


Reputation Management in the Fire Service

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That's the title of a white paper released by the [Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firemen's Association](#), which is a century-old organization serving members in Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. The contents of the 17-page paper identifies "social, cultural, and ethical issues impacting the fire service nationwide that demand increased awareness," to quote [their news release](#). That is, bad behaviors by firefighters that damn not only them, but their departments, their communities, and the entire fire service.

Cheating, fire-setting, theft and misappropriation of funds, use and misuse of information technology, misuse of facilities, alcohol and substance abuse, and harassment and discrimination. And in the Internet age, when mass communication can happen in minutes, "actions of a small minority of bad actors can have grievous widespread consequences," they write. What are the action steps? The paper urges the development, dissemination, and enforcement of a Code of Ethics by all fire service leaders.

[Read the white paper](#) , copies of which are available at www.cvvfa.org. Also watch in coming weeks for the launch of firefighterbehavior.com, which will serve to raise further awareness of the issues.

See also Firehouse.com and Statter911.

EXACTLY... This paper is DEAD-ON the money and a MUST READ for all responders. It sums up a truth that is being experienced by many organizations, not just emergency services. As I repeatedly coach at SHFD, I ask members: "How are you defined?" The answer is: ...by your actions and sheer professionalism. Then it becomes YOUR reputation. The "erosion of our ethics" is a powerful statement for us to individually reflect upon. Our customers are calling... with an expectation.

A.C. Rich - 03/10/10 - 20:54

I wonder if a "YouTube test" can be applied to some firefighter behaviors? Those involving misuse of equipment or facilities, or perhaps poor treatment of other firefighters? Not sure if what you're doing is kosher? Imagine someone video-taping, posting on YouTube, and blogging about your YouTube video. Does that help your decision?

Legeros - 03/11/10 - 07:52

In our Dept (Wake Co) we have no leadership to reinforce these code of ethics. There is little, if any attention given to teaching the core values and ethics of the job. This leaves the "nuts to run the asylum" When that is the rule of the day, bad shit starts happening. Our leadership doesn't wanna know that stuff. As long as no one is busting their balls from outside the dept. All is good. My guess is this is just another example of the deterioration of ethics as a whole in our society.

Days of Old - 03/11/10 - 08:44

Very timely advice, but advice not heeded by one of our local "soon-to-be-former-brothers". See WTVD's headlines...

[rfburns] - 03/12/10 - 13:46

I believe the membership of some departments can actually positively affect their "leadership" by providing logical and even irrefutable input. Provide solutions to problems instead of constantly making "light" of the issues and sitting on the sidelines. If you're involved in the "cultural remediation" of an organization, proven methods and facts are very important because there are many departments that have "been there and done that." So, the officer and non-officer level "key leaders" (sometimes called informal leaders) from within the ranks of the membership can demonstrate proper behavior and actually reinforce the organization's expected values and ultimately ethics. Simply take a look at your department's mission statement, define your goals and values, and go from there. Disclaimer – sometimes there are knuckleheads who will totally screw up and even appear on the news – no matter how hard you try.....

A.C. Rich - 03/13/10 - 21:21

There is leadership in this county that is SOOOO entrenched, and so well supported by the departments "good ole boys network" that make

even informal leadership an impossible task. I once thought that "low and slow" method was the way to make big changes, over time. Unfortunately some don't want anything to change, and will lead by intimidation, humiliation and fear. This lack of desire to change is an indication that they have not grasped the reality of the service, and it may be time for newer, fresher ideas to be pushed forward. I know in our department the membership is so beat down, that getting them involved and excited about anything is near impossible. I hope as time marches on, the pendulum of mediocrity will swing in the other direction allowing for a renewed sense of purpose, and understanding of what this job REALLY means.

Day of Old - 03/15/10 - 08:11

DoO – very true!! I believe informal leadership is possible if you are consistent. "Leading by intimidation" is not leading at all – it's simple autocratic supervision; so keep on trying!! Unfortunately in Wake Co., change is often difficult to manage and its hard to demonstrate "expected change" due to budget limitations. Many FFs equate "change" with new stuff and money. Well, it's not so. If for nothing else, launch a coalition of change in your organization – not a takeover, but a cooperative and demonstrated effort to do things right. It will take time and be mindful of the limitations many organizations have – and many are budgetary. If you are a volunteer, you do possess a significant capability to influence, however if an employee, your may only sometimes "ask." So, ask questions and back them up with facts. The pendulum will swing, but people have to get involved because the mediocrity exists at all levels of "membership." This perspective is very philosophical on my part and we all know some organizations take more time to evolve – or maybe never...

