



BY CHIEF KELVIN J. COCHRAN

Image Is Everything

Fire departments must work to cultivate a positive image in the community

There's a lot of talk nowadays about the fire service's battle to preserve its culture. Part of this battle is the challenge to cultivate a positive image, locally and nationally, publicly and internally.

A fire department's image is its personality and character as perceived by its stakeholders. Stakeholders include citizens, elected and appointed officials, law enforcement agencies, other fire departments and our own fire personnel, and they all have an opinion of the fire department.

Creating a positive image in the minds of these stakeholders should be a high priority for all fire service members, and it is the responsibility of fire service leadership to ensure everyone works together to maintain this image. Too much is at stake to not take this issue seriously. When a fire department is on the national news for rescuing victims, most stakeholders connect those rescuers to all fire departments and form a positive impression of the service as a whole. However, when a firefighter is in the news for driving under the influence, the image of the fire service as a whole is damaged.

Further, our image plays a major role in our pursuit to gain community and national support for fire service strategic plans. Most stakeholders' experiences with the fire department will not be through receiving services during an emergency. As such, gaining credibility with local, state and federal elected and appointed officials is an ongoing challenge. Therefore, fire service leaders must create and engage in a variety of activities and programs geared toward interacting with the public. During these programs, and throughout the year, all fire service members should consider the following target areas to help cultivate a positive, professional image.

First Impressions: We've all heard the phrase, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." For every fire department, it's crucial to make a positive first impression so the community will understand the great value of the service we provide. Further, it can be very difficult, if not impossible, to overcome a negative first impression. Fortunately, because of television programs, newscasts and stories from family and friends, most citizens have a positive expectation of what firefighters are like. They expect a timely response from a big red truck and a team of firefighters hitting the ground and carrying out their duties in an expedient and professional manner. We meet or exceed that expectation most of the

time, creating a positive and lasting image, and we must work hard to maintain this image.

Professional Appearance: People also form opinions about us based on our appearance. Today's fire professional does not necessarily fit the stereotype of a tall, masculine firefighter with an athletic build. Let's face it, today's firefighters come in many shapes and sizes, but that doesn't mean they can't wear their uniforms in a neat, clean and impressive manner. All fire professionals can (and should) have well-groomed, socially acceptable haircuts and hairstyles that enhance the character of our profession. Wearing a well-pressed uniform and shined shoes and appearing clean shaven builds a credible image for the fire service, especially if it is the standard for the entire organization and enforced and modeled by company officers, chief officers and the fire chief. Fire chiefs who look professional when wearing the department uniform send a strong message about the importance of appearance.

Facilities & Equipment: The manner in which facilities and equipment are kept makes a powerful statement about a fire department and the character of its members. Clean fire stations and fire apparatus were staples of the developmental years of the American fire service, and this must be maintained. Benjamin Franklin, the father of the American fire service, would turn over in his grave if he could see the condition of some of our firehouses and rigs. Firehouses, as well as the fire apparatus and equipment inside, must be kept clean and properly maintained at all times. The long-held image of immaculately cleaned fire trucks is one that promotes a positive professional image, and we should strive to continue this practice. Personnel offices also reflect the character of the department. When special guests come by the firehouse or when preparing for open house and other public events, we must give special care and attention to facilities in order to make a good impression. However, fire service personnel should treat the facilities like special guests are coming by every day. A clean environment not only makes for a positive image, but also makes a significant impact on productivity and morale.

Visibility: Fire service members who understand the significance of making a great first impression, whose appearance communicates professionalism and whose facilities and equipment are well cared for and maintained must

also be innovative in creating opportunities to "show off" to the public. Responding to emergencies, then returning to the fire station to hole up in a state of isolation until the next call comes in is not the best way to market what we do for our community. When conditions allow, we should open the bay doors to our firehouses and park the rigs on the apron. It makes a profound statement to the public that we're open for business and people are welcome to visit. Activities such as riding the response district for familiarization, conducting drills in locations visible to the public, attending town hall meetings and conducting quick-access, pre-fire surveys are just a few ways to increase our visibility and cultivate a compelling image of our organization.

Internal Treatment: Our ability to deliver compassionate and quality services is directly related to the level of teamwork and cooperation behind the walls of the firehouse. Said another way, there is a distinct relationship between how we treat one another and how we treat the public. If chief officers and company officers are not fostering camaraderie before the alarm sounds, it's difficult, if not impossible, for crews to perform as a cohesive team on the emergency scene. It is therefore crucial to develop strong interpersonal relationships and a synergy among fire personnel in order to foster an attractive organizational image worth celebrating.

