




Diversity and Inclusion in the Fire Service



Talking "Shop" 4 Fire and EMS



Robert P. Avsec
Battalion Chief (Ret.)

Introduction

The title of this e-book highlights a common misunderstanding in the fire service: Diversity and Inclusion are not synonyms.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) defines diversity as “the collective mixture of differences and similarities that include, for example, individual and organizational characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, backgrounds, preferences, and behaviors”.

Going further, diversity has two distinct branches: those we can see (visible) and those we can't (invisible). Most people closely associate diversity with what they see: a person's race, gender, physical abilities, or age and body type. The much harder to identify invisible diversity traits include things such as a person's sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, education, or parental status.

Inclusion is not a synonym for diversity, though the two terms are closely related. Inclusiveness is the degree to which a workplace or organization has created an environment in which everyone is treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute fully to the organization's success

It is incumbent upon fire officers and firefighters to have a clear understanding of how the concepts of diversity and inclusion differ. Many fire departments may be working diligently to attract more women and people of color to EMS. But if those same organizations are not looking for ways that those people can be successful in the organization, those same people will choose not to stay, thus creating a retention problem for those departments.

Battalion Chief (Ret.) Robert Avsec is one of the male champions for women in the fire service who really “gets it.” Chief Avsec's presence in fire service writing and social media outlets is largely focused on righting the wrongs regarding women and minorities in public safety

He is passionate about the topic and understands that fire and medical response agencies need to be reflective of the communities they serve and that diversity adds to more well-rounded teams

Today's complex problems must be met with innovative solutions developed by diverse teams. Fire and EMS is more than “putting the wet stuff on the red stuff” and in order to stay relevant in changing times, Robert's focus on diversity and inclusion is where all leaders need to be

In this collection of essays, taken from Chief Avsec's weekly blog, *Talking “Shop” 4 Fire and EMS*, he and his guest bloggers have taken on the task of bringing a sense of humanity to the discussion about diversity and inclusion in the fire service. I think you'll find that they've “hit the mark.” I know I did.

Cheryl Horvath

Fire Chief, Mountain Vista Fire District, Tucson, Arizona
Past President for iWomen
February 2017

Preface

First of all, Thank You! I believe that your purchase of this book demonstrates: (1) you're a leader in your fire service organization (whether you have a rank or not); (2) you're a person looking to expand your body of knowledge; and (3) you care about your organization's ability to recruit, include, and retain good people regardless of their gender, race, religion, place of birth or sexual orientation. The fire service needs people like you!

I'm a retired fire department battalion chief. I proudly served with the men and women of the Chesterfield County (Va.) Fire Department for 26-years. All told, I've spent 30+ years in the fire service and EMS.

During that wonderful "1st career", as I rose through the ranks of the department I had many opportunities for personal and professional growth and development. Those opportunities included:

- Serving as an Advanced Life Support Provider, which included a stint as a back-up flight paramedic on a medevac helicopter;
- Serving on our Hazardous Materials Response Team, during which I earned my Specialist Certification;
- Serving as the department's EMS Director while a Captain;
- Serving as Co-Manager of our county's Emergency Communications Center (9-1-1) while a Captain;
- Serving as the department's Chief of Training and Safety Division while a Battalion Chief; and
- Serving as an Operations Division Battalion Commander during several rotations.
- Serving as a member of the department's Strategic Planning Steering Committee

Since my retirement in December 2007, I've worked in several other capacities: Operations Chief for a private-sector ambulance service; as a Staff Instructor/Course Developer at the Georgia Fire Academy; and as a management consultant for a private-sector company with management services contracts with the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. All of which allowed me to continue to "broaden my horizons."

Since 2012, I've been plying my trade in my "2nd career" as a freelance writer beginning with the creation of my professional blog, Talking "Shop" 4 Fire and EMS. A couple of years later, I was recruited by Mr. Rick Markley to write articles on a monthly basis for the on-line trade journal, FireRescue1.com.

This book that you've purchased is composed of selected posts from my blog. In addition to my own original content, I've included selections from several of my guest bloggers (Thank you!): Tara Massarelli and Branden Husky.

Once again, thank you for your purchase. I hope that our words help you to gain a better appreciation for the need to embrace diversity and inclusion in the fire service.

Robert Avsec

Cross Lanes, WV
February 2017

Diversity: The Elephant in the Room

By: Tara Massarelli, Guest Blogger

When we firefighters are in mixed company and are present during conversations that make each other uncomfortable, why do we continue it?

Every time you participate in off color conversations, it reflects the dark side of yourself. Every time you laugh, nod, agree, insert your two cents, sit quietly uncomfortably reading your iPhone HOPING IT ENDS SOON, looking at the speaker or simply clearing your throat you are participating in the conduct that is **unbecoming of a firefighter**. Did you know that?

Don't agree? I want you to take a minute to think about things in a completely different way.

I'll put it this way for my Generation X kiddos. You and Barbie go to rob a bank. Oh, you thought you were just **going** to the bank. You find out that Barbie has **robbed** the bank when she comes rushing to the car with her hands full of cash. She gets in and says "DRIVE! GO!" You drive and you go.

Your logic was handicapped because of emotion. You would never rob a bank, but you just did because you were an accomplice.

We—both men and women—just haven't had the "balls" or the courage to stand up for what's right.

We don't need to sacrifice these qualities we originally "brought to the table" to fit in. We don't need to put down other men and women who **do** stand up courageously and fight for a workplace free from not just the fear of physical attack or abuse, but also free from the language of hate and intimidation. Because there is power in words.

Every single time you allow things to take place in your presence that you don't agree with or that violate your morals or beliefs or are against policy or against the law, you rob yourself. As a firefighter, you rob yourself of dignity, respect and every damn thing you worked for in your career, whether that career is one year or 30 years long. You see, it is not acceptable nor has it ever been acceptable to speak off-color within mixed company.

