Survival Guide
to
Problems in EMS Retention

Keeping The Best Series

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Preface

This is the second in a series of EMS personnel retention publications provided by the West Virginia Office of Emergency Medical Services and the West Virginia EMS Technical Support Network. This workbook, *Keeping the Best, Survival Guide to EMS Retention Problems*, is intended for the use of emergency medical service leaders throughout West Virginia. It is part of a toolkit intended to improve EMS personnel retention efforts on local, regional and state levels.

The *Keeping the Best* series was developed for volunteer, mixed and career agencies to use in order to meet the growing challenges of public demand for improved levels and availability of EMS services. The retention toolkit series was a collaborative effort of the Virginia Office of EMS, the Virginia Association of Volunteer Rescue Squads and the Western Virginia EMS Council. The principles and tools in this program have been widely used in all types of EMS agencies in the Old Dominion with positive results.

The survival guide outlines problems in retention and provides solutions to these problems. While we don't expect all the problems to apply to your EMS agency, we do expect at least one or two to be painfully familiar.

The solutions presented will not fit every situation you will face. They are designed to "prime the pump" and get you thinking about what actions you should take. Our focus is to give you the tools to take action now. Ignoring a bad situation only makes it worse. The most effective solution is to face reality, find out what works and do it.

We are pleased to offer these proven tools to West Virginia's EMS community as part of a larger EMS recruitment and retention program. A successful recruitment and retention program depends on all levels of West Virginia's EMS System performing serious self-examination and making long-term commitments to the well-being of our most valuable resource – the men and women who answer the call for help.

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Facing Up To Problems – Finding Solutions

Finding and keeping good people is hard work. Many squads spend a lot of time finding good people and a lot less time trying to keep them. It only makes sense to keep the individuals you have since finding new ones is becoming more difficult.

There are numerous issues facing an EMS leader trying to retain EMS personnel. As you read this sentence you may be thinking of all the reasons people have left your agency. This guidebook attempts to give you tools to survive the most common retention problems facing EMS agencies.

Think of this booklet as a survival kit given to you to make a trek though a jungle. There would be various items in the kit that would be used for specific situations. The kit might include: matches for a fire, purifying tablets to clean water, an antidote for snakebites, bandages for a sprained ankle, etc. The various components in the kit would be used to "address" specific problems you may encounter along the journey. Most likely, the kit would not completely resolve the issue, but the item would allow you to continue on your trek. The matches, for example, would start a fire but not keep the fire going. In the same way, this booklet will get you started on the mastering retention problems in your agency.

This booklet applies specific solutions to common EMS retention problems. Problems are sometimes referred to as "challenges" –like the ones you see on the current reality TV shows. Real problems, on the other hand, like snakebites, cause real pain. They cause you or members of your squad pain that can lead to turnover. The following pages identify the most common problems that make good people want to leave and offer practical solutions you can use.

The solutions in this handbook are designed to point you in the right direction rather than give you a detailed map from start to finish. The effectiveness of the solutions depends heavily on the problem solving method used. If you are from the "ready - FIRE! - aim" school of problem solving, these solutions may not work well for you. This is because the problems addressed are the ones that come up over and over again, and the most obvious solutions don't work well. Something is going on that is not easy to understand and requires a little digging.

The method described below will help you attack problems in a quick but effective manner. Here is how it works.

1. **Clarify the Problem** – Precisely what problem are you trying to solve? What are some possible causes of the problem? Be clear in your own mind the nature of the problem. Use this step to understand the problem on a deeper level.

   For example, if members are leaving the squad during their first year, don't just assume that you are making poor new member selection decisions. Look at other factors. Did those who resign complete an orientation program? Did they feel successful in the work they were doing? Did they receive proper coaching from leaders? It's likely that there is more than just one cause to the problem. Try to find the hidden causes to the problem.

2. **Describe the Desired Outcomes** - What are the desired outcomes? What will the situation look like after the solution has been implemented? This step helps you clarify the goals you want to reach no matter what solution you choose.

   To continue our example, a desired outcome could be to keep all new members for at least three years.

3. **Generate Alternatives** – What are some workable solutions that could create substantial improvement? What are the drivers and barriers to implementing each solution? This step helps you see beyond just the obvious first solution. A good strategy is to come up with three solutions to the problem. This may sound like overkill, but it forces you to stretch your problem solving muscles. And the third solution is often the best solution. During the generation phase, resist judging or evaluating the solutions. That will come later.

   To continue our example, you may have come up with these potential solutions:

   - Train and assign a "buddy" to each new member.
   - Conduct exit interviews with new members who resign.
   - Tighten your interview process for potential new members.
   - Meet with new members at the end of 90 days to get feedback on how they are doing.

4. **Select the "Best Fit" Solution** – Given the opportunities and constraints, what is the solution that best fits the situation? In this step you are trying to judge which solution will give you the best "bang for the buck." Pick the solution that is the easiest to implement but has the most potential for success. Resign yourself to the fact that you are not likely to solve the problem in one step. It will probably take several rounds of problem solving to make the pain of this problem go away.

   To continue our example, you may have chosen to meet with each new member at the end of 90 days to assess how he/she is doing.

