

**Leading a Combination Fire Department**  
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It's been said that leading a combination fire department is more difficult than leading either a call/volunteer fire department or leading a career fire department. I don't know if this true; it certainly feels true, but then I've spent my entire career (32 years) in combination fire departments, (the past 4 years as chief) and have never served in a department that is either exclusively call/volunteer or career. There is, however, no doubt that leading a combination fire department is different than leading a career or a volunteer department.

The combination fire department's attraction to a small community is the cost-effective blending of career and call/volunteer firefighters to provide a higher level of service than either a purely call/volunteer department could provide or a purely career department could provide. If done right, you can provide a timely initial response, backed-up with a well-staffed secondary response. It takes one advantage of the career department – speed out the door – and combines it with one advantage of the call/volunteer department – staffing at a comparatively low cost. But this blending of career and call/volunteer firefighters is also the combination fire department's most complex challenge to its leadership.

Further complicating any discussion about how to lead a combination fire department is the fact that there is wide range of what constitutes a combination fire department. A department with 3 career firefighters and 35 call/volunteer firefighters, and a department with 35 career firefighters and 3 call/volunteer firefighters are both classified as a combination fire department. Leading these two departments will be very different. One will be more like a call/volunteer department and one will be more like a career department, yet they both will have common issues that neither the career nor the volunteer department face.

In combination fire departments the career firefighters and the call/volunteer firefighters tend to form themselves into separate groups and fight with each other. This behavior tends to affect every aspect of how the department operates and is the single most complicating factor when it comes to leading the organization. The leadership of a combination fire department must be committed to the combination concept and be tireless in their efforts to prevent the department from splitting. I believe there are two tools that a fire chief must use to prevent the department from becoming fractured along career versus call/volunteer lines. The first tool is leading evenly.

**Leading Evenly**

By “evenly”, I mean never favoring one group – call/volunteer or career - over the other. It is important to constantly let both groups know that they are equally important to the success of the fire department. One group should not get the upper hand over the other. They must be partners, who recognize and appreciate the differences between both

groups and how those differences blend together to make a successful combination fire department. To do this isn't easy. It begins with the chief's commitment to eliminate or minimize any behavior that tends to divide the staff. And this applies to everything from training to station duties to promotions. For example, make all of the staff drill together. If the career and call/volunteer firefighters don't drill together you are setting the stage for division.

Other simple examples are to make sure you have one Holiday Party for the whole department, not two parties – one for the career staff and the other for the call/volunteer staff (but if there are two parties, you and your leadership team need to attend both). Make sure everyone wears the same logos. Sure, your career firefighters are going to have some union logo wear, but don't let that become the standard uniform. Everyone needs to wear the same uniform, or again minimize the differences in the uniform. Money is tight and uniforms for call/volunteer firefighters is a very low priority, but if you can at least provide the same duty shirt (more commonly a golf shirt these days) for all of the staff so the call/volunteer firefighters can wear it for training or events, you reinforce the concept of everyone being on the same team.

From personal experience, I can tell you that the logo wear issue is bigger than one might think. I spent many years as a call/volunteer firefighter on a combination fire department and never even got a t-shirt with the department's name and logo on it. The stated reason for this was that there just was never any money and I couldn't buy my own because the union had designed and supposedly owned the department logo. What it said to me, and the other call/volunteer firefighters, was that we weren't worth \$20 to the community, to the department and to the chief. As you can imagine, the call/volunteer force in this department died out. While the chief would always tell us we were important and that our services were valuable, the chief's behavior toward us strongly contradicted his words. When leading a combination fire department you must make sure that your words and your actions say the same thing.

As with logo wear, structural firefighting gear (PPE) can create big trouble for combination fire departments if it is distributed in a manner that divides and creates inequality. PPE should be issued without regard to employment status. When a department buys new PPE for its career firefighters and passes down the old PPE to its call/volunteer firefighters, it is saying that the call/volunteer firefighters lives are less valuable. If the PPE isn't good enough for one firefighter, it isn't good enough for anyone and needs to be retired. This doesn't mean you can't have hand-me-down PPE as firefighters come and go or change ranks or tear something – this is a normal and necessary function. Just make sure the criteria for issuing new PPE is the same for everyone. As with logo wear, make the PPE look the same for everyone.

Combination fire departments must appoint officers based upon ability and not job status. Don't automatically qualify or disqualify anyone for any rank based on the fact that they are career or call/volunteer. This is real tough one, especially as the career staff grows. When filling or creating officer positions you must let everyone – career and call/volunteer – compete for the position. I recently had to delay for a year the

appointment of captains in my department because the best person for the job was a career firefighter and there was no money in the budget to fund his promotion. Two volunteers who also were to be promoted to captain had to wait until the department could fund the career captain position. If we appointed the volunteers and not the career firefighter on the excuse that we couldn't afford the career promotion, this would have driven a wedge right through the department. There are many departments that restrict call/volunteer firefighters from being officers (or from certain ranks) and many departments that restrict career firefighters from being officers (or from certain ranks). In either case, it is destructive to the true concept of being a combination fire department. In reality, career firefighters will eventually dominate the officer ranks of combination fire departments based upon the fact that they will have the most experience, more opportunity for specialized training and other very legitimate reasons that will make them come out ahead in a fair promotional process. The importance here being that you have a fair promotional process that everyone can compete in. If you do this, the correct people will be officers and your officers will have the respect of the firefighters they lead.