We do not need more diversity training. What we need are for courageous leaders—both men and women, firefighters and officers alike—to have ongoing "training" with every conversation, in every firehouse, and in every department in this world.

My friends, until we all start to speak up for others, we're all accomplices in the "crime."

About the Author

Tara Massarelli has been a firefighter/medic since 2003 and has served in several career fire department.

If You're a Male Firefighter, You Should Be Mad, Too!

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

*All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.—Edmund Burke
(1729 – 1797)*

The evil in this case is the continued harassment of women who have chosen to become firefighters. And as a man who spent 30+ years in the active fire service, I'm getting pretty sick of seeing stories like these on an almost daily basis:

- [Women face multiple hurdles within Tampa Fire Rescue](#)
- [Critics: Sexual harassment a big problem in Philly fire dept.](#)
- [Women firefighters claim harassment, abuse on Forest Service fires](#)
- [Tampa Fire Rescue personnel chief retires amid sexual harassment investigation](#)
- [2 FFs suspended in sexual misconduct investigation](#)

My fire service colleague, District Chief Cheryl Horvath, wrote a compelling piece for FireRescue1.com entitled, [Same old story: The biggest issues facing women firefighters today](#), back in May 2013. In her piece, Chief Horvath presented the story of Carol, the sole woman on her department, and the harassment that she received on the job. Carol's story is all too familiar.

Why is this still so in 2015? Why are women subjected to [sexual harassment, sexual assault, and yes, rape](#) at the hands of the men in their own firehouse? Because the men of the fire service in the United States continue to "look the other way." They are the "...good men who do nothing.", that Burke spoke of more than two hundred years ago.

To those fire chiefs, and more importantly, fire officers who are accepting responsibility of the actions and attitudes inside your firehouses, and making the appropriate course corrections, thank you. You are few and far between.—Horvath

I'm sick and tired of hearing about fire stations that don't have accommodations for the women in a department. By gosh, if the men had to go outside to use an outhouse instead of having a bathroom with indoor plumbing, there'd be funds available to fix that problem! Where are all the DIY (Do It Yourself) skills that so many male firefighters pride themselves on possessing when it comes to making simple and basic modifications to a fire station to give a woman the same privacy and facilities that they enjoy?

And sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape in a firehouse? Who raised these types of men and how did they become firefighters and officers, in to many cases high ranking officers in a department? Where do male firefighters and officers get the idea that, for a woman working or volunteering in a fire station, the atmosphere should resemble a Saturday night frat house party? Where's the leadership?

Women in the fire service are not the problem and they are not the solution. Only the [men of the fire service](#) can make the necessary cultural changes so that everyone, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality or creed, is accepted for who they are and judged solely on their ability to do the required job.

Just the other day I was cleaning up some old files and folders on my computer and came across what follows below. I originally composed the message circa 2005 when I was a Battalion Chief with Chesterfield Fire & EMS Department and assigned to the Emergency Operations Division.

Dignity in the Workplace: It's a Leadership "Thing"

I shared this message with the Company Officers (first-line supervisors in the fire stations of our battalion) as one of the e-mails that I sent out at the beginning of each tour of duty so that they would get it first thing into their workday. (Battalion staff came on duty at 0700 hours and personnel in the fire stations came on at 0800 hours, so I had a "bit of jump" each tour).

I thought it worthy of sharing in this venue given the ongoing workplace harassment issues in the fire service for men and women of color, and particularly women. From reading accounts, both on and off line, it is evident that too many fire officers still don't "get it" when it comes to dignity in the workplace. I believe that is one of the fundamental factors in this ongoing blight on the profession that many of us hold near and dear to our hearts: we still have too many officers who don't manage their fire station like a workplace in 2013.

So, here's what I wrote at that earlier time:

Recently, I completed reading a really good book, *Generally Speaking* by [Lt. General Claudia Kennedy \(Ret.\)](#), which turned out to be a really good book on leadership (in addition to being a great read). I would highly recommend it to all of you.

One of the chapters deals with her Army experiences that influenced her attitudes about fairness and equality. In the chapter she discusses the Army's reaction to the sexual harassment scandals at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland where NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] drill sergeants were charged with various offenses to female trainees ranging from sexual harassment to sexual assault and rape.

As part of the Army's investigation General Kennedy was appointed as a member of the **Secretary of the Army's Senior Review Panel on Sexual Harassment**. That panel used surveys, focus groups, personal interviews and observations that involved 30,000 soldiers world-wide. Specific data analysis involved a cohort of 15,000 men and women soldiers across all branches of the Army.

I won't attempt to summarize her writings, or the work of the panel, in this short e-mail, but the biggest issue that I got out of this chapter was that they found that the Army had a significant issue in ***a lack of respect and dignity that created an environment where sexual harassment was tolerated and in some cases condoned***. She wrote:

Not surprisingly, the Review Panel found that Army leaders were the critical factor in creating, maintaining, and enforcing an environment of respect and dignity. But too many leaders had failed to gain the trust of their soldiers.

The good news was that the panel also found many examples of good leadership in many units around the world, even in deployments like Kuwait and Bosnia, where the leaders created high levels of respect and dignity in the harshest and most challenging work environments. The panel identified four characteristics of these types of units:

- Good leaders set standards for the members of their organization.
- Good leaders exemplified through their personal conduct adherence to those standards.
- Good leaders enforced and maintained those standards for the other members of the organization.
- Good leaders demonstrated genuine care and concern for their soldiers, no matter their rank, race, or gender.

I think there's good stuff here that can serve us as well. I believe that these same characteristics are what we need to strive for to create an environment that not only prevents sexual harassment from entering our work place, but also creates an

environment for success. The Army units that were led by leaders with these characteristics were also **high performing, operationally proficient units**. By valuing respect and dignity in the workplace will do that for you.

Chief Avsec

Do the leaders in your organization promote a strong sense of dignity in the workplace?