5. **Implement & Follow Up** – List all the things that need to be accomplished in sequence with timing and responsibilities noted. Set a time to follow up on the implementation to see if it solved the problem and met the desired outcomes. Depending on the amount of time you have, you may want to try out your solution on a small scale a little at a time.

   To complete the example, after meeting with several new members at the end of 90 days, you discover that strong cliques are the major problem. This leads you to direct your problem solving efforts at reducing cliques as a barrier to new member retention. While this wasn't your initial goal, you now have better insight into the root cause of your problem.

This method forces you to take small steps in the beginning so you can learn by doing. Each time you use the steps, you will get more comfortable with them and build on success rather than blindly shooting at any moving target in the hopes of getting lucky.

Begin tracking and attacking some of your agency's retention problems by applying some of the solutions suggested in the survival guide. Remember, it is a jungle out there but as the Nike shoe advertisement says, "Just do it." When you foul up, fix it and move on. Happy hunting!

Slackers and the Generation Gap

Problem

No surprises here. There has always been a generation gap. Every twenty years or so a new generation shows up and needs to be integrated into the squad. But this time it feels different. A generation with the nickname, slackers, makes many uncomfortable. The group you are probably thinking about is called Generation X. They were born between 1961 and 1981 when the birth rates fell after the Baby Boomers came on board. Some say this group's motto is, "Life is for now. Work is for later." While this may be a gross generalization, the perception by older generations that Xers have a lack of work ethic, grudging acceptance of authority and spotty dedication continues to be come up. Common behaviors may be a "know it all" attitude and a dislike for uniforms that are viewed as "out of style".

Like all generations before them, this may be a "first time" experience for the new member. It may be the first time they have held a responsible position, the first time they have worked in a team environment, the first time they have dealt with the public. You get the point. While they may not want to acknowledge it, they will need help.

As with every generation, the gap is created by the different life experiences each has been through. The Xers are as baffled by the older generation's obsession with getting ahead at work as the older generation is baffled by rap and hip hop music.

One major difference in experience deals with the family. This generation grew up while the family was transitioning from a father who worked full-time and a mother who stayed at home to either a single parent household or a household where both parents worked. The surge of mothers into the workplace created "latch-key" kids left at home to fend for themselves.

A second major difference between generations deals with the physical maturing of the brain. Recent research has determined that the higher levels in the brain do not fully develop until an individual is well into their 30s. Based on these physical differences, it is not surprising that different generations think differently about the same problem.

Conversely, Generation Xers may perceive they have more energy and drive than older members of the agency, but are denied leadership positions because of their youth. The older generation could feel threatened by the "upstart" wanting more authority without equivalent experience.

Solutions

Think of this solution as similar to getting two rival tribes to co-exist around a common water hole. Your job is to make sure that each gets what they need to survive. Let's look at your possible options.

First, think about bringing in the new generation in small groups, rather than separate individuals. This allows them to "hang around" someone they already share common experiences with. If you have the foresight to have a junior auxiliary or squad that can act as your farm team, give yourself a pat on the back. This has worked well for other squads.

Second, take advantage of the fact that many in the younger generation did not grow up in a stable family setting. If you have developed a strong "family feeling" in the squad, leverage this strength to help new members develop strong personal relationship with other squad members. It could be something as simple as providing washing machines and dryers for use in off-duty hours.

Third, pair them up with experienced members when doing less than desirable chores around the station. This can be part of your integration process. Yes, the more experienced members will see this as "coddling," and in some respects it is. Surprising enough, many younger members were never required to "work for their supper," and you have to fill in this gap in their experience.

Fourth, develop a keen sense of what is "fun" for these members. Remember that fun is an important value to this group. As a rule this generation is more technologically savvy than the older generation. Many have grown up with cell phones, computers and computer games. Think about leveraging their technological know-how as you bring them into the organization.   For example, ask them to work with an older member in setting up the agency Web site or e-mail system. In this way, the older generation members may recognize the value a younger members brings to the agency. Additionally, perhaps make an Xbox, PlayStation or other game device available for their use.

Find the option that makes sense to you; work it through the problem solving method and see what happens.

Your Attitude Stinks

Problem

You can smell this problem a mile away. Someone is unhappy and is letting everyone know about it. This person is always focusing on the negative and wants to nit pick every decision. In meetings, he/she may often "play" the devil's advocate and seems to enjoy the attention. He/she is good at getting everyone riled up by putting out incomplete information or making assumptions that are not true. To make matters worse, he/she may have attracted a following.

Others are more secretive about their discontent. They like to move in the shadows and play on members' frustrations and real concerns. Every time you shine a light in their direction, they retreat into darkness.

Let's be clear about the problem behavior. This is not the normal behavior you get from most members when:

- They don't know what you want them to do.
- They don't have the skills or tools to do the job.
- They think your way is wrong.
- They think they have a better way.

The problem members' behavior is more consistent. They are in a bad mood almost all the time. When confronted, they will deny they are the problem and will point to others who are much worse.

The bottom line is that this behavior can disrupt the smooth functioning of the squad and run off good people. In a business environment, you would fire these people and move on. But being a community based, volunteer organization means that members are closer to being "family" than "employees," which is going to make your job just that more difficult.

