

Fire Service Personnel Management

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First-line Supervisors role in motivation

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Firefighting: The greatest job in the world. Ask almost any firefighter why he or she got into the job. Most likely they will smile and tell you that they got into the job of firefighting to get the chance to help people and for the excitement of being able to race across town and save someone's life from fire or a medical emergency. Now try something different. Ask them why they are staying in the job and not looking towards a different career. Ask them if they are happy with their job. They will probably sit back in their seat for a second or two and then spit out some answer that they figure they are supposed to say like: "I still enjoy helping people and making a difference". I think that these folks are answering honestly, but why the pause? Why did they have to think about it?

That is what I did. I asked several firefighters and officers in my area these questions and more. It was interesting to note that once I got through the "correct" responses and dug a little, I heard a little more of what I expected. And frankly, I expected the responses because I too feel how most of them do. Now I consider myself a pretty self-motivated firefighter, paramedic, and individual in general. But lately, after 14 years on the job, I have really found myself disheartened with the job and disconnected with why I initially got into it: To help

people. Why is that? Why the change in feelings towards the “greatest job in the world”?

There are many, many answers to this question. Too many to count probably. Sure people abuse the system, the city cuts our budget, c-shift didn't put away the dishes, but my main focus in asking these questions was about where we lost the motivation that we once had. I want to know where my motivation went. In my opinion, the one person that can really make a difference in the motivation of a fire company/shift/department is the company officer. This is right where the rubber meets the road on the front lines at the fire station. Hey, that should not be that hard. The fire service is full of extremely motivated people that just can't wait to go to the next emergency, right? Not so according to the answers I got. Some of today's firefighters are becoming increasingly stressed out, unmotivated, and just plain sick of the job.

This paper will focus on some of the current management styles in the fire service dealing with employee motivation. Then I will give some of “my own” ideas that I got from texts and from interviewing my co-workers in just how the company officer can keep firefighters motivated and in love with their job, the greatest job in the world.

There are several different definitions of motivation. One definition is “providing an inner urge that prompts a person to action with a sense of purpose. This positive sense of purpose and the resulting action result in a different quality of performance on the part of fire fighters and other employees”. (Hoover, 1994) Another definition is “the individual’s needs, desires, and concepts that cause him or her to act in a particular manner. (Edwards, 2005)

There are several motivational theories that leaders can research and study. These include but are not limited to:

- Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs
- Herzberg’s Motivational Needs
- Douglas McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y
- Victor Vroom’s Expectancy Theory
- Frederick Herzberg’s Equity Theory

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs consists of five levels of motivational factors beginning with the need to satisfy lower level needs before one can focus on higher level needs. They are as follows:

- Physiological
- Security/Safety
- Affiliation or Acceptance
- Esteem/Power
- Self-Actualization

Once a need is satisfied it is no longer a motivator. Therefore, leaders must provide motivational opportunities for each individual based on their current position in the needs hierarchy. (Hoover, 1994) As you can imagine, this requires the motivator (company officer) to really be in touch with his or her subordinates and this can be difficult to do. **Herzberg** believes that before an individual can even begin to be motivated, the factors of physiological, security, and affiliation needs must be fulfilled. He states that the true motivators are the need for esteem and self-actualization. (Coleman, 2003)

Victor Vroom's Expectancy Theory is based on the concept that "individuals function rationally and calculate the value of action." The theory itself states that people are motivated to work if they believe their efforts will be

rewarded and they value the rewards offered. Some of the questions an officer must answer from the firefighter's perspective to determine whether a motivation technique will work are:

- How much is the task worth? (What is the reward?)
- What will it take to do it? (How much effort will the task take?)
- Can I be successful? (What are the probabilities of accomplishing the task?)

