Tips for the New Chief Officer

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It’s the first week of the New Year and a lot of you are starting out as a newly elected Chief of your department. With any new position there are going to be growing pains, that’s expected. Mistakes are going to be made, that’s part of the process. The key is to learn from those mistakes and use them to help you become successful. Over time and with experience you’ll grow into a great leader.

Here’s a few tips I put together to help you transition into your new leadership role.

**Meet with your Line Officers:** If you haven’t already, meet with your Line Officers to establish your ground rules and clarify how you’d like to see things run. Review any new policies or procedures that you would like to see implemented so that you are all on the same page.

**Meet with your Appointed Officers:** Again, if you haven’t done this already you should meet with your Appointed Officers to explain what is expected of them, review any new policies or procedures, and establish ground rules. Make sure to include all Captains, Lieutenants, Fire Police, Training Officers, & Safety Officers. If you want things to run smoothly everyone needs to be on the same page especially these Officers, they are the ones entrusted by you to ensure things run smoothly and according to your established rules.

**Review your SOP’s/SOG’s:** Use one of your first training sessions to review your departments SOP’s/SOG’s. Take time to explain why certain policies exist and highlight specific policies or guidelines that tend to be problematic.

**Review Training Records:** Take time to review the Training Records of your personnel. Ensure that they are up to date on all mandatory training and that all individuals are participating at a level that you are comfortable with. By reviewing these records, you should understand deficiencies in training that need to be addressed in the coming year.

**Establish a Training Schedule:** Take time to establish a diverse training schedule that will not only keep people’s skill levels up but will keep them engaged with new and interesting topics. Ensure that all required PESH/OSHA training is scheduled and attended by those individuals who need it. Whenever possible try and run the same training and drills for your dayside and evening personnel.

**Assign Officers to Probationary Members:** While every department has different training methods for probationary members they should always be assigned an Officer to work with them. Do not let new members learn things on the fly, they will almost certainly develop bad habits that will be hard if not impossible to break.

**Keep Members Engaged:** Mo matter their age, there is a roll for everyone in the fire service. Utilize everyone’s talent to your advantage. Encourage them to participate in drills and training. When training use senior members to change SCBA bottles or for traffic control.

**Squash Problems Quickly:** Every fire department has individuals who thrive on chaos. It is important that you set a tone early on that nonsense will not be tolerated. On the same token, resolve problems quickly. Don’t let issues fester and get worse over time, squash them fast. You’ll be amazed at how effective an impromptu sit down can be.

**Communicate:** Communicate constantly with your personnel. Most people want to be kept informed, even of seemingly minor things. When Chief or Line Officers keep too many secrets people tend to distrust them. With the exception of personnel matters relay as much information as possible through text alerts, memos, white board messages, newsletters, or bulletins. People tend to take more pride in an organization when they feel they are part of that team.

**Treat Everyone with Respect:** This is paramount! Fire Departments attract people from many different socioeconomic backgrounds, and it is necessary for the Chief Officer to remain respectful and professional with everyone in the department especially, those members they disagree with or dislike.

**Review Incident Command:** Review the Incident Command System with your Assistants and your Line Officers. Be sure that you are using the same phraseology and that everyone has a solid understanding of how ICS will function in an actual incident. I highly recommend using it regularly for smaller incidents like carbon monoxide calls and MVA’s so that when something major comes along everything clicks for you.

Also, ensure that all Officers are schooled in giving quality initial reports when they are the first to arrive at an incident scene. It is highly important to create a picture of the scene for the units coming in behind you so they can start preparing to leap into action.

**Check Your Equipment:** Ensure that all equipment and tools are started and in good working order. Ensure that all supplies are stocked up and ready for the next incident. Assign Officers to do weekly checks of the apparatus and equipment they carry.

**Drill with Your Neighbors:** The scene of a fire is not the place to find out you have equipment that isn’t compatible with your neighboring department. It is important that not only you know what equipment they carry on their apparatus but that you constantly drill with them and establish operational norms so that when an actual fire or incident occurs everything runs smoothly.

**Update Your Run Cards:** It seems like with every new Chief mutual aid plans change, which is fine, just remember to notify your dispatch office of the changes. Also, make sure you talk to the Chief of the department(s) you plan on calling in for mutual aid to ensure they have the equipment, manpower, and capabilities that you’re looking for. If you plan on utilizing a neighboring FAST/RIT ensure that they are available all hours of the day and have a backup plan just in case they can’t respond. Again, speak with the Chief to ensure they are ready, willing, and able to be your FAST/RIT.

**Establish Alarms:** There’s nothing worse than listening to a Chief during a working fire try and figure out on the spot who he’s going to call in next on mutual aid. This should already be established prior to a fire or other incident so you’re not wasting time or sounding foolish over the radio. Establish ahead of time what the Balance of your First Alarm will be if you have a confirmed fire as well as a Second, Third or possibly a Fourth Alarm. Also, establish mutual aid plans ahead of time for incidents such as Mass Casualty or Active Shooter Incidents.

**Familiarize Yourself with Resources:** Not every fire department is equipped or trained to handle every type of incident however, it is important that you know where to get the help you need during an actual incident so you’re not wasting time when they are needed most. Take time to research the available resources that you might need should an actual incident occur. There are likely departments with the kind of resources you might need all over your county that you can utilize if you know where they are located and how to get a hold of them. Also, there are some specialty and technical rescue teams in the western New York Region, educate yourself as to where they are located and how to get a hold of them should you need them for an actual incident.

**Work with your Emergency Manager:** Pretty much every city, town, and village has an Emergency Manager on staff or on call. They usually are a wealth of information and resources. I would highly advise you to give them a call and have a meeting to pick their brains. Find out what type of resources your municipality has, what surrounding municipalities have, and what neighboring fire department resources might be available to you if need them.