Solutions

Don't ignore the problem hoping it will go away. If you wait until other members come to you to complain, you will only be faced with a worse situation. Solving the problem is going to be painful for you and the member in question. He/she either has to stop the undesirable behavior or eventually leave the squad. Here are some options to consider.

First, decide how serious the problem is and how much time you have to fix it. If you can catch it at the beginning, you will have more flexibility. Avoid the mistake of making a "deal with the devil." This deal involves fooling yourself into believing that the problem member's long service or high skill level will balance out the hate and discontent he/she will spawn.

Second, let's assume something must be done now. Shorten up your disciplinary steps so that the only option is to improve or go. Hold a meeting with the individual and use the following steps:

1. Describe the behavior and give examples of why this behavior is unacceptable. Make sure that the behavior is disruptive to the squad and not just bothersome to you. The individual may be trying to point out a serious problem, but does not know how to go about it in the right way.
2. Make it clear the changes that must take place. Be as specific as possible.
3. Have the member repeat back to you *in his or her own words* steps #1 and #2. This step is to make sure the communication was received about the negative impact of their behavior.
4. Make it clear the behavior must change *now*.

If improvement isn't quick in coming, ask the member to leave. Treat the member with dignity and respect throughout the process. Others will be watching you closely and react as if they were the ones being let go. Don't be surprised that the same members who complained will feel sorry for the one let go. Don't overreact to this response. It will go away.

Third, if you have more time, use the following steps:

1. Describe the behavior and give examples of why this behavior is unacceptable.
2. Let the person tell their side of the story. You may learn something from this exchange that will clarify the problem.
3. Ask the member to take a day to think things over and make a decision. They can decide to leave or they can decide to stay. If they decide to stay, they need to come back to you with a plan on how they are going to change. Tell them you will work with them to make the changes.
4. If the member decides to stay, work with them to develop an acceptable plan. Set timelines and milestones to achieve. Provide feedback and coaching as required. While the goal is to keep the member, don't let them off the hook. If they backslide, ask them to leave.

Keep the Price of Belonging High

Problem

You know you shouldn't do it, but you do. You let someone in the door who shouldn't be here because you need a warm body. Or maybe you let someone in only because they have a friend or a family member in the squad. In these cases, it's hard to look the sponsoring squad member in the eye and say "no." "So what's the problem?" you might think. "If they don't work out, we can weed them out."

Here's the problem. People want to belong to something that's worth belonging to. What's the attraction if anyone can get in? And you may be encouraging prospects to think, "Easy in; easy out. If I don't like it, I can always leave." This kind of thinking can lead to low commitment from the start. And low commitment can become contagious.

How can you tell if you have set the price too low? The first clue is physical appearance. You might not notice it at first, but over time members start showing less respect for the uniform. Members stop holding each other accountable for how they look to the public. The next thing to go might be the physical appearance of the equipment and the station. And with all the other distractions, this slow deterioration may go unnoticed until you find that members just don't care anymore. At this point, your good members may have already left.

In police work, this problem is called the Broken Windows theory. This theory argues that crime is the inevitable result of disorder. If a window is broken and not repaired, people will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon more windows will be broken sending a signal that anything goes. Have you noticed any "broken windows" in your squad lately?

Solutions

How do you keep the price of belonging high? While setting clear standards can help, this approach often requires continual inspection. What you really want is to have each individual hold themselves accountable for the standards. Here are some options to consider.

First, weed out new members who are not a good fit for EMS work. Keep problem behavior from coming in the door. Make new member orientation a test that will stretch them to perform at a higher level. Resist "grading on the curve." Stiff criteria for admission cause the weak-hearted to look elsewhere.

Second, pay attention to rites of initiation. These rites are events that signal to the squad that the person has earned the right to belong. Most people find that when they sacrifice to achieve something, they prove to themselves that what they're seeking is valuable. Make the privilege of being allowed to join and stay special. Treat it as a privilege, and it will create a sense of exclusiveness. Initiation rites can create a common bond of experience that unites those who make it through.

Third, hold yourself accountable and lead by example. Members watch what leaders do and say. Be clear, to yourself first, what behaviors you want to see in your members and make sure that your behavior is the same. Walk the Talk.

Fourth, apply positive and negative consequences to behavior. When you see a member behaving in a way contrary to standards, don't let it slide. Remember the Broken Window theory. When you want to correct behavior:

- Approach the person in a manner that maintains their dignity and respect.
- Tell them what you observed.
- Tell them what you want them to change.
- Ask for their cooperation.

Fifth, make sure your good people know they are needed. Give them a say in things that affect them. Let them know that you rely on them and thank them for doing a good job. Show how what they do is related to the squad's success.

Inter-squad War Games

Problem

The problem is cliques. They form naturally when people get together and share common experiences. This kind of bonding can be a very positive experience when members form strong personal relationships that make them feel like they "belong." And belonging can generate strong commitment. The problem comes when commitment and bonding is shared between a small group instead of to the whole squad. Then bad things can start to happen.

Sometimes several members of a family can dominate an agency and possibly hold several leadership positions. If the leaders of those agencies are not professional, the non-family members of the agency will assume they have less influence and inclusion in the agencies' operation.

The first indication that you have a problem is when you discover a squad caste system. There is a clear pecking order, and it is not based on service to the community. Excluded from one group, members join together in other groups and can begin inter-squad war games.

