

Where Will Your Next Chief Come From?

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It seems like more and more fire departments have to look to the outside for their next fire chief, for various reasons, some of which are valid.

Let me start by saying I really enjoy my position as deputy chief, previously overseeing training and now overseeing administrative services, and I consider myself fortunate to be able to do what I do for the department, our personnel, and our community. I say that because I don't want anyone to get the idea that I'm trying to talk anyone out of promoting above the rank of battalion chief, let alone taking on the challenges of being fire chief as I am hoping to do in the future at some point.

It's actually just the opposite. I actually hope to encourage more personnel within the fire service to get out of their comfort zones and step up to be part of the solution.

I also hope to inspire more fire departments to do what they can to ensure there are sufficient numbers of interested and qualified candidates who will be the best fit for the position of fire chief from within the ranks.

Most importantly, I want personnel to go into the future with eyes wide open, knowing what they're getting into so they *aren't* surprised and *are* as prepared as they can be.

Reasons a fire department may have to do a nationwide recruitment for fire chief or other chief officers include:

- Not having sufficient numbers of interested or qualified personnel from within the upper ranks (interested and qualified can be two different issues, as someone may be interested but not qualified and vice versa)
- Not having the best fit from within to select
- Wanting to test the waters to see what other qualified candidates may be out there
- Needing to change the status quo
- Just needing a fresh perspective from someone who's "been there, done that"

Now, I wish each fire department had sufficient numbers of interested and qualified personnel within their ranks to select from when it comes time to choose the next fire chief. However, that isn't always the case for various reasons, some within our control and some out of our control.

A good thing to remember is that the firefighter we hire today may be the fire chief of tomorrow, or a chief or company officer. I say this because it's critical that leaders start doing what they can to identify newly or recently hired firefighters to encourage in their career development and the department's succession planning. Your organization's potential future leaders need to be inspired and motivated to develop their careers from the beginning instead of waiting halfway into their careers.

Inspiring and encouraging should also be done at those in the ranks of engineer, company officer and even battalion chief, since all of those positions may hold your next fire chief or other executive-level officer, though it may not yet be obvious.

Just the other day I was talking with a friend from an out-of-state department who was complaining about their current chief and how they couldn't wait for the chief to leave so they can get someone new. He went on to say how much he and the rest of their personnel didn't like this fire chief.

The ironic thing is I remember having the same conversation about two years ago, and about five years ago as well, with different fire chiefs in the equation. This department can't keep a fire chief for more than an average of three years—most of whom have come from the outside.

I finally asked my friend, "Do you honestly think there's a fire chief you and the rest of

your personnel will actually like and support?"

He chuckled and said, "Probably not."

So I asked him why he didn't step up to promote and eventually be considered to be the next fire chief if he thought he could do a better job. His answer was, "Why the heck would I want to do that? It's easier to be a captain and complain about how bad things are than to have to fix things that aren't easily fixable."

Enough said; can't blame him. He added that making changes for the better probably wouldn't be embraced, given his department's current culture.

When I asked him what he was looking for in a fire chief, he told me they wanted a chief who will support them and stick up for them and not accept any more budget cuts. When I explained that fire chiefs typically at-will employees (as opposed to you being represented by the union) who typically don't have much if any wiggle room when asked to make significant budget cuts, he seemed surprised.

For whatever reason he was expecting the chief to go tell the city manager or city council to pound salt and to give them more money. So I shared that a fire chief who did that probably wouldn't last long and would be easily replaced, especially since they were employed at will.

I also added that the city leadership probably didn't want to hire a chief who would cater to the union's every request, which is what he and many of his personnel were apparently hoping for in a chief. Rather, the city leaders want a chief that would do what they asked, which hopefully includes being efficient and effective, among other things.

At the end of the conversation, he said essentially, "Wow, I didn't realize that a fire chief was really stuck between a rock in a hard place."

That is the sad part that is happening in some departments; they continue to rotate fire chiefs every few years and most never get the support they should have. They were doomed to fail before they started because of a lack of support from within, budgetary causes or the current climate of their elected officials.

The fire service is struggling for personnel to step up into the fire chief ranks from within. If you or others from within your department choose not to step up, then do your best to support the leadership brought in from the outside and don't complain about having to hire a fire chief from the outside.

If you don't like who they can find to bring into your department, do what it takes to get your best and brightest to step up to lead your department to ensure it's successful for years to come!

If you're department doesn't have at least three candidates who are qualified and interested and would be a great fit as your next fire chief, then we as the fire service leadership have failed. Either we didn't hire the right personnel in the first place or we didn't do enough over the years to inspire and motivate our personnel to step up and lead.

We can either choose to be part of the problem or part of the solution.

I choose to be part of the solution because I can at least say I tried. I did the best I can to make a positive difference in my department and my community and ultimately for our personnel and the citizens we serve.

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Alan Fletcher, August 06, 2015

Thanks for the article. Taking a walk in someone else's shoes is easier said than done but necessary to understand the perspective of that person. It is very much like being promoted to a lieutenant, for the first time I realized how much weight was on my shoulders. Being a fire chief is the same, all of the responsibility and some of the time with one hand tied behind my back. Finding some perspective of the other person is one of the best ways to build a supportive team. Go take a walk sometime; you'll be surprised what you may find.



Joseph Krueger, August 03, 2015

All about personal accountability - great write D/C!