A Healthy Discussion About Diversity in the Fire Service

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

In response my previous post, [What's Your Plan for an Inclusive and Diverse Department to Increase Service and Safety?](#), I received a lengthy letter from a fire service colleague that posed several thought-provoking questions. Below are the contents of that letter. (WK is the letter writer; RPA is me).

Dear WK,

Thank you for your thought-provoking letter. I read it with great interest and wanted to respond in kind. I thought a discussion paragraph by paragraph might be rather interesting.

WK: My question is; We have a proven system of initiation that has worked or has been accepted as the cultural norm for a particular occupation. Who says and what proof do “they” have that this is not the best for our organization?

RPA: I believe in data-driven decision making and data-driven problem solving methodologies. When I “scan” the Fire and EMS “environment” (both on-line and through the several hard copy trade journals I subscribe to) I see far too many instances where our collective “accepted” culture is not working. Just look at the number of lawsuit judgments and settlements; the number of new filings of lawsuits; the number of disciplinary actions, including firings, against personnel from firefighter to fire chief that are happening every week across the USA.

In too many of these cases, the issue is not an objective evaluation of a person’s ability to do the job, but rather someone’s personal and subjective—and in many cases pre-determined—feeling that a person does not belong. That’s not me “talking”, it’s being spoken loudly in millions of dollars (of taxpayer monies) being paid out and jobs being lost.

When you say, “We have a proven system of initiation that has worked or has been accepted as the cultural norm for a particular occupation” [firefighting], am I to assume that this “system” has been vetted and approved by the leadership of the organizations in question? If that’s the case, then why is money being paid out and people losing their jobs because of the behaviors of individuals towards their fellow employees or members? Is the presence of such a system the best use of taxpayer or contributors monies? Monies that they believe is being used to provide high quality fire protection and EMS?

WK: Does being “sensitive” and implementing procedures actually improve the service to the citizens or is it just a feel good measure?

RPA: In the words of Gordon Graham, “You cannot deliver EXCELLENT external customer service unless you’re delivering excellent INTERNAL customer service.” I firmly believe those sentiments. I have seen first-hand on many occasions the difference in the way the customer (homeowner or medical patient) perceives the care or treatment that they are getting when they see people who “look like them”, e.g., women, people of color, people of different ethnic backgrounds, among the crew that has answered their call for help.

As our communities continue the “American Tradition” of becoming more diverse with each generation of new immigrants I think it is incumbent that Fire and EMS organizations actively recruit, hire, and retain a diverse membership that is reflective of the communities that they serve. Not only do I think this is important from a service delivery perspective, it’s also important as a marketing and recruitment tool for organizations to attract good future members from those same communities. People want to be a part of an organization that has incumbent members who “look like them” and share their common experiences and values.

WK: I personally believe we need to return to height, weight and strength charts for our recruits. Simply changing a standard, procedure or job performance requirement to be diverse is a tragedy.

RPA: I disagree with your first statement and couldn't agree more with the second. The only acceptable criteria for any recruit firefighter—career or volunteer—to meet should be based upon an objectively developed job description that accurately reflects the job tasks that ALL individuals are required to perform. That's why the courts have **struck down** those entrance requirements that do not have a bona fide relationship to the job of a firefighter, e.g., timed distance runs, number of sit-ups, etc. That's why CPAT was developed by a joint taskforce involving the IAFC (management) and the IAFF (labor).

Changing a standard, procedure, etc., and calling it diversity improvement is akin to painting an old house with a new coat of paint of a different color and calling it a new house. Doesn't do anything to fix the leaking plumbing or the furnace that doesn't work.

WK: Why should fire departments be the leader in facilitating cultural change? Does not the culture changing on its own, without facilitation, eventually find the best solutions? Maybe the fire service is the organization that has the right formulation to find and keep the best personnel for its missions.

RPA: I'm not sure where to start on this one. Ask our citizens of African descent if "change on its own without facilitation" is a prudent strategy. If that were the case, then we didn't need the American Civil War, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to eradicate slavery in this country and give those folks full rights of citizenship, right? Or that whole women's suffrage "thing" that resulted in another Constitutional Amendment granting women the right to vote 131 years after the Constitution was originally ratified.

We are paid as leaders to lead, guide, and direct the resources of our organizations in the pursuit of a worthwhile and meaningful mission. I see so many Fire and EMS organizations who "spout" the words, "Our people are our most important resources", and many others like those, and yet they don't put actions to their words. Our communities are changing (just as they always have) and our mission is changing (as it always has) and successful organizations are going to be those who effectively manage the inevitable changes in their organizations.

WK: Just because someone wants to be a firefighter does not mean they should be. My wife wants to be a NFL Quarterback do you think the NFL should jump through hoops to get her the job and change the locker room behavior to comply to her needs?

Dignity in the Workplace: It's a Leadership "Thing"

RPA: Given the state of quarterbacking in the NFL, I believe that if your wife could throw the fade route, read disguised coverages in the secondary, and run an effective 2-minute drill, she'd have teams lining up at the front door. I believe that because the teams in the NFL, like those in any professional sport, only care about whether a person can meet the requirements of the job description. A job specific job description. A cornerback is not expected to do the job of an offensive tackle and vice versa.

Take a trip down to your local recreational facility these days and watch young boys and girls playing together on the same teams, e.g., baseball, soccer, basketball, and I think what you'll see is acceptance and teamwork and camaraderie at work "in spades." It's not until adolescence sets in, and society has had a chance to "imprint" those same boys and girls with their "proper roles" in life that many of them get the idea of what they can or can't be in life.

WK: In fact is that not selfish and self-centered personal behavior that would expect such a change? That does not sound like the person willing to risk their life for someone else. Matter of fact the person that expects and wants these considerations is more likely to be a non-team player. Selflessness is one of the most enduring qualities of the fire service. The person that does not overreact to the ridicule and does not feel embarrassed, threatened or coerced is truly a strong person.