Inter-squad war games begin as "friendly competition," but can end up as "winner takes all" food fights. The result is that new members are either pressured to join one of the groups or ignored altogether. Cooperation and teamwork can disappear.

Another dangerous result is that one group ends up with all the power, and runs the squad like it's their private club. Those on the outside may stay, but will likely put in nothing but their time. These squads tend to become very brittle and break apart easily.

Solutions

There is no sense trying to keep cliques from forming. The stressful nature of EMS work is like a magnet drawing people together. A more important question is, "How do you get these separate "tribes" to exist together?" The simple answer is to get the groups to replace competition with cooperation and build a level of trust to allow this to take place. This is often easier said than done. Let's look at some options.

First, the squad must identify a mission that all members can accept as their own. Don't assume that everyone knows why he or she is here and why the squad exists. Get everyone to buy into the mission. Your job is to remind members of this often. Remind members, "It's not what is best for you or for me; it's what's best for the squad."

This also means that you have to be and stay passionate about the mission. It's an absolute must that you lead from the front. Some leaders try to use an outside threat as a rallying point. Be careful with this approach. It can backfire on you when the threat turns out to be false or is easily overcome.

Second, when you do have conflict among groups, think about resolving them on a "win-win" basis. This means that the solutions must be mutually beneficial and satisfying where all parties feel good about the decision and are committed to the action plan. You are going to have to be a good negotiator to make this work, and it will take longer than you might expect. But "win-win" agreements stand up much better than the usual "win-lose" approach.

Third, get members used to moving around and working with a wide variety of other members. This will build a network of small groups that have strong connections among each other. Show leadership by moving among the groups yourself. Start this process with new members so they are used to it from the beginning.

Fourth, in family dominated agencies, stay away from having the majority of the squad leadership positions filled by family members. Make a concerted effort to treat family members and other members with equal attention and respect. Hold all members of the agency, blood relative or not, to the same performance standards. Lastly, actively recruit "new blood" into the agency with the understanding that the new recruits can bring revitalization and new insights.

Working Harder Is Not the Answer

Problem

Perhaps your agency just lost another couple of members or your call volume has increased by 20% over the last six months and your recruiting efforts have not kept up.

How often have you heard someone say when times are tough, "Well, we'll just have to work harder?" This approach might work once or twice, but if this is your normal operating mode, how long can you expect members to play along before they play out?

It seems not working harder is un-American. What were we told when we were growing up? Hard work pays off. If you work harder than the other guy, you will get ahead. And what do we use when we work harder? It is likely the same habits and assumptions that worked in the past will not work now. Working harder while using the same old tools, techniques and thinking patterns may actually compound the problem.

Solutions

The solution is not to work harder, but to learn how to work smarter. Working smarter involves looking for easier approaches to problems. Here are some options to consider.

First, think like the military and use an after action debrief. After the smoke has cleared, get those involved in the problem together and get the facts on the table. This can be very threatening to some members since it implies weakness and can lead to blame, especially if this is the style of the squad. Make it clear that fact-finding is the goal, and nothing more. If you look hard enough, you will find that the processes and procedures you use are more to blame than any one individual. And that's where you want to focus your attention. If you are continually having "personal emergencies" poking holes in your shift schedule, take a look at your whole scheduling process.

Second, look "up stream" from the site of the problem. Because processes are linked together, problems created at the head of a series of processes are passed along "down stream" where they get amplified. To continue our example, you may find that the scheduling process has no back-up plan for "personal emergencies" or has extra staffing added at the wrong time and place.

Third, try to streamline and simplify the process. Processes that have too many steps are a dead giveaway for problems waiting to happen. Take as many moving parts out of the process as possible. To complete our example, you may find that the sign up process itself forces members into shifts that they know in advance will be a problem. Find a simple way for conflicts to be raised and resolved at the start of the scheduling process rather than at the end.

How to Burnout Good People

Problem

Burning out good people is easy. Left to their own devices members will often do it to themselves. Some might think that burnout is the inevitable result of the stress and strain of EMS work. Given this line of thinking, it would make sense that sooner or later everyone will burn out. But, that doesn't happen. It seems to only happen to certain people in certain situations.

Are some members predisposed to burnout? While there is no one type, there are certain characteristics that make a person more vulnerable.

- **High, unrealistic expectations** – These members are unaware of the realities of public service. They also have overestimated their ability to successfully meet the unrelenting demands of the job.

- **Inability to say "no"** – These members find it hard to say "no" to any request, reasonable or unreasonable. They probably have a garage full of Girl Scout cookies. They commit to way more than they can do and are in a perpetual state of catch-up.

- **Pressured to volunteer** – These volunteers were pressured by family or friends to volunteer. They are there to please others, not themselves.

- **Low resilience to stress** – These members take a long time to recover from a stressful event. They can cope until being overwhelmed by a series of stressful events.

- **Unmet emotional needs** – These members are trying to use EMS to fill unmet emotional needs. Often, it takes higher and higher levels of service to fill this bottomless hole in their lives.