Recently, I became aware of a department that gave a promotional exam that had so many pre-qualifications that only one person was eligible to take the test. Whether you're a career, combination or call/volunteer department, this is a bad situation. The process will be viewed as rigged or flawed, and the new officer is being set-up to fail because subordinates won't respect how this officer got the promotion.

Your promotional process should focus heavily on attitudes so that you promote officers who are committed to the combination philosophy and won't work to undermine the system.

Sometimes, you have to recognize and adjust for the fact that career firefighters and call/volunteer firefighters are part of your department for different reasons and they are motivated differently. While they all should be Firefighter I/II certified, apart from regular department drills, you must provide the initial FF I/II training and certification to each group in a different way. The same is true of discipline. Giving a career firefighter a one-day suspension is pretty serious, but giving a call/volunteer firefighter a one-day suspension is a slap on the wrist. What is important is that the outcome of your actions is fair and reasonable, even if you follow a different path for your career and for your call/volunteer firefighters.

It is also OK to have different roles for your career and for your call/volunteer firefighters so long as everyone fully understands everyone's role, the differences between the roles and the reasons the differences make sense. Written job descriptions for both call/volunteer and career staff go along way to providing the necessary information here. Written policies and procedures that you actually follow are important as well. What's more, it's critical that you involve both career and call/volunteer staff in writing these policies and procedures. Ambiguousness and arbitrariness will tear a combination department to pieces.

## Leading Transparently

The second tool I have found extremely useful for leading a combination fire department is make it a transparent organization. If your slogan is “this is need-to-know matter and you don’t need to know” you are in trouble. Everyone needs to know almost everything and they need to know how they fit into the big picture. Knowledge builds teamwork and helps unite the career and call/volunteer staff.

While certain personnel issues clearly (and legally) need to be handled in private or quietly among the department’s senior staff, the vast majority of department business should be done in broad daylight. Preparing and managing the budget needs to be a public process. Writing new procedures needs to be a public process. Writing specifications for a new truck needs to be a public process. In a combination fire department, anything you do in a secretive manner is going to be perceived by the career staff as a conspiracy against them by the chief and the call/volunteer staff, and simultaneously perceived by the call/volunteer staff as a conspiracy against them by the chief and career staff. In a combination department, it is important that you tell the entire staff what you are thinking of doing, why you are thinking of doing it and then give everyone a chance to comment.

How do you give everyone a chance to comment and participate? I have used three methods with success. The first and most common is to email everyone and attach a copy of the draft budget or procedure and simply ask them to email me their thoughts and ideas. Sometimes I get some great feedback and other times I don’t. Sometimes I hear that I send too many emails. But most of the time most members of the department don’t comment – it is enough that they’ve been informed and asked. And too many emails is a small price to pay for the assurance that everyone knows what’s going on and why. The second method is holding a department-wide staff meeting on a drill night where we review incidents, procedures and give everyone an opportunity to publicly question the chief. We do this every other month. Finally, I solicit individuals, regardless of their rank or job status, for input when I know or think they have a special interest in or knowledge of a particular topic.

How firefighters think the chief spends money can create a great deal of friction in combination departments, so don’t spend it in secret. I post my monthly budget updates on the door to my office so everyone can see exactly what we spend on overtime, volunteer stipends, heat, diesel fuel, repairs, PPE, telephones, training and so forth. Everyone knows exactly how we spend our money. This practice ends all of the whispering that “so and so got this and I didn’t”. It ends all the divisive myths and rumors about who is benefiting from the department’s spending. It unites both career and call/volunteer in the quest to save money so they can come to me with a request to purchase something they all want.

Transparency also requires that the chief be a public and private advocate for both the career and call/volunteer members of the department. When dealing with selectmen, citizens and the media the chief must be seen as someone who believes in the

department's firefighters and has pride in all of them. Make sure that selectmen don't try to use the call/volunteer firefighters as a weapon against the career firefighters during union contract negotiations. If they try, bluntly tell the selectmen that their behavior is unacceptable and will do long-term damage to the department, ultimately costing them even more money, and then bring together the department and tell them what the selectmen have tried to do and that they must stand together and not let themselves be divided.

Finally, I have come to understand that most of the call/volunteer verses career friction starts as a beef between two individuals that grows out of proportion if you don't take some action. Recently, I heard the complaint that the "call guys don't clean up after themselves and think we (career staff) are their maids." This statement is a call to action for the chief of a combination fire department. If ignored, your department will break down. If you look behind the sweeping generalizations, you'll likely discover that a specific call/volunteer firefighter left a mess and the event needs to be dealt with as an issue for one or two people. Don't let yourself or your staff send out a blast email calling all of the call/volunteers on the carpet for the sins of one – which will then be responded to by emails or talk blaming all of your career firefighters for the bitching of one. You can see where this goes. If you don't de-escalate these clashes, you won't have a combination fire department for very long.

Being the chief of a successful combination fire department requires you to embrace the combination concept of blending the career and call/volunteer members into one team. This requires constant maintenance and leadership. It's not an easy road, but if you succeed you will have the satisfaction of leading a high performance organization.