RPA: That first sentence is the definition of a "jackass" and we've had them in the fire service for years. Everyone was okay with that when all the jackasses were white males. We've also had individuals who were not "team players", who "milked the system", and engaged in hundreds of other types of behaviors that were "different".

How many of those individuals became the “target” of others with the intent of making them conform or getting rid of them? What do people call a white male who’s opinionated, speaks their mind, doesn’t care what others think, and doesn’t back down when they think they’re right? Tough. What do they call a women who exhibits the same characteristics? Bitch.

WK: Diversity in and of itself means not going in the same direction. With an organization like the fire service, that depends on its very limited resources and manning (non-PC word), being on the same page is important.

RPA: I disagree with that first sentence. Diversity in an organization consists of recruiting, hiring and promoting a workforce of people with differences. These differences include race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical abilities or economic backgrounds. Diversity also consists of creating a culture of inclusiveness, or one where all employees feel valued.

[Read more: Importance of Diversity in the Workplace](#)

Our job as leaders is to take all of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a diverse workforce “brings to the table” and create a culture of inclusiveness where all employees feel valued. It’s also our job as leaders—from the first-line supervisor to the fire chief—to get everyone working in the same direction to accomplish the mission.

We don’t have to look any further than our United States military organizations to see successful organizational diversity at work. Is it perfect? Probably not, but look up and down the organizations and you’ll see all genders, colors, nationalities, religions, etc., filling important roles because they have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to do they job.

Just as instructively for the fire service, the majority of those people were trained for those jobs, trained to take on greater responsibilities, and provided with systems that encouraged their growth and development because success for the individual meant success for the unit.

WK: Words, like hero, bullying, exceptional, risk, duty and 1000 others have been reduced to commonplace vocabulary words. If we as an organization need sensitivity and diversity training why is the other half of the organization not required to take “toughen-up-and-take-it” courses?

Back to my original question. Who says, and what proof do they have, that softer, kinder and more **inclusion** produces a better and more well run organization? Before you start listing them, is history on their side?

RPA: Diversity has nothing to do with “softer and kinder”. It does have to do with recruiting, hiring and promoting a workforce of people with differences. Diversity also consists of creating a culture of inclusiveness, or one where all employees feel valued. The U.S. Army has found that the following leadership characteristics and behaviors are commonly found in its **high performing and operationally proficient** units.

- Good leaders set standards for the members of their organization.
- Good leaders exemplified through their personal conduct adherence to those standards.
- Good leaders enforced and maintained those standards for the other members of the organization.
- Good leaders demonstrated genuine care and concern for their soldiers, no matter their rank, race, or gender.

Providing respect and dignity in the workplace will do that for you.

Respectfully yours,

Robert

[See Related: Dignity in the Workplace: It’s a Leadership Thing](#)

Thoughts on Changing the Fire Service Culture

By: Branden Husky, Guest Blogger

Culture consists of group norms of behavior and the underlying shared values that help keep those norms in place.

Changing our culture? I saw this piece from Chief Robert Avsec on LinkedIn and I couldn't help myself, so I posted my comments on the LinkedIn Group. Chief Avsec (the author) contacted me and asked me to use my comments as a Guest Blogger, so here I am.

I have been studying and applying the ideas of creating personal and leadership boundaries. This has forced me to be very self-reflective and very clear about my expectations. It has also made me consider what consequences will be handed out in the case my expectations are not met. Long story short, I feel the culture is shaped directly by the maturity of our captains [first-line supervisors] and their understanding of their boundaries as leaders and as human beings.

Secondly, I have noticed a direct maturing effect that a professional female presence has on a crew. We have very mature and professional female FF's and the maturity level of those crews is notably higher than those that are all men. Professional women, that are comfortable living and being just that, professional women, are worth their weight in gold. They add a touch of class and have an amazing effect on helping men act like men instead of boys.

The "boys club" mentality has been an amazing recruiting tool for us, but it has ended many careers as well. The presence of professional women increases the professional "behavioral IQ" of a crew in my opinion. Men and women are equally important yet very different. Those differences should be embraced and be allowed to compliment each other.

I don't want to hire women that want to be like men, we have enough men as it is. I want to hire women that are very good at being women, meaning, living in the strengths that we as men don't possess. Another benefit to this dynamic is that men can be men because the feminine side of the human dynamic is being handled by the experts. Again we (men and women) are created to complement one another and when we hire the best of both sexes we can change the culture without even trying.

We Don't Need More Diversity Training...We Need More Leadership Training

I have noticed over my short 19+ year career that the cultural change question is a very consistent theme and it seems our tendency is to ask the question, but never do anything different to fix the culture or I should say positively mature or grow the culture. Even if we do try to make the needed change it is met with a huge opposing force and fails. One of the reasons most solutions are "dead on arrival" is because change is always met with resistance and we don't really understand why. Perhaps we humans resist change because it represents a loss.

Losses of any kind generate mourning, and when change is brought we mourn. What are we mourning? We are mourning the loss of the old way. If you don't believe me just listen to the kitchen table to talk during the next change project in your department. Even if we originally hated the old way, we will still mourn changing to a new one.

So change has a better chance of living past the "roll out" if we "set it up" for success through recognizing key vital behaviors, using opinion leaders to champion it, and employing all the sources of influence to get others to behave as those that are doing it best. Then change takes care of it self.

There are at least six sources influence that I have found. You can find these sources of influence in two books, *Influencer* and *Change Anything*. My first concept fits in two of the six sources of influence which are, “personal motivation and personal ability” (promoting more mature company officers and building on it with objective-based coaching/accountability).

The second one fits in the source called “structural ability” (hiring professional women with a goal to have one on every crew). Professional women will change the structure and dynamics of the team for the better [and] therefore change the culture over time.