Basically what that says is that firefighters make choices concerning when and where to put forth maximum effort. (Hoover, 1994) Anyone who has been around the fire station understands this theory, even if they didn't know it. How many times have supervisors assumed that firefighters were lazy just because it didn't seem that a task was getting done? One consideration in that case would be to look at the above and answer those questions and see things from the firefighter's perspectives. This could be linked to seemingly simple things like station remodeling/maintenance. If the firefighters believe that they will not receive support from management to provide them with the proper tools and equipment to complete the project, they do not even want to attempt it. This is

an interesting theory and possibly one of the most applicable to the fire service, in my opinion.

The **Equity Theory by Frederick Herzberg** developed what he called the “two-factor theory” concerning motivation; hygiene factors and motivators. The two are independent from each other. Hygiene factors can make an employee dissatisfied, but they do not contribute significantly to productivity. Motivators affect the individual’s sense of intrinsic satisfaction and provide a positive feeling toward work. (Edwards, 2005) Basically, even if hygiene factors such as pay, benefits, and relations with other employees are all met it doesn’t mean that these factors will contribute directly to motivation of the employee. Motivators act directly on the individual’s level of productivity and create a positive environment and effort by the employee. Some of the motivators are praise, a sense of responsibility, and successful completion of tasks. (Edwards, 2005) The main message of this theory is that even if all hygiene factors are met, it doesn’t mean that an employee will be motivated. An example that proves this theory is when you have firefighters working in a department with a new fire station, new state-of-the-art equipment, and good pay and benefits but is still not motivated. A manager lacking knowledge of this theory will not understand what is “wrong”

with his or her employees. “What more do they want?” might be a question that the manager asks.

The last theory that I will discuss regarding employee motivation is **Douglas McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y**. This is a classic theory of motivation that identifies two belief systems about the nature of workers. Each is composed of a different set of perceptions about employees, that determine what type of motivation technique and leadership style will be most effective. (Hoover, 1994)

Theory X

- Workers dislike work and will avoid it if possible.
- Workers must be coerced, directed, threatened, and controlled.
- Workers desire direction, avoid responsibility, have little ambition, and want security.

Theory Y

- Work is as natural as play and rest.
- External control and threats are not the only means of getting people to work.

- In appropriate circumstances, employees learn to accept and seek responsibility.
- Under authoritarian management, the abilities of employees are only partially utilized.

Theory X believes that only money and time are appropriate motivation techniques and that even those will not make a difference in performance.

Theory Y believes that people who want to work will do the best they can, and recognition and reward tend to enhance their efforts. This was the first theory that recognized the inherent desire of certain employees to work and make a contribution to the organization. (Hoover, 1994)

The theories mentioned above all have one thing in common; People are individuals. Each person's particular needs and makeup, as well as the situation at hand, have significant impact on their level of motivation and what might be the appropriate leadership approach. Leaders, especially first-line supervisors, must be people centered, mission focused, and flexible in their approach or they will not be successful. (Coleman, 2003)

Leaders, same as motivators, can do several things that will contribute to creating a positive environment. The following are taken from Steven Edward's Fire Service Personnel Management:

- Fairness: Ensure that all training and career opportunities, promotions, and employment are based on job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Respect: Demand a work environment in which employees are treated with dignity and respect, free from mistreatment and harassment, such as unwelcome remarks, jokes, sexual innuendo, and the like.
- Trust: Maintain a work environment where employees can raise issues and make suggestions without fear of reprisal, one in which they feel fully comfortable in contributing at all times.
- Flexibility: Consider the changing and different needs of employees as balanced against the mission of the department. Be flexible where appropriate and it is warranted.
- Sensitivity: Foster awareness of the differences in people and situations. Active efforts to ensure inclusion of people of all races, sex, and cultures are welcomed and appreciated. (Coleman, 2003)

Everything up to this point has been based on published theories that have been accepted as “best practices” in fire service management. I don’t think that I could ever add to such well thought out and tested theories. All the information is valid but I still ask the question: “Does a leader/boss/motivator really think of these theories when managing people?” What I would like to do now give some quick hitting bullet points that I believe are key in what first-line supervisors can do to improve motivation on a day-to-day basis. This is not science. It is just what I have both seen and hope to see out of various bosses that I have had that I know have worked.