CULTIVATE YOUR IMAGE

Take a moment to consider these questions: How do our customers perceive us? Are we still proud of what we see in our organizations? Does our fire department patch symbolize the honor, integrity, dedication and bravery espoused by our founding fathers? If there is any doubt about the answers to these questions, you probably need to work on a strategic campaign to cultivate a positive image of your department. We must take our image very seriously, as it plays a major role in our ability to gain support for our mission and serve our country.



Kevin J. Cochran is the chief of the Shreveport (La.) Fire Department. A 25-year fire-service veteran, Chief Cochran is a member of the IAFG, is chairman of the Fire-Rescue International program Planning Committee and is the former chairman of the Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Section. He holds a master's degree in industrial and organizational psychology and a bachelor's degree in organizational management.

Public Treatment: Our reputation for delivering compassionate, consistently high-quality services is vital to the image of every fire department. Good news travels fast when citizens have a positive encounter with firefighters. Our customers are quick to tell their family and friends if the firefighters who served them were helpful. The fire department belongs to the entire community. As such, there should be no distinction between the quality of service from one customer to another or one neighborhood to another. More specifically, the level of service should not vary based on the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood in which you're responding. We all know that some calls for service are extremely challenging and it's difficult to be nice to certain people. Nevertheless, we should treat all citizens in our care with the utmost level of dignity and respect.

Protect your crew when they need it most



Traffic accidents claim the lives of more firefighters than fire itself.* Protect yourself and your crew with the Rollitek Rollover Protection System.

SPEC Rollitek TODAY

Available now on Pierce, KME, Ferrara and Spartan fire trucks.

rollitek.com

©2006 Rollitek. All rights reserved. 2320P
Source: USAFA

Rollitek is an MMMA LEAGUE Technology

Circle 92 or go to www.frm.lms.ca/6040-92

From GOOD

By Assistant Chief Brian A.
Crawford, EFO



to GREAT

Draw on your people to elevate
your department's success

What distinguishes good fire departments from great fire departments? Just what is it that they're doing that you're not? You have the same equipment, the same work schedule. You may even hire from the same applicant pool. Yet when it comes down to it, everyone, including you, knows that your fire department ... well, it's just *pretty* good, while other departments have achieved greatness.

Contrary to popular belief, the measure of a fire department is not found in big, shiny, new engines or grandiose fire stations. Fire service organizations that truly separate themselves from the rest are great because they have found a way to win internally—through their *people*.

This is not some industry secret; sports teams work the same way. On the surface, the difference between teams that make it to the championship and those that don't can seem negligible; it often comes down to 1/100th of a second. But the determining factor in whether a team reaches the championship is the same factor that determines whether a fire department is good or great: Their people possess characteristics that we all like to see in ourselves and admire in others—drive, dedication, loyalty, honesty and character. To be a “great” fire department, fire chiefs and chief officers must use their greatest resource—people—to take their department to the next level.

For fire service leaders, “winning with people” means hiring, training, promoting, motivating, valuing and inspiring individuals who possess the aforementioned qualities, as well as finding ways to add significance, worth and importance to each employee's position. The result of applying this philosophy: a diverse and highly talented workforce that moves in orchestrated harmony toward completing the mission of the organization. The harmony achieved, the shared and equal employer and employee contentment and satisfaction, takes performance into a world of far greater possibilities and achievement.¹

HIRE THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Without question, the hiring of firefighters and other staff is one of the crucial elements of a successful organization. In his book “Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't,” author Jim Collins asserts that, contrary to popular belief, people are not your best

asset—the *right* people are.¹ Some fire departments don't spend the time and effort necessary to hire the best candidates. Fire chiefs in larger departments may not even be that familiar with their hiring process, leaving the task to subordinates. These same chiefs may later ask, “Where the hell do they get some of these people?” As the leader of the organization, you must be intimately familiar with your hiring practices and ensure that you are getting and retaining the best and brightest.

With the role of today's fire service expanding to include EMS, hazmat, emergency management and terrorism, the right people are a culturally diverse group of motivated, intelligent and flexible individuals, people who are able to adapt to a changing environment and do not require close supervision. To ensure your organization is hiring to its potential, conduct a review of current hiring practices and evaluate how well your new firefighters perform once out of the academy. If you start out with top-notch recruits, you get top-notch firefighters who, with the right leadership, will produce results almost immediately and throughout their career. Be disciplined in getting those choice candidates; don't settle for less.

BUILD TRUST & ACCOUNTABILITY

Another key to making your department great: peer-to-peer accountability. On some department issues, namely policy, the supervisor-to-subordinate accountability model works well. But if you want to build a true culture of accountability, you must establish a peer-to-peer accountability system.