A third concept is to remember that **we are the culture**. Meaning, the individual firefighter attains positive change personally that in turn positively changes the crew and eventually the entire culture is changed. This can happen and has in the negative direction as well and that is proof that the power of one is influential on a culture. Now, I humbly believe that these suggestions can aid in positive culture change because they all challenge the person to grow.

Sounds simple doesn't it? Maybe it is. I challenge you all (myself included) as people to spend more time growing yourself and less time fighting the “three-headed monster” that is “fire service culture” and then see what we look like in a few years.

What do we have to lose, except our broken culture?

About the Author

Branden Husky is a Captain serving with the City of Goodyear (AZ) Fire Department. Captain Husky first joined the department as a volunteer in 1992 and became a full-time career member in 1995. Captain Husky earned his Associates Degree in Fire Science and Firefighting from Phoenix College. He and his wife and their three children make their home in the Goodyear area.



Male Privilege in the Fire Service

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

The Arlington County (VA) Fire Department made U.S. history when it hired Judith “Judy” Brewer as the nation’s first female career firefighter in 1974.

The following definition of [white privilege](#) is courtesy of Professor Arlene Avakian’s class at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. *The Social Construction of Whiteness and Women*

White privilege is a set of advantages and/or immunities that white people benefit from on a daily basis beyond those common to all others. White privilege can exist without white people’s conscious knowledge of its presence and it helps to maintain the racial hierarchy in this country.

“Being white means never having to think about it.”

-James Baldwin

A week or so ago, in preparation for an article I’d been assigned to write by my editor at [FireRescue1.com](#), I posted a request for information on my [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#) accounts asking for input on turnout gear fitting issues. One of the responses I received was from Cathy, a career firefighter with a large county fire and EMS department located in Virginia.

In reading her response, along with several others of a similar nature from other women, I believe that in the fire service in the USA we have a culture of **male privilege**. That definition would be:

Male privilege is a set of advantages and/or immunities that male firefighters benefit from on a daily basis beyond those common to all others. Male privilege can exist without male firefighters’ conscious knowledge of its presence and it helps to maintain the gender hierarchy in the fire service in the USA.

Cathy’s Story

I have a few issues with my turnout gear and it has taken me approximately 3 years to get someone to listen and realize that I am not just trying to draw attention to the fact that I am a female and I want to stand out. It appears that this is the perception, but I just want to blend in with all of them and I feel that I am not part of the system that we have because I am different.

I think that the trunk of my body must be a little shorter. When I wear my SCOTT SCBA, the cylinder sticks up a little higher and the brim of my helmet lays on it. It was so bad, that I could not just tilt my head to the side a little and look up when needed. I had to bend over and then turn my head a lot to see what was above me. I mentioned something to my crew and then to my officer.

I think they became uncomfortable to the fact that I would speak out against our issued gear. I only stated that my “My helmet keeps me from effectively doing my job.” This went on for a couple of years. I worked up the courage to take it forward to the safety office. Didn’t hear anything for a couple of months, then the email came and I have never seen so many names cc’d before. I felt kind of isolated and it felt like I had done something wrong.

So, somebody finally stated that I needed to change the way that I was wearing my SCBA. I had made numerous attempts to reposition my SCBA, but nothing worked and I even tried repositioning my helmet. I eventually was issued the old salad bowl [type of helmet] and it is amazing. There were a lot of political issues that occurred, and I still get comments of why I choose to be different. Well, I am . We are all a little different.

I have an hourglass shape and my coat fits great in my chest and back, but it is the same diameter all the way down and when it reaches my hips, well, you know when they ask “does this make my butt look big”? Well, it makes me feel like my butt is an enormous battleship. It was very tight. I was able to fasten my coat, but there was not room for movement, so I removed the bottom of my coat, which is where the name [panel] attaches. When I was questioned why I removed my name tag, I explained my circumstance and the cycle repeated itself.

We have a new logistics manager who happens to be a female. I have been given the opportunity to talk with her and she immediately recognized the problem with my coat and is working to resolve it. I felt the weight lift off of me, when I realized I was going to get help.

This probably appears that I am venting, but it feels good to put this in words for you. This has been ugly for me and I have grown and developed confidence and have learned to stand alone when I feel strong about a circumstance, so I am actually grateful that this is happening. I have had many positive results with all that has occurred, but it is a choice to keep a good attitude.

I know I have probably portrayed this as a negative impact, but I have used it for goodness. I have taken 4 minutes off of my annual work performance evaluation test and I now don't have to worry about something falling from above and hitting me. I can also look up and see the ladders on the side of the apparatus when I take them down. It has been amazing.

Does this happen in your department? If you're a male firefighter reading this post, do you “get it”?

It's not about the equipment. We could just as easily be discussing sleeping quarters and bathroom facilities in fire stations. Or professional development and promotional opportunities. Shoot, we could even go all the way back to entry-level training to get the job in the first place.

No, it's about the fire service institutions and men—who still hold the vast majority of leadership positions in the fire service—who make the rules. Even beyond the rules, it's male privilege “at work”.

[See Related: Arlington County Hires First Full-Time Female Firefighter in USA](#)



Women and Minorities in the Fire Service Need Champions

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

I recently came across a post on LinkedIn entitled, [To get promoted, women need champions, not mentors](#). Though the title and article specifically addresses women, I believe that the concept of having a champion applies equally to all those who are under-represented in fire and EMS departments.

As a ticket to the top, a sponsor will work equally well whether you're climbing the corporate ladder or a working as an entrepreneur, a writer or activist, said [Sylvia Ann Hewlett](#), an economist and author of the new book *Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor*. A sponsor—basically a power broker who will endorse you in closed door meetings and support you in stormy moments—could also be valuable for executives established in their careers.

Hewlett goes on to say that women are too passive about finding a sponsor. According to her, women have twice as many mentors as men, but half as many sponsors.

Mentors vs. Sponsors

The key difference between mentors and sponsors is that mentors are “one-way streets”, giving their chosen mentee a gift of wisdom, time and advice. Sponsorship requires reciprocity and commitment; sponsors serve as champions.

