others is near and dear to my heart. Rising from Ground Zero is about all of that and more. The book lays it out clearly and impactfully: It's not about the setback… It's about the comeback. It's about how we build those deep connections to one another that help all of us rise through times of incredible adversity and challenge. Important book. Great read."

***Robyn Benincasa,** Founder/Minister of Dreams Project Athena Foundation*

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The lessons learned from the FDNY's response on and after 9/11/01 are universally applicable, demonstrating that the strength of an organization in crisis is forged in the values it establishes long before the event. Nowhere is this more evident than in the raw and resolute voices of the FDNY personnel who lived it. Shea, Brown, and Kotze offer an unprecedented look at how the

FDNY's storied history, paramilitary structure, and deep-rooted brotherhood created a foundation that held when everything else gave way. The narrative reveals how culture and character take over when even the most rigorous planning is eclipsed by the unthinkable. It is a necessary piece of our national history that captures the heart of public service and the extraordinary lengths to which our first responders go to protect their fellow countrymen. I encourage you to read this slowly-- it will undoubtedly touch you. You should therefore proceed with the care and attention that the book deserves. Rising from Ground Zero is essential reading for everyone, especially every American.

***Guy Barber**, MPH, FACHE, NREMT-P, Air Medical Executive & EMS Educator, Strategic Specialist in Healthcare Operations & Emergency Systems*

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Having worked alongside many of the men and women interviewed for this book, I can say without hesitation: they are the real deal. These are not secondhand accounts or stories polished by time. They are the voices of people who were there doing the work on September 11, 2001, and in the difficult months and years that followed. They were in the arena.
What makes *Rising from Ground Zero* especially compelling is its authenticity. The authors conducted an impressive number of interviews with key players who lived these events, allowing them to tell the story in their own words. The result is a powerful and deeply personal account of one of the most challenging periods in the history of the Fire Department of New York (FDNY). What has always set the FDNY apart is its culture. A culture of training, teamwork, mentorship, and commitment to one another. “Mission first, people always”. Throughout this book, readers will see how those values shaped decisions, actions, and outcomes during moments when there was no playbook and no easy answers. You will witness how firefighters, officers, chief officers, and civilian members came together with a common purpose and unwavering dedication to their mission.

This is what I call “The FDNY way.”

The book also does an outstanding job of illustrating where bottom-up leadership met top-down leadership. It demonstrates how initiative, experience, and problem-solving at every level of the organization combined with strategic direction and vision from leadership. The lessons from these experiences remain relevant today for anyone who leads people through uncertainty, adversity, or crisis.

As the authors note, the FDNY’s dedication to training, preparation, and professional development had been preparing its members long before that fateful day. Equally important was a culture that fostered resilience, resourcefulness, reliability, and, above all, the ability to remain calm amid chaos, confusion, and tremendous loss. Those qualities are woven throughout every chapter.

One of the book’s greatest strengths is that it does more than recount history. The authors thoughtfully draw leadership and organizational lessons from each chapter, helping readers connect these experiences to challenges they may face in their own professions and lives.

Rising from Ground Zero is a story of tragedy, recovery, leadership, and resilience. Most importantly, it is a story about people, ordinary people who faced extraordinary circumstances and stepped up. They found a way forward together. I am grateful that their stories have been captured so thoughtfully and preserved for future generations.

Frank Leeb, Retired FDNY Deputy Assistant Chief, Firefighter in FDNY Squad 270 on 9/11/2001