- **Take the bullet every time (almost):** Firefighters live, eat, work, sometimes bleed, and sometimes die together. They develop into a close knit family (sometimes dysfunctional, but family none the less). They need to know that they are protected and that their leader will keep them safe, both on the fire ground and from the bureaucracy of city government. When someone on the crew messes up, the boss needs to handle the problem fairly and that is it. It is over. I put “almost” in parenthesis because sometimes someone messes up bad enough that the first-line supervisor cannot handle the problem. He or she still needs to be an advocate for the firefighter at all times.

- **Do things together:** I got this from a current chief that was a company officer for many years. He insisted that his crew do things together while on duty. We say that the fire service is a team “sport” but we all know that tasks around the station are many times completed by members acting alone. He didn’t like that. He always made sure that the apparatus were being checked together, the station was being cleaned together, and that they played together when the work was done. Sure there was time to escape each other but he made sure that teamwork was stressed at all times. This keeps the family motivated in that everyone has a part in the day-to-day activities and we know that firefighters love to be part of a team.
- **Training:** In my opinion, one way to kill the motivation of a bunch of type A personalities at the fire station is to not provide training or worse yet not provide interesting, challenging training. Firefighters love to learn and love a challenge. Keeping up to date on knowledge and skills as a team is a great way to stay motivated.
- **Get your hands dirty:** An officer on any fire department is busy with all of the day-to-day paperwork and reports that come with the job. One way to kill motivation for your firefighters is to never get your

hands dirty. If the firefighters see you out there with them cleaning, checking equipment, flushing hydrants, testing hose, etc. they know that you haven't "forgot where you came from". This is a very big deal to the group. Six years after one Captain retired the guys where I work still talk about how Capt. X would be out there with the guys doing truck checks and cleaning the apparatus. If you looked back and counted, he probably didn't do it that often but he did it enough for the guys to notice and respect him for it. Get your hands dirty. It fosters total teamwork and lets the guys know you care enough to "chip in". That's motivating.

- **Empower your people:** Give your highly skilled firefighters some special project to do and let them run with it. Empower them to make the decisions with the project and stay out of the way. This lets your firefighters know that you trust them and that you believe in their decision making. This is motivating because firefighters like to show off what they know and what they are capable of. If you don't empower your people, you are missing out on an opportunity to learn how much they know. Empowerment can also let your

people know that you are not all knowing and you trust them to help in decision making.

- **Have character, be trustworthy:** It is motivating to your people when you show them that the boss is a good person that will make decisions based on good character and sound ethical standards. You only need to mess this one up once for firefighters to never forget.
- **Stand with your guys:** One of the most motivating things that I have seen in a long time happened at a memorial service for a retired Chief from a neighboring department. We were all in our Class A uniforms lining up for our last respects. This is when we go up two-by-two to the casket and salute the departed. There were probably 50 or so firefighters, officers, etc. present. The normal protocol is for the Chiefs to go first followed by officers and then the firefighters. Just before the last officers were going the Captain that was coordinating the “event” came up to my Lieutenant and told him to join the other officers. He immediately, and politely, advised the Captain that he was going to remain with “his crew” and pay respects together. I cannot explain why this made such an impression but it did. I believe it is because he showed that he is not better than any

one of us and that we are a team. I don't know if he meant it to make such an impression but I will never forget the feeling of pride that I had because my Lieutenant stood by us. Many officers today are missing that point.

There are a lot of good firefighters out there that are asking the same questions that I am: "Where did my motivation go?" I hope that this paper gave the first-line supervisors some education as to the theories out there but I also hope that this got them thinking. We don't want to lose the "good ones" to poor motivation. Firefighting is the greatest job in the world. Officers, please help us remember that and keep us motivated!

Coleman, R. (2003). *Fire Chief's Handbook 6th Edition*. Tulsa: Penwell Corporation.

Edwards, S. T. (2005). *Fire Service Personnel Management*. Upper Saddle: Pearson Publication.

Hoover, N. G. (1994). *Fire Service Administration*. NFPA.