I personally like the term champion. It's a term that a mentor and champion for my career, Chief Jim Graham, frequently used regarding people, programs and projects. When it comes to people, a champion advocates on behalf of their protégé, connecting them to important players and assignments. The reciprocity part comes in as the champion trusts that the protégé will prosper and help advance the champion's cause as well.

A Case Study

During my 26-year career serving with the men and women of the Chesterfield County (Va.) Fire and EMS Department, I had the honor of being an adjunct instructor who served on the training staff for every recruit school (entry-level training) beginning just a few years after my own. Toward the end of my career, I served as the Chief of the Training and Safety Division for 3+ years.

During that tenure, we were conducting an average of one recruit school per fiscal year. One of my observations over my time as an instructor, and then as the Training Chief, was that our department was being somewhat successful at recruiting women and minorities to join the depart. But they still made up a small percentage of our total entry-level firefighters. Most of the schools had one or two women and one or two non-white males on average out of a total population of 20-25 students.

Historically, the Recruit School Coordinator was a full-time member of the Training and Safety Division (a captain) while the Lead Instructor (a lieutenant) was a temporary duty assignment coming from the Emergency Operations Division. The selected lieutenant would come to the Training and Safety Division a month or so before the commencement of the school to assist the Coordinator in the planning, preparations and logistics necessary for the school's success. They would typically remain for several weeks after graduation to assist in the school's demobilization activities.

Both the Recruit School Coordinator and Lead Instructor had always been white males. Nothing wrong with that. Common wisdom, however, says that men and women bring different perspectives to any workplace, so I saw an opportunity to bring another perspective into our recruit training process: Select a woman to serve as the Lead Instructor for an upcoming recruit school.

At the time, we had a total of 14 women firefighters (out of a total staff of about 260 total career firefighters); only one of those women was a lieutenant. Lieutenant Amy Burnette, nee Vest, had been a very talented and motivated firefighter and her promotion to lieutenant was no surprise. But she was still relatively new in her position as an engine company officer (only a little over a year if my memory serves me correctly).

But I firmly believed that Lieutenant Burnette was the “right person for the job” at the “right time” for our organization. A company officer has the opportunity to have a direct and positive influence on a small number of people, primarily the two or three firefighters assigned to them. I saw the opportunity for Lieutenant Burnette, a woman, to have a positive influence on a “bigger audience”:

So I set out to recruit Lieutenant Burnette for the position. First I approached her one-on-one and “pitched” my idea to her. To say she was not interested would be an understatement. Like any firefighter who gets that first promotion to company officer, she was excited about learning and growing in her new position; not just for herself, but for her team as well. She expressed her desire to serve as a Lead Instructor one day, but just not now.

So I developed this recruiting presentation for her to “step up” my recruiting efforts.



Ten reasons why Amy Vest should be the next Lead Instructor for Recruit School

- ★ You're enthusiastic
- ★ You know the job
- ★ You set high standards of performance for yourself and your team
- ★ You've got great social skills
- ★ You're a good communicator
- ★ You use influencing skills rather than authority
- ★ You're more tolerant of differences, less bound by social traditions
- ★ You more readily show appreciation for the efforts of others
- ★ You're expressive of your thoughts and feelings
- ★ You're an inspirational role model to all recruits, but especially women

What you'll gain from the experience

- ★ Improve your coaching skills and ability to develop people
- ★ Improve at creating and articulating a vision of what you want to accomplish
- ★ Improve your ability to set a clear direction
- ★ Improve your leadership abilities

But most importantly, seeing your first class graduate will be one of the most satisfying moments in your career!

Why Was I So Persistent?

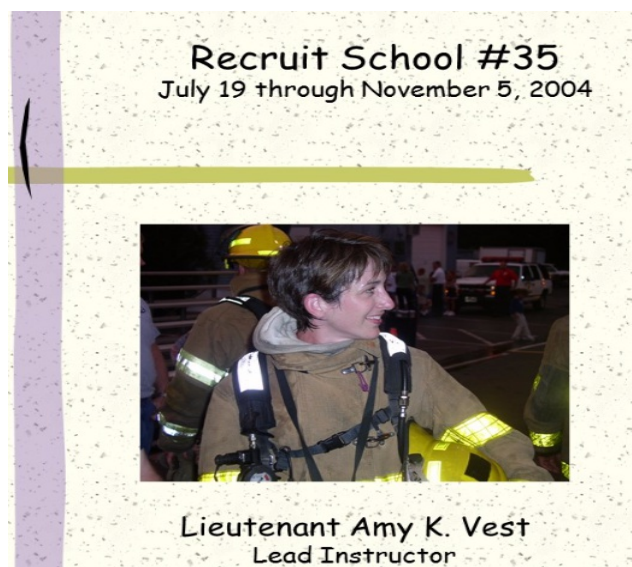
If we're ever going to make meaningful changes regarding diversity and inclusion in the fire service, our efforts have to go beyond recruiting. We have to start the retention process at the very beginning of a new firefighter's career for both career and volunteer firefighters. We have to expose them to positive role models during their entry-level training.

Continuing that theme of cultural change, we have to expose incumbent firefighters and officers to women and minorities in positions of greater responsibility and authority early in the protégé's career, not later. Male firefighters—for the most part—never think twice about seeking such positions, especially promotions, before they're "ready."

Female firefighters, like their counterparts in most other professions, don't actively seek promotions and the like until they feel they are "ready." For the most part this is because of the male-centric aspect of our fire service culture that requires that a female firefighter has to work twice as hard and be twice as good as their male counterpart to "prove" themselves as being "worthy" of promotion.

Follow-up

Ultimately, I was successful in my efforts to recruit Lieutenant Burnette to take the position of Lead Instructor. I was also successful in persuading my Training and Safety Division staff and my bosses that it was the right thing to do and a positive development for our organization. There's one more thing that I did when it was all said and done: The Thank You.



