

# Deliver Tough Messages with Grace & Stealth

Try this 7-point plan when offering performance feedback.

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If I were to ask you what you hope to accomplish on any given shift, how would you answer? For most fire-department leaders, especially those at the company-officer level, these goals might be: 1) Give the customer the best possible service; 2) Ensure everyone goes home at the end of the shift; and 3) Have fun.

Accomplishing these objectives requires a team effort and buy-in from the whole company. You can start by writing the goals on a whiteboard next to the kitchen table and discussing how everything we do while on shift should help us achieve our stated goals. Examples: Any training conducted will help us perform our jobs safely and to the best of our abilities. If we exercise and eat healthfully, it helps ensure we can perform the physical aspects of our jobs well and lessen the chances of injury. Prefire planning and learning about new technologies and equipment also help us meet our primary goals of customer service and safety.

Here's the challenge: Even when everyone agrees on the goals and the means of achieving them, there will be times when someone disregards the group objectives. They might perform poorly on scene, ignore safety SOPs or protocols, or behave rudely or disrespectfully in-station or out in public. Firefighters usually tolerate things that bother them; we don't like confrontation. Typically, no one wants conflict at work, to be labeled a "rat," "snitch" or "bad guy." We may also fear retaliation, or being isolated by our coworkers. However, if we tolerate poor performance/behavior, one of two things happens: 1) The behavior remains unchanged; or 2) It gets worse. Sometimes you need to have a conversation to halt these behaviors before they snowball, and these discussions can be uncomfortable.

## A Nicer Delivery Method

When I began working in behavioral health at my fire department, I adapted the following communications guidelines from the "Small Business Wellness Initiative" to help firefighters manage difficult conversations. The model works well, as it enables people to defuse conflicts at the lowest level, before things escalate.

- 1) *Consider what you want to say.* Does the behavior affect your goals? Before addressing the issue, decide what you want to achieve. Think about what you know, what you suspect and your specific concerns. Make notes. Have some idea of your desired outcome.
- 2) *Make your move.* Request a meeting to discuss the issue. If you decide to talk with a supervisor or manager, make an appointment. If it is a coworker or subordinate, and you are comfortable talking with him

or her, ask them to meet with you at a particular time.

3) *Get to the point.* When you are anxious or nervous, you might talk around a subject. This dilutes your message.

4) *Practice good communication.* Use “I” messages and active listening skills. I messages are non-blaming, nonaggressive ways of presenting ideas, feelings and concerns. Listening creates a supportive atmosphere.

5) *Make a clear statement about what you want to see.* If you are reporting to a supervisor, you might request a certain action. If talking with a coworker, make an explicit request that the behavior stops or that they access help to address the behavior or situation.

6) *Roll with resistance.* Supervisors might not want to hear about the problem, or they might downplay it. Coworkers might get angry or deny the problem. These are normal defensive reactions to hearing things we don’t like to hear. Listen respectfully and use calm repetition to dissipate strong feelings and ensure your clear request for action is taken seriously.

7) *End on a positive note.* Thank the person for their willingness to listen. State your belief that the supervisor or coworker can and will handle the problem.

Let’s put all of the above to work with the following example: Bob, a firefighter on your crew, seems unfamiliar with where equipment is stored on the apparatus.

1) *Consider what you want to say.* Does this behavior impact your goals? If yes, how can you communicate this concern in a nonconfrontational way?

2) *Make your move.* Are you going to have a conversation at the scene or wait until you are back at the station? In this scenario, you can wait until you are back at the station and say something like: “Hey Bob, after you get your stuff restored from this last alarm, can I have a chat with you in my office?”

3) *Get right to the point.* Don’t spend time discussing the weather, family life, upcoming training or any other impertinent topics.

4) *Practice good communication methods using “I” messages and active listening skills.* “When we called for the saw, I heard several of the compartment doors opening and slamming on the apparatus. It frustrated me a bit. I am concerned we might not know where the equipment is carried on our rig.” You may even add how this equipment familiarity (or lack thereof) impacts the agreed upon goals when we started shift.

5) *Make a clear statement about what behavior you want to see.* “I would like us to go through our apparatus each morning at shift change to make sure we know where everything is stored.”

6) *Roll with resistance.* Bob may have many reasons why he didn’t know where the saw was located. He might say, “Yesterday’s crew failed to put the saw back where it belonged,” or, “That is a reserve apparatus, and the maintenance guys placed it in the wrong compartment.” Listen to Bob, then repeat your request. “OK, that might be the case, but here’s my request: We need to familiarize ourselves with the equipment layout at the beginning of each shift.”

7) *End on a positive note.* “Listen, Bob, I enjoy working with you, and I don’t want to see anyone get into trouble or get hurt.”

*Another example:* The crew is in the grocery store shopping for dinner. You are smiling at a young child who is looking at your uniform. One of the crew drops an F-bomb down the aisle, and you notice the child look at their parents, and you see the look on the parent’s face.

1) *Consider what you want to say.* Does this behavior impact your goals? If yes, how can you communicate this concern in a nonconfrontational

way? In this instance, it might be good to get the crewmember's attention while in the grocery store and let them know to stop the language.

2) *Make your move.* You can address the situation in the apparatus while still in the parking lot or while traveling back to the station. Sooner is better in some cases.

3) *Get right to the point.* Since your goal is to address this behavior as soon after it happened as possible, resist the urge to use small talk to ease your way into the subject.

4) *Practice good communication using "I" messages and excellent listening skills.* "When I heard your language and saw the child's reaction and the look on their parent's face, I felt embarrassed and frustrated. We represent our organization, and I want people to think positively of us."

5) *Make a clear statement about what you want to see.* "I can't hear that type of language in public again."

6) *Roll with resistance.* The f-bombing firefighter might say, "Well I have heard you say that in public," or "The chief talks that way in public," etc. Your response should be, "I'm working to stop that behavior, and if you hear me cussing, I want you to call my attention to it. I will also speak with the chief if I hear them use similar language in public. But I've got to stick with my request that you never use that type of language in public."

7) *End on a positive note.* "I enjoy our organization's reputation in this community. I don't want to jeopardize it, and don't want anyone to get into trouble."

This simple communications model worked well in my previous fire-service organization when teaching crews how to handle things at the lowest level. From coworkers coming to work unfit for duty, not performing to expectations, or behaving inappropriately, this model seems to manage defensiveness and encourages crews to work well together.

## References

1) Adapted from, "Team Awareness Training: Small Business Wellness Initiative." Texas Christian University. **BS**



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