Solutions

One thing is clear. You have to actively be on the lookout for potential burnout victims and be willing to step in quickly and take corrective action. Some options are:

First, can you recognize the signs of burnout? In general, people do not suddenly burnout. Instead, they develop symptoms over time and if actions are not taken to relieve some of the stress in their lives, they will experience severe health problems and/or simply have to quit. Here are common symptoms of people beginning to burnout:

Chronic fatigue
Physical exhaustion
Short temperedness
Cynicism
Irritability
Increased degree of risk taking or risk aversion

They may experience sudden weight loss or gain, sleeplessness or depression.

As a leader, stay attuned to your members' physical and emotional health. Take note of people who are experiencing signs of burnout and take corrective action.

Second, ask yourself if you are setting your members up to fail. Here are some things leaders do to make situations worse:

- **Making unrealistic demands** – In the heat of battle, asking members to give 110% may be what's needed. However, you can unintentionally end up sending the message that, "You're not pulling your weight unless you put out 110% all the time." Avoid this trap by making sure you will take "no" for an answer, and members can come to you when overextended or overwhelmed.

- **Inability to say "No"** – It's easy to become dependent upon members who volunteer to do everything. And it takes a lot of pressure off leaders who might have to spend time influencing others to give their fair share. Even if you know it's not the best use of willing members, it's easy to think, "I'll do this just one more time." Become more disciplined around balancing out the workload.

- **Not providing required support** – Asking members to work hard without the proper tools and support sets them up to fail. If they do succeed, it is usually only through extraordinary efforts that cannot be sustained. Avoid this mistake.

Third, go to members who show signs of burnout before they come to you. Even though they may be emotionally exhausted, guilt and self-doubt can keep them from raising their hand and asking for help. Let them take a break and give them some control over how their duties are transferred to others.

Fourth, train leaders all the way down the line in recognizing the symptoms of burnout and have a process in place to address the problem early. Early intervention gives you more time to make adjustments.

It's the Little Things That Count

Problem

How leaders handle their people says a lot about them. It also says a lot about the assumptions they hold about the role of a leader. When people think about leaders they often think about strong charismatic leaders –General Tommy Franks commanding in Iraq, Donald Trump in his boardroom or Lee Iacocca revitalizing Ford and then Chrysler. They always seemed to be leading from the front.

Their legends showed them as being tough, hard-nosed winners. What happens to the apprentices in the TV boardroom facing Donald Trump? The most often remembered message is, "You're fired!" As a new leader, it is tempting to want to copy these legendary leaders' style. But, will it work for you leading community service volunteers?

Let's look at what members say they want from their leaders. Members tell us they want leaders who:

- Are competent in their job
- Are fair minded and don't play favorites
- Make and keep commitments and help others do the same
- Are willing to listen to and act on members' concerns
- Treat members with dignity and respect
- Have integrity and are trustworthy

If this is a good representation of what followers want, then it's not the big things that make you famous, it is the little things you do every day that seem to count the most.

Solutions

Why are the "little things" so important? One of the reasons is that members watch their leaders closely. Leading by example may be an unspoken expectation of your squad. They will be constantly judging you to see if you "walk the talk." Here are some options to consider.

First, be predictable. Members can accept decisions that they don't agree with, but you can drive people crazy by being unpredictable. Be predictable on:

- **Squad values** – Values are standards of conduct that everyone is expected to meet. Make sure everyone understands desired behaviors. Discipline yourself to be a role model for others.

- **Commitments made** – The general rule here is to under promise and over deliver. Make few promises but keep the ones you make. This will build the trust and respect needed when you have to make the hard, unpopular decisions.

- **Enforcing rules** – Avoid the trap of making a rule to solve every problem. You will end up with a lot of rules that are unenforceable. Have a small number of rules and consistently enforce them.

Second, get your emotions under control before acting. If you are having a bad day, don't pass it on to others when you walk through the station door. Practice self-control. Don't let passion overwhelm reason. Members are going to do things that make you frustrated and angry. They may blame you for things totally out of your control, and want you to solve all of their problems. Expect it going in.

Third, once you have your emotions under control, practice empathy. Expressing empathy is a technique used to help the other person get their emotions under control. This means spending the time to understand the other person's point of view and using it as the starting point of the discussion. Empathy is not sympathy. You do not have to smooth things over to be empathetic. You know you are being empathetic when you can clearly state the problem from the other person's point of view.

Fourth, pay attention to the small things. Take a walk around the station before starting work. Get a quick sense of what is going on. Good leaders can walk into a station and know immediately if things are okay or not. Are members smiling and talking or do they have their heads down? What does the agency look like? Is it clean or in disarray? Is the equipment where it's supposed to be? What do your senses tell you about the overall readiness of the station? If things don't feel right, they probably are not right. Start digging around until you find out what's up.

Failure to Plan Is Planning To Fail

Problem

Would members in your agency have the following to say about a typical day in the squad? "You arrive at a squad meeting. It does not start on time and runs late. You come to the station ready to work but have to sit around while things get 'organized.' When assignments are made they are not clear, and everyone seems to be working at cross-purposes. Worst of all, you look at each other and silently mouth, 'SNFU' (Situation Normal; everything's Fowled Up)."

We hope this is not the critique your members would make of the squad, but this complaint comes up often. From a retention point of view, work situations like this can lead to frustration, disillusionment and resignation – both in the sense of giving up hope and walking out the door.