Ten Reasons Why Amy Vest Was a Great Lead Instructor for Recruit School #35

- # You were enthusiastic
- # You knew the job
- # You set high standards of performance for yourself and your team
- # You had got great social skills
- # You were a great communicator
- # You made great use of your influencing skills rather than relying on authority
- # You were tolerant of differences, less bound by social traditions
- # You readily showed appreciation for the efforts of others
- # You freely expressed your thoughts and feelings
- # You were an inspirational role model to all recruits, but especially the women

What You Gained From the Experience

- # You improved your coaching skills and ability to develop people
- # You became better at creating and articulating a vision of what you wanted to accomplish
- # You improved your ability to set a clear direction
- # You improved your leadership abilities more than you will ever know

**But most importantly, you saw
17 individuals grow and develop
into firefighters in large part
because of your leadership.
It doesn't get any better
than that!**

**We're going to miss you
around here!**

When Should You Don Your SCBA Facepiece?

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

A couple of days ago, I received an e-mail message from a firefighter looking for some pertinent safety information on the subject of when firefighters should don their SCBA facepiece. Here's their message:

Chief Avsec,

I'm a volunteer firefighter/EMT for our local fire department and I'm writing to you because I came across several of your articles while researching a particular issue for our department.

Currently our department doesn't have an SOP/SOG on file in regards to whether or not to mask up prior to arriving on scene to a fire. As it currently stands, we've had one person injured (newer to the department,) from being told to do this prior to exiting the fire apparatus. Some feel that it should be done, while others feel that it is a matter of safety to actually mask up just after exiting the fire apparatus once on scene.

I'm researching this to present to my battalion chiefs so that we can get a good SOP/SOG in place with the highest priority being for the safety of our firefighters. Do you have any information that might be for or against this?

Several of us are of the position that it is far safer to don the SCBA facepiece after getting on scene (and out of the apparatus,) as we are all responsible for scene size up (to a degree,) and that once the mask is on, it can fog rapidly depending on conditions, and visibility can become more limited. Any help, information, or other department's SOP/SOG's that might be able to help would be so very greatly appreciated.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

I, for one, always admire initiative on the part of firefighters. And I especially like firefighters who seek out information in advance of presenting a solution to their boss about a problem, especially when it involves firefighter safety.

So, what do you say? Who can provide some guidance and direction for this volunteer firefighter?

In the interest of anonymity (because everyone isn't as enlightened or appreciative of initiative as are you and I) for this firefighter, please leave your comments here on this post, or send them to me at rpa1157@gmail.com. Sample SOGs are certainly welcome!



This is What a Fire Service Champion Looks Like

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

What is a fire service champion? In this post, I'll provide a very illustrative case study that I trust will make the term crystal clear.

Last month, I wrote a piece about a firefighter who contacted me about what my thoughts were on the subject of when firefighters should don their SCBA facepiece and begin breathing air from the cylinder. In that blog, [When Should You Don Your SCBA Facepiece?](#), I asked readers to submit their thoughts on the subject.

I got many good and thoughtful responses from readers via comments on LinkedIn and Facebook, as well as e-mail messages. I subsequently shared those comments with the firefighter in an e-mail message. In that message, I included the following counsel:

I understand completely your desire and enthusiasm for making firefighting safer, especially with you being so new to the fire service. Very commendable!

Now for some guidance and direction that I've learned from the "School of Hard Knocks" where I've earned a PhD. "Emotion always trumps logic. Logic never trumps emotion."

What that means is that you'll never "win over" fire service people to your position by presenting facts and figures, aka, logic. I believe this is especially true for "newbies" like yourself; and being a woman in the fire service just amplifies the dynamics. Not right, not fair, and it is reality.

But fear not! You and your "small group" can be successful, and here are some "tips of the trade":

- 1. You've taken the first step by seeking out subject matter experts like me. Keep that going through your connections on LinkedIn and from the feedback that we might get from my blog post.*
- 2. Identify and cultivate a "champion" in your department, someone who has respect and followers in the department who can help you bring your ideas forward while ensuring that you get the credit. The reality is that in your current position (firefighter, newbie, and woman) you're in no position to champion your own ideas regardless of how many followers you have. See my post on the topic, [Women and Minorities in the Fire Service Need Champions](#).*
- 3. Give yourself plenty of time! I understand your sense of urgency (particularly since someone has already suffered the consequences from lack of a SOG), but you should be realistic: this ain't your circus, and these ain't your monkeys.*

It's going to take time for you to follow Steps 1 and 2, and I get the sense that you're going to want to be "in this" (being a participating and productive member of the department) for the long term. So don't get in such a hurry to achieve a short-term "win" (with the odds currently against you) that you spoil your future prospects.

A Fire Service Champion Steps Forward

So, just the other day I received the following message from that original firefighter:

Hey! I just wanted to drop a line to say hello, and thank you for all the help that you gave me.

I took your advice to heart. I have played it safe in taking my time in building a case with my "partners in crime" (our loving and sarcastic term of endearment to each other) in regards to getting a SOG in place for our SCBAs.

I also approached someone who has been with the department for about 25 years that I've known and trusted forever (or so it seems), to be our champion in this. It was my own BC. I told him that I was terrified that what I was presenting would "ruffle some feathers" and that it would cost me my position because I was a newbie.

But I also told him that I trusted in him as a friend and as my BC, and hoped that he knew that I was coming to him with a serious concern for our department, not only as a FF, but as someone who was willing to put the time and effort into researching this matter out well before presenting it to him.

We discussed it at length, verbalizing different scenarios, him asking me the questions that those in department would ask, particularly those who are opposed to changes like this. I'm proud to say that your help gave me the fortitude to anticipate what some of those questions were, and I was able to give him a convincing argument by acknowledging both sides of the coin, but by showing why my position was stronger for the department.

