

The Decline and Fall of the Volunteer Fire Service: Unless ...

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Why Are You Here Today?

- ❖ You are a member of the volunteer fire service.
- ❖ You sense something isn't right in the world today.
- ❖ You want to find out what is happening in the world around you.
- ❖ You want to make a difference.

Why Am I Here Today?

- ❖ I have been a volunteer for more than four decades.
- ❖ A great deal has happened to me over the years and I kept notes.
- ❖ I love the volunteer fire service.
- ❖ My research has identified some clues as to what we all might be able to do to save our service.

The Decline and Fall

- ❖ 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.

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?

Let Me Get Things Straight

- ❖ I have been a volunteer for a long time now.
- ❖ There are those who volunteer as Little League and soccer coaches.
- ❖ There are those who work for the Red Cross, the Masons, the Boy Scouts or the Salvation Army.
- ❖ I my friends have been an active participant in the world of volunteer emergency services since the spring of 1964.

Let Me Get Things Straight

- ❖ During the past four decades I have witnessed a number of changes 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.

Change

- ❖ One of the problems Gibbons saw with ancient Rome involved their failure to anticipate and adapt to change.
- ❖ 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 study.
- ❖ 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 suggest less are available in our country today.
- ❖ This research by the 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 into downward spiral from which it can never recover.
- ❖ But we must act now.

Research Findings

- ❖ There were a series of 66 comments distilled from my interviews with 27 chief-level survey participants.
- ❖ In order to make the analysis easier, these comments were distilled into five distinct groups.

Five Distinct Categories

- ❖ 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 FD

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

- ❖ There 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

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

- ❖ One study participant stated that some [members] left because they "couldn't cut it, they weren't able to do the job." Other study respondents stated that people left because "with a lot of individual personalities you find people who cannot adapt.
- ❖ Some people cannot take orders, so they leave." Another respondent noted that "there are some [people] who decided that they did not want to be team players and left."

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**

Leadership Recommendations

- ❖ Leadership training must be made available for all leaders or potential leaders
- ❖ Departments need to create educational requirements for advancement
- ❖ Members must have completed the requirements before they can run for election

Leadership Recommendations

- ❖ Continuing education requirements must be created
- ❖ Find a way to use past officers as mentors
- ❖ The mentor/mentee program should be a continuing requirement

Economic Recommendations

- ❖ Establish an employment opportunities network in your organization
- ❖ Establish relationships with local real estate firms
- ❖ Establish relationships with local banking institutions
- ❖ Consider creating affordable housing

Interpersonal Recommendations

- ❖ **Conflict exists – It is human nature**
- ❖ **A dispute mechanism must be created and added to the constitution and by-laws of the volunteer fire organization**
- ❖ **Counseling programs may be needed in volunteer departments**

Personal Recommendations

- ❖ Mentoring systems which pair veterans with new personnel
- ❖ Medical screening
- ❖ Graduated membership so that everyone can have a job
- ❖ Personal fitness should be stressed

Organizational Recommendations

- ❖ Have and enforce a reasonable set of rules and regulations
- ❖ Create and use a proper set of standard operating procedures
- ❖ Study length of terms for officers
- ❖ Lengthening terms of office may work to limit organizational upheaval

Some Closing Thoughts

- ❖ **Bad leaders can run off people**
- ❖ **Hiding from society's problems can cause harm to a volunteer fire department**
- ❖ **Work to identify and correct the problems which are facing your organization**

**You ignore these
problems at your own
peril**