

Recruiting and Retention: You Can't Leave it to Chance

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Why Are You Here Today?

- You are a volunteer firefighter
- You are a volunteer fire officer
- You are a volunteer fire chief

Why Are You Here Today?

- You are concerned about the future
- You are getting lonely waiting for people to respond with you
- You are worried that someone will be injured or killed due to staffing shortages

Why Am I Here Today?

- I have been an active member of the volunteer fire and emergency service world since 1964
- I have served as a volunteer fire chief and company officer
- I have seen the ranks of our volunteer fire service dwindle over time

Why Am I Here Today?

- I have studied the problem
- I have found that it is not specific to any particular state or place
- There are things which you can do to reach out to your community
- I can assure you that this is a problem which will not go away

I Ask You All Here Today

- Has the volunteer fire service lost sight of its role in society today?
- Has the society evolved away from the ability to support a volunteer fire service?
- Is it a combination of the two?

There is a Difference Between Recruiting and Retention

- Recruiting involves identifying people who might be good candidates for your department
- Recruiting involves convincing people to join your agency
- Retention involves keeping the people you have as happy and productive members

Times Are Different

- Society is different
- People are different
- Your fire department is different
- People are not beating down the doors to become members of your fire department

The Fire Service Decline and Fall: My Theory

- Many decades ago, a famous author, Edward Gibbon, wrote an extremely lengthy treatise on the reasons for the collapse of the Roman Empire
- His work was entitled "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire"
- He portrayed the entire sad tale of how a great and mighty empire fell from the heights of civilized success
- While this was a tough series of books to write, Gibbon had the benefit of hindsight and a bit of recorded history to guide him along the way on his literary journey

Why Did Rome Decline & Fall?

- Gibbon's research found that the empire declined because of variety of changes, some internally driven, others forced on them by outside forces
- However, the reasons which caught my attention involved the nature of its leaders, and the actions of the people being governed
- Gibbons spoke of a group of people lost sight of their role as citizens, with its attendant duties and responsibilities

Let Me Get Things Straight

- Volunteers have been around for a long time now: Think back to the Minutemen in Massachusetts who first met the British forces at Lexington and Concord
- Nowadays there are those who still volunteer, only now they do it as Little League and local soccer coaches
- There are also those who work for the Red Cross, the Masons, the Boy Scouts, the Elks, or the Salvation Army
- Then again there are those who volunteer their time for the dirty and dangerous job of being a volunteer firefighter

Let Me Get Things Straight

- During the past four decades I have witnessed a number of changes which have occurred in our volunteer fire service
- Much like the case of the Roman Empire, a number of these changes were driven by external forces
- Other changes were of a more subtle internal nature, and in some ways mirrored the changes in society that all of us have seen and felt
- Sadly, we did not always respond to these forces in a timely fashion (if at all)

I Ask You All Here Today

- Has the volunteer fire service lost sight of its role in society today?
- Has society evolved away from the mindset which will allow a community to support a volunteer fire service?
- Is it a combination of the two?

Change

- One of the problems Gibbons saw with ancient Rome involved their failure to anticipate and adapt to change
- He saw them failing to do their fair share
- After approximately one year of research and data collection, I was able to determine that leadership is a critical element in the volunteer fire service retention equation

Change and Other Things

- However there are other issues
- As a long-time volunteer firefighter, I am distressed at the findings of my doctoral study back in 2005
- People are celebrating the fact that the fire service does not change much and then doing nothing to battle their recruiting and retention problems

We Do Not Mean What We Say

The sign out in front of the station always says New Always Welcome: Yet inside of the building behind the sign people are scheming to run off existing members.

Who Are We?

- My research indicated that the majority of the communities in the United States are protected by volunteer fire departments.
- Research from the National Fire Protection Association indicates that "777,350 of the 1,064,150 firefighters in the year 2000 were volunteers."
- New research data suggests that far fewer are available in our country today.
- This research by this nationally recognized fire service research association stressed the importance of volunteers to the delivery of fire services in the United States.

