How Fire Chiefs Create Stress

Present, communicative leaders create healthy departments.

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC

Chief Alan Brunacini once asked me to write a book with him titled, "How Fire Chiefs Kill Firefighters." He passed away before we could work on the project, but I have been thinking about how the fire chief's actions (or lack thereof) impact the health of the organization's members.

My job since retiring from the fire department involves visiting fire organizations and helping them create a culture that supports behavioral health. Sometimes I am called in proactively, which is preferable, but often, departments enlist my help after an employee suicide. My process includes training for all members on taking care of the customers; taking care themselves and each other; developing resiliency; creating peer teams; and developing continuing education for stress management. Frequently, I can embed myself into the organization's culture for a while and learn from the employees which environmental factors cause the most stress. In my experience, chiefs impose two primary personnel stressors.

Silence (Lack of Communication)

The best organizations communicate effectively, and this starts with leadership. I often hear mid-level managers say, "We like our chief, we want them to be successful, and we will follow them anywhere. We just don't know where the hell they are going!" Effective communication and strong leadership are entwined. Communication is a core leadership function, and weak communication skills can trigger organizational dysfunction and employee stress. In his book, "Fist Full of Bugles," Chief Scott Weninger (ret.) asks, "Is the fire chief part of the communication problem or part of the solution?" To be part of the solution, a chief must communicate organizational direction and values and introduce questions and concerns. If not, others eventually will—usually, the most distressed members. I've worked with departments where lower-ranking chiefs scramble to provide direction for the troops to limit the chaos the chief's silence has created.

In the article, "First Due: Organizational Communications," Chief Brian Schaeffer states, "Organizations that rely on the chain-of-command method to communicate eventually fail, miserably." When you *do* communicate, ensure the message reaches the entire organization. Keep things simple and clear to avoid misunderstandings. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' publication, "Crisis & Emergency Risk Communications (CERC)," offers six principles for straightforward, effective communications that any leader can adopt.

1. Be first—Provide information quickly (before others do). If you cannot, explain why.
2. Be right—Give facts in increments, which allows for greater accuracy and the ability to correct misinformation.
3. Be credible—Tell the truth.
4. Express empathy—Acknowledge in words what people may be feeling.
5. Promote action—Make concrete suggestions as to what personnel can do. Action calms anxiety.
6. Show Respect.

Invisibility (They Only See You in Bad News Roles)

Early in my career as a young officer, my chief told me, "If you're doing your job right, you won't see me. If you do see me, it's because you effed up." So, no direction—except when you screw up. What could possibly go wrong? In that environment, I defaulted to anxiety whenever I saw the chief.

I often hear people say the fire chief never comes out of their office unless something bad has happened or is happening. Crews want to see their leader as an agent of influence and order, not a bearer of bad news or discipline. I have worked with several fire departments, and in my experience, the troops want to see their boss. When I give the chiefs this feedback, they usually mention how busy they are. It is up to you as the leader to prioritize your daily schedule and decide what takes the highest priority, but personnel is a department's greatest investment. If you want them to care about organizational values, direction and concerns, wouldn't it be nice to stop in for 15 minutes, have a cup of coffee and chat about what's going on?

I discussed this concept with a fire chief who leads 1,300 employees from 30 firehouses. He has made it a priority to have a cup of coffee at a different fire station every Friday morning on his way to work. It will take 90 Fridays to hit every station on every shift, but he believes it is worth the effort. I shared this idea with another fire chief whose crews told me they never saw him outside of his office; he talks only to his assistant chiefs, who then deliver any news. I told the chief the crews want to see him every once in a while. Months later, when I was conducting training with multiple crews from this department, someone said, "You wouldn't believe who stopped by the firehouse this morning just to have a cup of coffee: the chief. It was nice of him to stop by with no agenda other than to see how we were doing." Visibility is a form of communication, and being invisible says loud and clear that other things are more important than personnel.

Be the Right Example

If you want the people who work for you to communicate, be consistent and care for each other and the customers, you must lead by example. Communicate well, be present and show them they matter. Model behaviors that exemplify the type of employees you want in your organization. **BS**

References

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