To return to the sports analogy I used earlier, on a team, peer pressure is the greatest motivational tool available. When players on a sports team score a goal, a basket or a touchdown, they have a feeling of accomplishment and joy. By the same token, when their actions are detrimental, such as missing a shot or acquiring a penalty, they feel a sense of remorse and guilt. Who do the players turn to when they want to celebrate their accomplishments or apologize for their actions? Their teammates—not the coach.

In fire departments, the fire chief is the head coach. For the most part, members of the team are not decisively swayed one way or the other by the chief's response to ▶

CREATE OWNERSHIP & BUYIN

Getting members to take ownership in the organization can be a difficult process, but it doesn't have to be. Following are two basic principles that any leader can use to start the process:

- Ask questions and shut up. Someone once said, "You can't learn anything if you are talking." In the fire service, strong-willed leaders are sometimes so busy impressing everyone with their wealth of knowledge and wisdom that they never shut up long enough to really learn what is going on in their organization. Believing that you have all the answers and everyone else just needs to follow your vision can lead to less-than-desirable results. Providing an open climate of communication, where member's opinions are not only sought, but also required, gives members a feeling of inclusion and value. This builds ownership.

Members of an organization who will be affected by a decision or policy change deserve a place at the table. One good example: A fire department must create a policy to instruct members in a new method of loading their 1 1/2" hose on an engine for rapid deployment. It stands to reason that the department should involve someone who actually pulls the hose from the engine in the process. Yet it's no secret that in some departments, having a "blue shirt" involved in a policy discussion is unheard of. When you bring to the table those who will be affected by an executive decision, you gain their firsthand expertise and knowledge of the situation, leading to better policies, as well as their buy-in and ownership. It's a win/win situation.

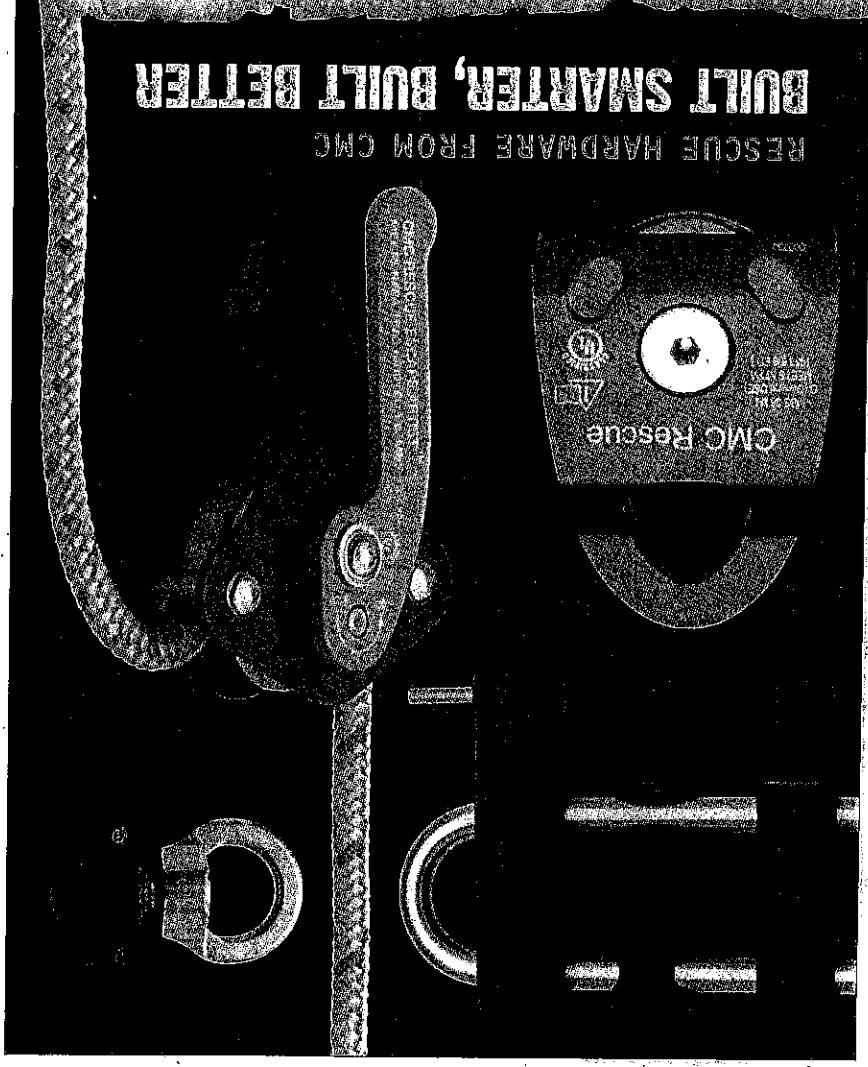
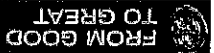
ALLOW MEMBERS TO SUCCEED

Great organizations are successful because they have found a way to allow members to achieve success. They do this by ensuring that they hire the right people, as previously mentioned, and by placing them in the right positions. Now, you may be thinking that there are a limited number of positions to which you can assign firefighters. But I am not only speaking of job/tasks assignment, but placement as well.