Volunteers are a Resource

- Studies by the National Volunteer Fire Council speak to the fact that volunteers are a resource that must be nurtured, and supported.
- It is my belief that there is still time to strengthen our volunteer fire service and forestall its continuing decline before it launches itself into a downward membership spiral from which it can never recover.
- But we must act now.

My Research Has Identified Five Distinct Categories of Concern Which Must Be Addressed in any Recruiting and Retention Effort

- Leadership issues
- Economic issues
- Personal issues
- Inter-personal issues
- Organizational issues

Leadership Issues

- Leader creates positive experiences.
- Leader creates negative experiences.
- Leader fails to do anything.
- Leader does not listen.

Leadership Issues

- Leaders play favorites
- Leaders do not listen
- Leaders engage in petty behavior that punishes people with whom they do not like work
- Leaders make it known that they do not need anyone's help or advice in how to run the Fire Department

Economic Issues

- Working multiple jobs to pay family expenses
- Members cannot afford to live in fire department response area
- Lack of affordable housing
- Both parents have to work and share child-rearing duties

Personal Issues

- The fire service ends up not being what the people who joined it thought it would be
- Some people tried it and just did not like it
- Some left because it was too much work
- Both parents have to work and share child-rearing duties

Personal Issues

- Issues of aging
- Physical conditioning issues
- Friends of older members pass on to their reward
- Department changes because of new members and older members leave
- People die: That is a fact of life

Personal Issues

- There is another category within this area of the study that has much to do with an individual's perception of their ability to perform the duties of a volunteer firefighter
- In some cases the reference was to matters of a physical nature, while others made reference to mental concepts

Personal Issues

- Some members leave because they can't cut it or they weren't able to do the job
- People leave because with a lot of individual personalities you find people who cannot adapt
- Some people cannot take orders, so they leave
- Some people decide that they do not want to be team players and leave

Inter-Personal Issues

- Personality clashes between members of the department
- Personality clashes between members and leaders
- Personality clashes between people in different positions of department leadership
- Weak leaders did nothing to bring conflicts to a just and proper conclusion that eliminates the problem

Organizational Issues

- Small group seizes control of FD and runs it like their personal social club
- Chiefs change too often to suit the members
- Chiefs do not change often enough to suit the members

Organizational Issues

- Some departments have too many rules
- Some departments fail to have a sufficient number of rules
- Some departments have no operational guidelines
- Some fire departments make too many guidelines and thereby stifle initiative

What Can You Do?

- Before you attempt to build a departmental recruiting program, you need to square your fire department away.
- You need to eliminate the negative influences
- You need to emphasize the positive aspects of organizational membership
- You must emphasize retention before you consider the recruiting part of the puzzle

**The Best Recruiting Plan in
the World Will be Worthless if
People Do Not Wish to
Remain With Your
Fire Department**

Cure Your Problems

- Train your leaders
- Train your followers
- Create a supportive, nurturing environment within which people can grow and prosper
- Use discipline where needed

Some Other Problems

- Fire departments can no longer count on the children of current members following in their parents footsteps.
- Fire departments can no longer count on community-minded people to step forward in the number once expected.
- Fire departments cannot count on people joining them and remaining active for long periods of time.

Create a Recruiting and Retention Committee

- Seven to nine people
- All age groups and member classes
- People who want to be on the committee
- People who like people

Committee Membership

- Create the Position of Recruiting and Retention Officer
- Fill that position with someone who is good with people
- The R & R Officer will serve as the committee chair

Traits to Look For in a Potential Recruiting and Retention Officer

- Team builder (Creates an organization wherein trust and concern for the members are the hallmarks of retention success.)
- Esteem builder (Develops ways for team members to grow within the organization through the combination of increasing responsibility and organizational support.)
- Communicator (Is able to create and share their vision with all members of the organization.)
- Climate builder (Can make the work enjoyable and rewarding.)
- Flexibility expert (They are able adapt, overcome, and achieve success in spite of problems which emerge from time to time.)

