

Preserving Your Volunteer Fire & Rescue

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What do you do when you are faced with losing a significant number of fire and rescue call personnel? How can you guarantee public safety when you are unsure how many, if any, of your volunteers will respond to a call? These are the problems faced by many communities in Maine and throughout the United States.

With the rapid decline in the number of volunteers, more and more towns are forced to consider employing full-time staff – a decision that could run havoc with the financial well being of any community. The National Fire Protection Association reported that the number of volunteers has dropped by 8% while the number of emergency calls continues to climb. The demands of family life, more volunteers working outside their home community coupled with employers unsympathetic to the need of the community, and the escalating training requirements are real factors contributing to the decline of volunteers. Absent radical change, this deterioration within the ranks will continue.

When Nathan Poore became the new town manager in Falmouth in 2006, he was faced with the challenge of preserving his fire and rescue department. Having worked in several communities, he appreciated the value and contribution volunteers provided. Volunteers are the fabric of the community. To lose them would tear away at its culture and feel of the community.

In 2006, the Falmouth Fire and Rescue experienced declining volunteer participation, few new recruits, and low morale. Two years later, there has been a complete reversal of fortune. Today it is a vibrant, growing professional force. How is Falmouth bucking the trend of every other volunteer fire department?

The Town of Falmouth is located just north of Portland, on the coast of southern Maine. They have a population of 11,000, draped over 32 square miles. Today they have a fire and rescue department with four stations, three full-time staff and 95 call firefighters and emergency medical technicians and 12 part-time paramedics. They respond to 1600 emergencies per year.

The town manager knew that Falmouth found itself in a unique position. It was a large community by Maine standards and it abutted Maine's largest city, Portland. Portland had a full-time fire and rescue department. More and more suburban communities, some of them smaller than Falmouth, were abandoning their volunteer departments and becoming full-time departments. With such a large population, the pressure would be for Falmouth to move in the direction of a full time or mixed full-time and volunteer department. For the town manager, these were not acceptable options. He was committed to a volunteer department.

To save its volunteer department, Poore, upon his arrival, needed to understand how his department was operating and why it was bleeding so badly. He learned that some calls were not being answered. He knew that morale was low.

Poore embarked on an ambitious plan to independently evaluate his department, while assessing its leadership and its members' morale. He recognized that getting an objective evaluation of the department would require outside expertise. An outsider could assure anonymity. He would be unencumbered by agendas and personal relations and it would be easier for him to build trust with whomever he spoke. To fully understand how the department was operating, input was needed from its leadership and membership. Beyond those inside, feedback was solicited from those who worked closely with fire and rescue, including Falmouth department heads, police and communications. A candid appraisal from its mutual aid partners was also needed. Finally, town council support was required both to make the initiative happen and because they had the pulse of the community.

An undertaking of this magnitude requires a significant amount of communication. Stakeholders need to understand what the town manager planned to do; why he was going to do it; how the initiative was going to be conducted and by whom; and how it was going to impact them. Without everyone's buy-in and support, any hopes of making change within the department would fail.

The town manager met with the department leadership initially and then with all members to express his concern about the state of the department and to seek their help to save it. He stated his goal of preserving the volunteer concept, but also threw out the challenge to raise the performance bar and make Falmouth the premier fire and rescue department in the area.

To achieve this, an outside consultant developed a diagnostic process that provided the town manager with a complete picture of the department, its staff and its operations. To get input from the staff, a member satisfaction/engagement survey was developed and given to all the volunteers. Understanding the operations and what the members were thinking was critical. The members would be a great source of information. They were closest to the operation. They provided the service and interfaced directly with residents. They saw the problems first, heard about issues earlier, and had ideas that could improve the department's overall performance. At the same time, in many situations, the members would never bring the information to management unless they were asked for it.

Satisfaction/engagement surveys are questionnaires where members can respond anonymously on a variety of issues. These surveys, in fact, are probably one of the best tools managers have for taking a barometer of what is happening in the workplace at any given point.

Prior to developing the survey, the consultant sought input directly from the members. By soliciting their ideas on the issues to address in the survey, he received valuable information, buy-in from the group, added trust to the process and advocates within their ranks. The survey addressed 26 different elements including leadership, command structure, training, cooperation, safety, morale and communications. The survey was given to the members over two nights. Over 75% participated.

In addition to a look inward, input was sought from all of Falmouth's department heads, key employees in police and communications, members of the town council, and Falmouth's mutual aid partners. This was done through a series of individual interviews.

Falmouth managers and employees provided valuable insights. They worked hand-in-hand with fire and rescue during emergencies. A close, positive working relationship with police and communications had to be seamless. Mistakes could be fatal.