We often hear the complaint, "But I don't have time to plan!" And it is a reality for most of us. We live in a society addicted to urgency. And urgency affects the choices we make. Some of us get so use to the "high" of handling crises that we can't break the habit. Performing under the pressure of the moment is exhilarating. It makes us feel useful. It also makes us better at reacting than planning. And the fall out is we spend more time working on things that are urgent rather than things that are important.

To make matters worse, the service side of the business is driven by urgency. When someone is injured or seriously ill, the patient may have only six minutes to live without help. Speed counts. And this impacts the kind of people who are drawn to EMS. The adrenaline rush of handling a real emergency can provide a short-term shot of self-worth, power, control, security, intimacy and accomplishment. These needs work well at the scene of an accident, but can be detrimental to running a smooth operation.

The truth is, failing to plan results in planning to fail. Poor planning always has consequences. Meetings run late, training does not happen, grants are not submitted on time and people get fed up and leave. EMS leaders have no choice; they must plan and plan well.

Solutions

While some people are naturally organized, most of us have to work at it. And we have to work harder when our focus changes from getting ourselves organized to getting the squad organized. The level of complexity can increase significantly. What are our options?

First, start with the "big picture." If you jump into trying to understand the details first, you can become hopelessly lost. Take a step back and look at the overall goals and objectives of the squad. Start to form some priorities in your mind. Focus on no more than five to seven goals that are truly important for the success of the squad. Remember, if everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. Now put some structure around these goals. Identify assignments and due dates.

Second, now that you have a good grasp of what's important, start looking at things you can stop doing. Weed out programs, events and duties that don't impact the big picture. Be prepared for resistance when you discontinue things that others find enjoyable even though they don't contribute to the success of the squad. A good example is a long-standing committee, run by a few members, that is no longer needed.

Third, set aside time each day to get prepared. Discipline yourself to spend at least 5 – 10 minutes each day to get personally prepared. For example, if you have a training session coming up on Friday, you may need to set aside some time on Wednesday to make sure all the necessary equipment is available and practice the presentation on Thursday. Many activities become urgent as a result of the lack of preparation.

Real Time Learning

Problem

Your business is changing rapidly. Your customers are raising the bar on the level of service they expect. Members are under the gun to perform at a higher level. Knowledge gets stale fast when the heat is on. It would be nice if you could declare a time-out and bring everyone up to speed at once before someone pushes the "on" button. But, the world doesn't work that way.

Today, learning has to take place in real time. Someone has described this problem as driving a car at 60 miles an hour while changing out the transmission. Squads usually have two specific areas that need attention.

First, how long does it take to make a new member productive in your squad? We hear it ranges from seven to twelve months. "So, what's the hurry?" you might ask. The reason you need to hurry is that members may not stay long enough for you to get your training investment back. The national average for EMTs is 2.2 years. A more pressing issue is that call volumes are going up. The quicker you can get the rookies up to speed, the less pressure you put on your veterans to fill in the gaps. This kind of relentless pressure leads to turnover. In an extreme case, you can create a death spiral where veteran turnover creates more rookies who in turn put more pressure on the veterans who quit at increasing rates.

Second, are your experienced members falling behind? Learning simply doesn't last as long as it use to. How long does it take for a member's skills to become obsolete? The National Research Council says it only takes three to five years for half of our skills to become outdated. Think of your members as being like computers requiring continual knowledge "upgrades."

A lot of experienced members get too "comfortable." They know what they are doing. They like what they are doing, and they like with whom they are working. Life is good. This sounds like the perfect situation, but it isn't if the veterans think they can sit back and relax. They get lulled into a false sense of security, and the next thing you know, they are mentally overweight. Suddenly, a new regulation or change in certification catches everyone by surprise, and the pain of getting their brain muscles back in shape may cause them to consider quitting. Learning is like riding a bike, when you stop pedaling, you fall off.

Solutions

We have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that squad members tell us they like to learn new things. The bad news is that there will be even less time for training in the future. If this is a problem in your squad, here are some options to consider:

First, make sure your new member orientation program is running on all cylinders. Find out how long it takes to get a new member up to speed and start reducing that time 10% - 15% a year for the next three years. Don't use the excuse that you have to wait for certain courses to be taught. The current approach only leads to "learned helplessness." Put pressure on yourself and your "training partners" to go to real time learning.

Second, make sure in every meeting (and we mean every meeting) that some time is set aside for learning. Look for other times when members are standing around (maybe even between calls) and create a learning opportunity. *Stop thinking about learning as only taking place in a classroom.*

Third, take the hassle out of learning. Schedule sessions when members are most likely to come. This may mean breaking up weekend training over two weekends to accommodate your staff, or use lunch hours for small group exercises and learning techniques. Another option is to use competency testing. If someone can demonstrate they know a topic or can perform a technique, don't make them sit through unnecessary training.

Fourth, take a hard look at your experienced members. Are they really up to speed? Can you afford to let their skills and knowledge waste away? One way to keep skills up is to teach others. Give your veterans regular teaching assignments. Rotate these assignments so that natural instructors don't get burned out.

Are Your Leaders Ready To Lead?