Traits to Look For in a Potential Recruiting and Retention Officer

- Talent developer and coach (Creates, develops, and teams members the importance of a team environment)
- High-performance builder (Creates an environment wherein the members understand what is to do, and the importance of doing it well.)
- Retention expert (Works to develop knowledge of the field of retention and possesses the ability to apply that knowledge in a real-world environment)
- Retention monitor (Has the skills to identify and measure possible problems and the means to overcome them).
- Talent finder (Works to look for that next great team member)

Committee Membership

- Recruiting and Retention Officer
- Fire Chief
- Fire Company President
- Senior member of department
- Mid-Career member of the department
- Young member of the department
- Junior member if you have them

Why Might People Join?

- The experience is rewarding and worth their time,
- The training requirements are not excessive.
- The time demands are adaptable and manageable.

Why Might People Join?

- They are rewarded with a personal sense of value.
- There is good leadership minimizing conflict.
- There is ample support for the organization

Why Might People Leave?

- No time to volunteer 92.3%
- Conflicts in organization 47.8%
- Organizational leadership has created an adverse Atmosphere 46.7%
- Too much training 45.6%

Source: St. Joseph's University, 2004

Why Might People Leave?

- Attitude of existing members to newcomers
39.1%
- Criticism received from officers/older members
38.0%
- Lack of camaraderie
19.5%

Source: St. Joseph's University, 2004

Brainstorm Your Problems

- Not a one-shot deal
- New breed of volunteers need to be sold
- New residents may not even know that you are volunteers

Brainstorm Your Problems

- You need to create focus groups
- Look for cures to identified problems
- You need to listen to people

Sources of Assistance

- Community volunteer office
- Local newspapers
- Local radio stations
- Local television stations
- Local public relation's firms

Create a Marketing Plan

- Do an analysis of your community (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats)
- Define your product
- Create your recruiting plan

Elements of Your Recruiting Plan

- Development of recruiting criteria (What do you want to see and do for your organization?)
- Development of retention criteria (What do you want to see and do for your organization?).
- Creation of a list of the strengths which your organization has to offer to prospective members

Elements of Your Recruiting Plan

- Media campaign (radio, television, print media, Internet media)
- Person to person contact (Create an every-member-get-a-member campaign. People will normally recruit people with who they wish to associate)
- Approach business community asking support from their staff base

Elements of Your Recruiting Plan

- Focus groups to create an understanding of people's perceptions about the volunteer fire service
- Focus groups of volunteer firefighters to create an understanding of people's perceptions about their own role in the volunteer fire service
- Common messages
- Press releases

Elements of Your Recruiting Plan

- Television and radio spots
- Computer-based campaign
- Media associates
- Magazine articles
- Use of any Toll-Free numbers which are available in your area

Elements of Your Recruiting Plan

- Several funding sources from the private sector
- Direct mail letters
- Collateral sales materials
- Ads

Elements of Your Recruiting Plan

- Brochures
- Business cards
- Direct mail
- Videos (some in existence already)

The Plan Has Been Created

- Put it into play
- Hold monthly recruiting and retention committee meetings
- This is not a one-shot deal
- You need to stay on top of recruiting
- Be ready to accept and train new members as they are found and recruited

Continue to Recruit

- Always be on the lookout for new members
- Perhaps people should be reminded to ask their friends to consider joining
- Do not run people off if they step forward
- Give them a solid evaluation during their period of probation

Measures of Success

- Increase in contacts with public reported by fire departments in the target area
- Actual increase in number of new firefighters
- Increase in number of firefighters being trained by state and county fire training centers.
- An increase in the number of media stories (print, radio, and television) that cover the volunteer fire service

Stay on Top of Retention Issues

- Stay abreast of leadership issues
- Make contacts within the economic sector in your community
- Monitor personal and interpersonal relationships within your department
- Do not ignore problems which may crop up from time to time
- Problems do not go away on their own

**You are either proactive
and recruit people
(or)**

**Your Fire Department will
end up going out of
business out!**