Research has demonstrated that employees with strong work ethics excel when placed into environments with employees of similar behavior. In their article "Effects of Crew Composition on Crew Performance," researchers Aaron Tziner and D. Eden write "Each individual team member's ability influenced other team member's performance effectiveness differently depending on the ability levels of those other members of the team. In high-ability task accomplishments

their accomplishments or failures. What they are swayed by is the reaction of their teammates. The opinion and perception of the people they work with every day are far more important than those of the boss.

By creating a peer-to-peer informal accountability system, where everyone is dependent on one another for success and where individual success is equated with team success, you will move your organization into a realm of mutual honesty, trust and cooperation. This leads to the ultimate common goal: the success of the organization. Accountability is a cornerstone of great departments; leaders accomplish it by creating ownership and buy-in from the rank-and-file. Accountable members take the approach that, "This is my fire department and I'm going to do my best and by God, so are you!"



BUILT SMARTER, BUILT BETTER
 RESCUE HARDWARE FROM CMC



For information or to order any CMC Rescue product, visit WWW.CMCRESCUE.COM. Request a catalog online or call 800-235-5741.

Circle 95 or go to www.firm.lms.ca/6040-95



people appear to achieve more in combination with other uniformly high-ability members than in combination with low-ability members.²

Placing your best and brightest members together, whether at a station or on a project, will give your organization the best opportunity to achieve success. Some officers may think they should spread around their talented people and place them into undesirable situations to "fix the problem." More often than not, this does not work out well for the department, and you can lose a great employee to discontentment in the process.

Leaders should assign individuals to executive assignments that draw on their expertise and natural interests. The combination of ability and willingness to do the specific assignment, whether short or long term, holds the

greatest opportunity for success.

Success should always be rewarded. Rewarding employees for their accomplishments is another cornerstone of great organizations. Formal rewards include an increase in pay, a promotion/assignment, time off and public recognition. Less formal and less costly—but often the most cherished—rewards include small gestures and comments, such as telling an employee, "Great job!" When choosing when to reward, don't wait for a "home run" achievement. Leaders of great organizations reward accomplishments and recognize employees on a daily basis. Seek out and find any and all opportunities to honor your employees and recognize those "base hits" that come far more often than the home runs. They are what will ultimately win you the game.

What can Summit build for you?



Drop Frame Alteration
Maximize space while maintaining a short wheelbase. Drop Frame Alteration increases storage capacity up to 30% with lower, more accessible, full-depth transverse bays below normal chassis frame rail height.



SUMMIT
FIRE APPARATUS AND CUSTOM FABRICATORS

Summit Fire Apparatus has been in business for nearly 50 years as a family-owned and family-operated corporation. The 31,000-square foot, state-of-the-art facility is located in Edgewood, Kentucky, just outside of Cincinnati, Ohio.

SummitFireApparatus.com

SUMMIT

For more information visit our web site or call and let us help build your truck! 859-331-0360

MAKE THE MOVE

When given the opportunity to use their abilities and hone their talents, firefighters produce positive benefits that contribute to the success of their organizations and the success of their brother and sister firefighters. In addition, increased job satisfaction directly correlates to increased productivity, moving the organization closer to achieving its mission. Job satisfaction also leads to collateral benefits off the job in everyday aspects of life, including one's health.

Whatever challenges facing your department, you cannot be successful without making people your primary focus. Whether hiring, promoting, assigning, motivating or rewarding, as a chief officer, you are the key to your department's cultural climate, and *you* possess the ability to move your department from good to great. Don't miss your opportunity. ✨

REFERENCES

- Collins, J. (2001). *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't*. Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. New York, N.Y.
- Tziner, A., and Eden, D. (1985). Effects of Crew Composition on Crew Performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 70(1), 85-93.



Brian A. Crawford is an administrative assistant chief and 22-year veteran of the Shreveport (La.) Fire Department; he serves as a member of the IAFC Human Relations Committee, A National Fire Academy resident instructor and Maryland Fire Rescue Institute (MFRI) National Fire Service Staff and Command faculty member. Crawford is an NFA Executive Fire Officer program graduate and an IAEM Certified Emergency Manager. He is a 2006 recipient of the U.S. Fire Administration's Harvard Fellowship and graduate of the university's Kennedy School of Senior Executives in State and Local Government. He holds a master of arts in industrial psychology, a bachelor of science in organizational management and an associate's degree in paramedic. He can be reached at 318/673-6652 or brian.crawford@ci.shreveport.la.us.