A.C. Rich - 03/15/10 - 10:00

"Management is making sure things are done right. Leadership is doing the right thing. The fire service needs a lot more leaders and a lot less managers". -Unknown

Silver - 03/15/10 - 13:06

You are so right Chief. Maintaining the slow but steady pace: see the "tortoise and the hare" seems to win the day. What is most puzzling, is the attitude of those currently in power seems to be one of total disgust and frustration with the very responsibilities they ASSUMED. I know in our case this person seems to genuinely HATE being responsible for the departments future. Yet there are a half a dozen people waiting to be given the opportunity to take the reigns and move forward... what's the old saying.... 200 years of history, unimpeded by progress" seems to be most fitting.

Day of Old - 03/17/10 - 07:42

DOO, is such disgust and frustration the result of change, perhaps? With the parameters of responsibility today pretty darn different than in prior times? Or maybe "running the show" has always encompassed a broader and wider set of implications and complications that some ascending chiefs are ever prepared for? Also, education levels are always a-risin'. The troops under your command get smarter and more aware of the context of the chief's and department's actions and directions. Come to think of it, the Internet age and even social media such as this blog make it easier for information exchange. Responders, officials, citizens, and everyone involved can more readily level-set, and be more equal in expectations of what "good service" should look like.

Legeros - 03/17/10 - 07:49

OHH good points Mike. In our case I think a lot of it has to do with the lack of training by leadership in leadership. Our leadership still wants to pretend they are in 1973, and in my opinion hasn't changed or learned anything since then. because of that reality they are frustrated leading to a "blind eye" towards what might be best for the department and more importantly the community they serve. the public does expect more from the service today then in days past. These new expectations are not just thrust upon the fire service, any and all public sector jobs now live with the weight of new expectations (teachers, PD, FD, Hell even trash-men) but with good reason.

We are all a product of our success as a society. That success or failure is now out there for all to see. If we don't raise our game we will be eaten alive. This white paper is SO ON THE MARK in my opinion. Unfortunately the ones that can help propel it's message the furthest and the fastest are often times, the very people that create the need for the white paper.... The proverbial "Catch 22"

Day of Old - 03/17/10 - 10:58

So true. Once again we see the "societal expectation(s)" in contrast with pure and simple generational gaps. I wonder, can a leader really be trained? I personally don't think so because leadership is a trait that must be learned (and earned) in an experiential manner. In addition, we know education will definitely enlighten and broaden your views. Finally, and related to power, it is truly fascinating to me... does assertive leadership yield power or, is power gained through positive leadership? Which perspective is best for change?

A.C. Rich - 03/17/10 - 23:49

Statter911 blogged about blogger Firehouse Zen, and this posting Character vs. Character: <http://firehousezen.com/2010/03/16/chara..>

Interesting quote on leadership: "Our industry needs to understand that the people who are worth anything aren't going to keep coming around when they get treated badly, they aren't going to take "because I said so, Rookie" as an answer to "why?" and they aren't going to choose time away from their families to be given all the scut duties while the vets sit around and watch. I know of a few officers who think it is funny to make the probies go get their coffee for them, or to stand around and watch under protection while their personnel are working in the sun or the rain. When good people say, "I don't want to work for you anymore", take that as a wake-up call that your management style sucks."

Legeros - 03/18/10 - 07:29

If you beat a dog long enough he will eventually not come back, find somewhere else to eat or bite the you know what out of you. The fire service does not need to lose good people because of bad leadership. The customers are the ones that suffer. Everbody has something to offer, you just have to listen. I think Brunacini one said "make it as easy as possible for your people to make you look good" Hey guys, I still like to help wash the truck and cut the grass to. Not trying to make you look bad just want to help the team.

Rob Mitchell - 03/18/10 - 13:26

Gentlemen I believe you have discovered one of the PRIMARY reasons volunteer FF enrollment is down, and has been on a downward trend for years. Not only is the job harder with stuff like BBP, HazMat, ISO req, NFPA standards, State and Federal pressure, but if you heap on a "pr_ck" for a leader then you have tipped the scales for many including me.... I am one of those that is having a serious talk with myself and my family about leaving this all behind because I just don't want to be told AGAIN. "Don't let the door hit you in the a@@"

Day of Old - 03/18/10 - 15:06

It is very sad because it's the citizens who suffer in the end. No discovery here... I've been studying organizational dynamics for years and have found our volunteer enrollment numbers are down due to the overall disinterest of society in their civic duties. Really, it's true. As I have mentioned before, our society and the "societal expectations" are not easily oriented towards volunteering you time for something. Also, communities across the nation are becoming more and more decentralized. So, when a perspective volunteer walks into the door of the fire station nowadays, it's a glorious time for all!!however, soon they become disenchanted as the disorganization and lackluster "styles" erode their interest.

A.C. Rich - 03/19/10 - 00:20

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/ [Textile](#)

Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

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Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.
Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.