Problem

You have probably seen this happen to others. It may have happened to you. Someone gets put in a leadership position and is just not prepared for the stress and pressure of being in the spotlight. They may be timid or domineering. They may try to be the good guy or the drill sergeant. The result is the same. Members slow down and sit on the fence waiting to see what will happen next. Others may take advantage of this weakness and try to manipulate the situation to their advantage.

Over time, the leader may get better through trial and error. He or she may move the squad forward. Conversely, his/her leadership may collapse, and the leader will have to be replaced. The outcome is that the squad has taken a good member and turned him/her into a sub-par leader causing members to lose faith and look for a way out.

Part of the problem is that the criterion for choosing a leader is never discussed before action is taken. Because of this lack of information, candidates aren't sure what they are getting into, and members aren't sure what they're voting for. This kind of confusion can lead to bad decisions.

A more serious problem is that there in no functioning pipeline of leadership development preparing the next generation to take over. It takes time to develop leadership skills and get the practice necessary to build competence.

Volunteer organizations have a special problem in that there are usually only a small number of members who want to get involved in the day-to-day running of the organization. Most of your members are content to come in, pull their shifts and go home. The result is that a small group gets chosen over and over again. This can easily lead to stagnation and a lack of bench strength.

Solutions

The easy answer is to only place members in leadership positions who are ready. In a perfect world, you would have planned ahead and prepared one or two members to be ready when they were needed. The reality is that stuff happens. Let's look at some options when you're faced with filling a leadership void.

First, if the new leader is not prepared, a sink or swim approach is going to have more of a down side than up side. You, or someone you trust, are going to have to "job share" for a short period of time. Sit down with the new leader; determine the areas where he or she is shaky, and job-share these responsibilities.

Second, to get the new leader up to speed, take a four-step approach.

1. Have the new leader watch a successful leader in the same role. This could be you or a trusted counterpart such as the predecessor in the position.
2. Have the new leader do it together with a successful leader.
3. Have the new leader do it under instruction and critique.
4. Slowly withdraw support as the new leader builds competence.

Third, if the new leader is already in place and in trouble, first focus on what that member can do well and help them improve on it. Trying to fix serious problems while under pressure rarely works. If you decide to keep the person in the job, take the areas where he/she is most deficient and give them to someone else who can do it for a short period of time. Then, start remedial action.

Fourth, identify and start training a replacement as a "fall back" strategy. Don't wait until the bitter end to try to get someone else up to speed.

Make Everyone a Winner

Problem

Volunteers come to EMS work for a lot of different reasons. But we know one thing they don't come for – money! When you look at all the reasons people join your squad and stay, a lot of the reasons deal with getting a psychological paycheck. The problem is that everyone's psychological paycheck is different. One size does not fit all, and there aren't enough hours in the day for you to find out what everybody wants and needs.

But when these needs are not meet, members can get discouraged and leave. Members tell us they leave because the hassle factor is too high. There are too many barriers to success and no one seems to care about making it easier for them to get the job done.

What seems to be the common factors that block success? Four stand out.

- Performing "make work" jobs that don't seem to contribute to much of anything
- Having to follow "rules" that are more bureaucratic than helpful
- Working for leaders who have an outdated leadership style
- Requiring excessive time to meet certification requirements

Solutions

Let's dispel one myth right away. Helping your members become winners does not mean that your goal is to make them "happy." Your goal is to reduce or eliminate the barriers that keep them from doing a good job. Create a work environment where members can achieve, and commitment is bound to improve. Let's look at some options.

First, find out what is bugging people. Don't make the mistake of raising this issue at a meeting. The result is often a gripe session where more heat than light is generated. Start with your best members first. Take each one aside and ask him/her a simple question, "What one action could I take that would significantly improve your success on the job?" Take the results of this poll and see if there are one or two common items that float to the top of the list. Pick one of these items to work on. Let's say it's updating communications equipment.

Second, take some of the members who also see this item as important and spend a few minutes with them determining what barriers there might be to updating communications equipment. *Be very specific.* Instead of listing, "There's no money" as a barrier, list, "There's no money *right now* in this year's budget." Being specific helps you and others think more clearly about how to reduce this barrier.

Third, pick one of the barriers and think of very specific ways you can reduce this barrier. For example, if there is no money in this year's budget, is there grant money available from other sources? You will likely be able to come up with several "barrier busters."

Fourth, pick the best barrier buster and construct a short plan of action around it with assignments and due dates. Ask for volunteers to work on this step only. Use this process to work your way through all the barriers listed.

Now, you might be thinking, "this is going to take too long." You're right. The first time you use this process, it will take longer than a less disciplined approach. But, the more you use the process the quicker you and your group will get at moving through it.

Look at reducing barriers to success as a long-term effort that will require constant attention because no matter how successful you are, there will always be barriers to overcome.

Lead, Follow Or Get Out Of The Way?

Problem

Being a leader, especially if you're new to the job, can be very confusing. Sometimes, as soon as you get out of your car, a member is in your face with a problem to be solved, a question to be answered or a complaint to be heard. And it gets more confusing when members get upset when you offer a solution, answer the question or listen to the complaint. To further complicate matters, those members often do not make it clear whether they want you to lead, follow or get out of the way.

It would be easier if you had more time to think through your response, but as soon as one member gets in front of you, a line begins to form behind him or her with others who want a piece of you. For a new leader, this unwanted attention can be overwhelming. Experienced managers often complain that they spend most of their day "baby-sitting."