He agreed with me, and agreed to take it to the Chiefs meeting next month to start discussion on it. We agreed that it is going to be presented as a concern of his, and several others on his battalion, so that nothing will fall back on me for being a newbie.

Thank you. I am very grateful for your help and guidance.

I applaud that BC, whomever he or she may be, because they are a fire service champion. And champions are what our younger firefighters need if we're going to maximize our use of their thoughts, ideas, and talents to keep moving the fire service forward in the 21st century



Organizational Climate: Another “Weather” Report

By: Robert Avsec, Executive Fire Officer

Consultant: One who is hired to tell you what time it is, using your watch.—Anonymous

How does the old saying go? Everybody talks about the weather, though there's nothing they can do about it.

The organizational climate in the Fairfax County (Va.) Fire Rescue Department is not good according to an assessment of the organizational culture and attitudes within the department completed by a third-party. The department had commissioned the study following the suicide of Firefighter/Paramedic Nicole Mittendorff last year, a suicide that's been attributed to on-line bullying by some of her “brother” firefighters in the department.

My fire service colleague and fellow contributor to FireRescue1.com, Linda Willing, recently had another powerful piece of prose published where she provided [some analysis for the report](#). Willing's assessment was that the report, while including many valuable insights and recommendations, fell short when it came to really dealing with the primary issue: personal accountability.

Accountability is a term frequently used within organizations, and one that I've found is frequently misused just as frequently. It's often used in the context of ensuring that someone faces consequences for something they did wrong. In reality, accountability is not a stand-alone term; it is best used in conjunction with its sibling terms, [responsibility and authority](#).

The fire service is no different than any other organization in that we have policies, procedures, rules and regulations that are designed (or should be) to guide the behaviors of individuals within the organization. Those “governing documents” provide the foundation for any organization to be effective and efficient in its operations.

Organizational culture in the Fire Service

But organizations are made up of human beings. And the behavior of human beings is guided more by the culture in which they exist. The Merriam Webster on-line dictionary provides several definitions of culture:

- The [integrated](#) pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations
- The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time *<the fire service culture>*
- The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization *<a fire service culture focused on risk-taking>*
- The set of values, [conventions](#), or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic *<Changing the risk-taking culture of the fire service will take time>*

Much is being written and discussed about the fire service and its culture of risk-taking and the influence of that culture on firefighter deaths and injuries. But there is also the culture of the firehouse, and that's the culture that's influencing the inappropriate behaviors, on and off the job, that are resulting in careers being ruined, lawsuits being filed, and in the worst cases, firefighters taking their own lives.

And I'm not just talking about a suicide like that of Firefighter/Paramedic Mittendorf. I'm also referring to those firefighters who are taking their lives because the mental stresses and strains associated with the job and their own inability to seek professional help because of the cultural stigma associated with openly seeking help. The job's tough. Firefighters are tough. Anybody who's not tough is weak.

Changing the organizational climate and culture

For starters, we must get rid of the “go along, to get along” component of the firehouse culture. The Fairfax County report is only the latest report where it was found that “people knew, but nobody did anything to stop it.” Why do “good” people not do the “right thing” when confronted with behavior or activities that they know “in their gut” to be wrong? **Because nobody wants to be “that guy” in the firehouse.**

I’m confident that many fire departments have language like this in their policies and procedures regarding behavior in the firehouse: *Every member has the responsibility to ensure that [Fill in the name of the department] provides a workplace that’s free of harassment based on race, sex, religion or sexual orientation.*

They have the responsibility (Great!) but do they have the authority to fulfill that responsibility? If they do, are they held accountable when they don’t carry out their responsibility?

What is that authority? It means that from the newest firefighter in the organization—right on up the ranks to the fire chief—individual members **know and understand** that they have the authority to make decisions, to stand up to bad behavior, to be an ally to someone who is targeted.

And just as importantly, the consequences for not exercising that authority

A formal policy and an online class on bullying are not likely to change much of anything when practices are deeply embedded in organizational culture and expectations. —Linda Willing

How can we make that change?

If fire departments want to make meaningful changes in their organizational culture, more specifically change in the firehouse culture, their leadership must start by accepting the fact that the **culture doesn’t change because of new policies, procedures or training.**

Most of us think of progress or improvement as the spread of enlightened thinking and the expansion of morality. We believe that to change the culture of a fire department we can do it by appealing to the sense of right and wrong in our people, i.e., “awaken their better angels.”

But, if we really want to make meaningful and lasting improvements in the fire service culture, we may gain more ground by stopping our efforts at tapping into people’s desire to be good or virtuous. Rather, we should take advantage of something less lofty, and quite frankly harder to admire: an individual’s powerful drive to “be normal.”

In the career fire service, nobody has more control over what is “normal” in the firehouse environment than the company officer, aka, the first-line supervisor. Developing such an attitude—that everyone has a responsibility and the authority to speak up when they see something wrong—is not just needed to halt intolerant behavior, sexual harassment, and other people issues in the firehouse.

It’s a key cultural element that must change for the fire service to eradicate unwanted behavior on while responding to calls (not wearing seatbelts) and on the fireground (unmanaged risk-taking). But, as Willing wrote in her article:

Members need to know not only what to do, but how to do it. And they need to feel safe and supported in making those choices. This is especially true for officers. Many company officers are promoted based on technical knowledge and are largely unprepared for their role in defusing conflict and setting the tone within a team. They many good intentions, but poor skills can sink their best efforts. Even if they want to do the right thing, they may feel they won't be supported by their crews, their peers or their supervisors if they make hard choices.

So, changing this one aspect of the fire service culture can have positive implications for not just eliminating intolerance in the workplace, but for a host of other needs as well. Most departments I know of are doing everything they can to recruit and hire the best people possible for the job. But if we don't have a culture that supports people speaking up and resolving conflicts and doing what's right every day, how will we ever take advantage of their skill, talents, and abilities?



THE END