Relationships with the mutual aid partners had been severely strained over the years. An attitude of "going it alone" permeated the department and the partners were well aware of it. When reaching out for their input there was a concern that they would rebuff the plea. They did not. They used it as an opportunity to be frank and candid about the partnership and about the strengths and weaknesses of the department. Their straightforward appraisals exposed some significant safety issues which might have remained uncorrected without the partner's input.

The member survey results and subsequent follow-up focus groups, along with the interviews with individuals outside the department, provided a comprehensive evaluation of the fire and rescue department. The picture was not pretty. While the members liked volunteering and maintained a sense of pride in their work, morale had hit rock bottom. Communication was poor; leadership was questioned; traditions were ignored; and members felt the full-time fire chief did not understand the needs of the volunteers. The mutual aid partners projected a similar picture. As one fire chief stated: "Falmouth is a good neighbor, but we have plenty of better ones."

Successful volunteer departments depend on pride in the organization, a family atmosphere, loyalty, and a tradition based on generational contributions to the community. This was lost. The members were not engaged.

It just makes sense from an economic standpoint that every town manager should make fostering an engaged volunteer staff a high priority, where people care about what they do and want to be there. Yet many do not, often because they don't know how. In a national survey conducted by The Gallup Organization, Gallup found that 75% of the American workforce is either disengaged or actively disengaged – and we can expect that these same findings would also apply to volunteers. In other words, these people are not committed to either their work or their organization. They simply don't want to be there and their unhappiness and dissatisfaction infects the entire organization. The only difference between these workers

and volunteers is that volunteers do not have to be there. There is not a weekly paycheck holding them and they can express their discontent with their feet.

So how can you tell if your volunteers are engaged? A disengaged volunteer call staff has fewer staff answering calls or attending trainings; volunteers who are simply going through the motions; and at the extremes, individuals who are outright negative or hostile. It is clear that a town manager must take immediate steps to turn things around in these organizations – they must re-engage their volunteers or suffer the consequences.

The good news is that these situations are not hopeless. Leadership can take control and the first thing they can do is find out why their volunteers are turned off by their organization. The simple act of asking an employee “How are things going?”, if sincerely done, can often be the first step in the re-engagement process. Volunteers want to know that their town manager and chief care about them.

When an organization has a fully engaged staff, whether it is made up of volunteers or fully paid employees, they enjoy higher staff retention rates, more productivity, better safety records, increased numbers of recruits, and minimal grievances. People want to be there because they like what they do, they believe in the mission, and they want to contribute. It’s a place people want to work. Achieving this level of commitment does not have to be difficult. In fact, the process is quite simple. Put managers in charge who care about their people and who set clear expectations and accountabilities. In addition, seek your staff’s input, listen to their ideas and act on them; develop their skills; provide them the tools to do their job; and at the end of the day, sincerely thank them for their efforts – simple and uncomplicated and it works.

During any kind of change initiative, expect the unexpected. Just prior to our administering the survey, both the fire chief and rescue deputy left the department. Seizing upon this, all members were asked to assist in profiling “an ideal chief.” This would be used in the recruitment of the new chief. In addition, key members of the department were asked to participate in the employment interviews. The members provided the town manager with valuable input and by including them the town manager reinforced his commitment to the importance of the volunteer staff.

Falmouth’s recovery began with the reporting of the findings to the members. No one was shocked by the results, but all were committed to turning it around. Over the next 18 months a new, vibrant volunteer department was established. The new fire chief, Howard Rice, Jr., was hired with the assistance of the members and their mutual aid partners. The survey results were used as a baseline from which to build and survey negatives were turned to positives. Member focus groups, which began during the planning of the survey, were institutionalized to foster open communications. The members were becoming engaged.

Rice began an ambitious plan to re-engage his members. He regularly met with the focus groups. He held one-on-one meetings with every member. He hired a new assistant chief for rescue and an administrator. He took the burdensome administrative task off the shoulders of the members, allowing them to do what they did best: fight fires and rescue.

Two year later, Falmouth has a growing, vibrant Fire and Rescue Department. Membership recruitment is up 28%; leadership is strong and respected; a second member satisfaction/engagement survey showed morale was high; a family atmosphere was restored. More importantly, sufficient, well-trained staff is responding to fire and rescue calls; members are attending training programs; equipment has been upgraded; and relationships with their mutual aid partners have improved.

Falmouth’s formula for success was simple: install strong leadership; listen to its members and partners; respond to their needs; and always strive to improve. Much was accomplished. The message is clear: volunteer fire and rescue departments can remain viable saving taxpayers millions of dollars each year while maintaining a long held tradition of service to the community.