Members have a different point of view about this interaction. They think it's the leader's responsibility to have all the answers. "Isn't that what leadership is all about?" they ask.

Solutions

What the new leader doesn't know that the experienced leader does know is that there are a predictable number of situations leaders will face, and each situation requires the leader to "flex" their natural leadership style. Let's take a look at some of these situations and potential options.

First, new leaders are often given a "leadership test." Here's the set up. Early on, someone or some group will come to you with a serious problem and push you to make a quick decision. It's a test to see how you will react under fire. Your first reaction should be to slow things down. You might do this by saying, "I'm not going to give you any decision until I understand the problem." Next, dig into the problem. If it is a real problem, take some action. If it is not, bring the person or group back together, tell them what you have found out and ask them to clarify why they think it is so important.

Second, all leaders are faced with "delegating up." Here's the set up. A member comes to you and asks for help with a problem. He/she will give you a lot of reasons why he/she can't do the job, and infer that you are the only one to do it. If you listen carefully, you will hear the slow sucking sound of someone who wants you to do something they should be doing for themselves. New leaders, who have a special skill they love to use, can be easy targets for delegating up. The right response to this request is to say, "How can I help you with <u>your</u> problem?" Assume the role of coach to provide assistance.

Third, some leaders create situations called "learned helplessness." If you are always making the hard decisions, your members will become dependent upon you to think for them. This may work fine until the volume of decisions becomes so high that you can no longer stay up. Now, all of a sudden, you are the problem. To keep this from happening, distribute decision making down the organization. Start slowly with a few people and increase this over time. To make this work, be very clear what decisions they have authority to make, and that they will be held accountable for these decisions. Coach them along the way.

Fourth, some leaders don't know when to just get out of the way. Some think they are not doing their job unless they touch everything that moves at the station. The assumption is that they have the most experience and therefore, can make the best decisions. While this may be true, members start to feel powerless. Taken to an extreme, this style stifles enthusiasm and drains energy. Start staying out of the way by giving each employee full control over some aspect of their job.

If It Isn't Broken, Break It!

Problem

Sometimes, the good times last too long. And even if they aren't the best of times, they certainly aren't the worst of times. Members have gotten into a comfortable routine. Why rock the boat? What harm can come from taking a rest break once in a while? There is one question you need to ask yourself before you lean back in that easy chair, "How will the squad react if the future is a lot more turbulent than the past?" Will you and the squad be ready to respond to the unexpected? The problem is that sooner or later the unexpected always happens.

How does this play out? In his book *The Fifth Discipline,* Peter Senge calls it the parable of the "boiled frog." If you place a frog in a pot of water and slowly turn up the heat, the frog will sit in the pot becoming groggier and groggier until he is unable to climb out. Although there is nothing restraining him, the frog will sit there and boil. What did the frog do? The frog, like some squads, will not sense the threat to survival of slow, gradual change.

Solutions

What we are talking about here is taking a hard look at the bad habits that have built up over time that now or in the near future are going to turn into liabilities. Making this kind of change is not for the faint hearted since your goal is to shake things up. Some of your older members may consider what you are trying to do as treason. Let's look at some options.

First, practice "surfacing pain." Do you know of a sister organization that got itself in trouble by living in the past? Post the story on the bulletin board. Update the squad on the facts of the current situation. Help them face reality. The first time you do this, the likely response will be, "but we're different." This form of denial can be an effective shield from reality unless you keep poking holes in it.

Second, destabilize the status quo. Move some people around or add tasks to their jobs that will force them to adapt. You are going to get a lot of resistance to this. Don't act surprised. You will always get resistance to any kind of major change. Essentially there will be three groups you have to deal with during change:

- **Early Adaptors** – This group thinks the change is a good idea and will give it a try. You should spend most of your time with this group.

- **Fence Sitters** – This group can be influenced either way. They will follow the lead of whichever side looks like the winner. You need to get the early adaptors to work on this group for you.

- **True Resisters** – This group honestly thinks this change is a bad idea and will actively resist it. Spending time with this group is a waste of time. Don't ignore them totally. Listen to their concerns and make adjustments to the change *if it doesn't slow you down.*

Third, raise the performance bar. Set higher standards of performance in important areas. Start with one or two, and add more as the change gains momentum. This also means that you have to raise the performance bar on yourself. You are not immune to complacency.

References

For more detailed information on EMS Retention Principles, please refer to the first tool in the Retention tool kit, *Keeping the Best! How to use EMS Retention Principles*.

Resources

Office of Emergency Medical Services,
West Virginia Trauma and Emergency Care System
Bureau for Public Health
350 Capitol Street, Room 425
Charleston, West Virginia 25301
304-558-3956
www.wvoems.org

West Virginia EMS Technical Support Network
4921 Elk River Road
Elkview, West Virginia 25071
800-525-6324

National Highway Traffic Safety Highway Administration
EMS Division
www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/ems/index.html

United States Fire Administration, Department of Homeland Security,
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Use the search feature to order or download fire and EMS recruitment and retention
related publications
http://www.usfa.fema.gov/applications/publications/

National EMS Management Association (NEMSMA)
www.nemsma.org