



Recovery

Overall, the fire service enjoys widespread public support thanks to the good deeds, devotion, and diligence of firefighters. Unfortunately, when firefighters are arrested for arson they erode this support and damage a variety of important relationships.

Firefighter arson incidents significantly impact the fire department, the community, and the firesetter. The sense of betrayal is significant and is not limited to those directly involved in the incident. When a local firefighter is exposed as an arsonist, the vision of firefighters as protectors is severely compromised. Rebuilding relationships between the department, the community, and within the ranks can be a daunting task. It may take years to reestablish a favorable reputation, and in some cases, a department never fully recovers.

This section explores how a department can begin to recover from a firefighter arson incident by rebuilding its reputation and repairing critical relationships.

Dealing with Crisis

The fire service is in the business of crisis management and mitigation. Generally crisis occurs in the community, but in the case of firefighter arson, it is much closer to home. Regardless, the response is the same: have a plan, communicate the plan, and execute the plan. Although the hope is it will never happen, departments cannot afford to wait to develop a mitigation strategy until it does.

While there may be existing crisis management strategies that have worked in past situations, it is important to consider and address the following components of an effective crisis management strategy:^{1,2}

1) Assessing Risk

It is important for departments to be aware of potential crises and have a strategy in place. Start by completing a risk assessment for the department. Think of possible scenarios – even if they are highly unlikely to occur.

Firefighter arson is a problem that the entire fire service faces. There is not one specific type of department that is susceptible—every department is at risk. It is essential for every department to consider the possibility and develop a plan.



2) Assemble a Team

Formulate a plan after contemplating potential crisis scenarios. Start by creating a crisis team. Designate a team leader and an alternate/back-up. It is also important to assign someone to be in charge of all internal communication, external communication, and to identify a community liaison. Make sure each member clearly understands their role in the event that a crisis does occur. Also be sure to update this list periodically to account for staff turnover.

In many cases the players on this team will be the same command staff who handles all organizational matters. Be sure to assign a public information officer. This is an essential function that should be assigned long before an incident to give that person plenty of opportunity to get comfortable and build connections with various local media outlets. It is also worth considering deputy roles in case an assigned individual is out-of-town or related to the accused firesetter.

3) Coordinate Information

Assemble the crisis team after an incident occurs to assess the situation and develop a plan for moving forward. Formulate answers to these questions:

- What happened? (Be concise and include the when, what, where, why, and how.)
- How did it happen? (Be honest and express concern. Consult an attorney to determine what details can be discussed.)
- What will be done to ensure it never happens again? (People are going to want reassurance. The department should identify policy and procedure deficiencies and outline a plan of how they will be addressed and remedied. Pledge full cooperation with the investigation and convey a sense of urgency.)

¹ Barton, Laurence. *Crisis in Organizations II*. South-Western College Publishing, 2001.

² Harvard Business Essentials. *Crisis Management Master the Skills to Prevent Disasters*. Harvard Business School Press, 2004.



Rumor, innuendo, and misinformation breed during a crisis and can make a bad situation even worse. It is essential to engage department members as much as the local community with transparency, honesty, and information.

4) Communicate Effectively

Keep a log that can be updated and shared with members of the crisis team showing who has been contacted and what was discussed. This will help eliminate duplicate efforts and confusion.

A log of incoming calls/inquiries from community members, local officials, the media, law enforcement, etc. should also be maintained. It is important to follow-up quickly. Gather all of the necessary contact information and take a detailed message. Be sure to note any follow-up action.

A sample crisis contact log can be found in Section Three and on the CD-ROM.

Be prepared to go public. The community will be shaken in the event of a firefighter arson incident and may lose faith in the department. It is essential that the department be proactive in reaching out to the community. Let them know that the department will make the necessary changes to ensure it will never happen again.

The crisis team should keep a list of names and contact information for community leaders, elected officials, media contacts, and other influential individuals with an interest in the fire department. These people should be contacted early and often if a crisis occurs. A contact list template is available in Section Three and on the CD-ROM.

Working with the Media

Firefighter arson cases will almost always attract media attention. These cases make great headlines—not only in the local press but also nationally. Therefore it is important to have an effective, practiced, and professional public information strategy. This is not something that can effectively be pieced together at the last second with news cameras rolling; it should be established long before the media reaches out to the department.

It is important to effectively work with the media and utilize all possible methods to make sure the department is influencing the message. The media will report on the story with or without the department's cooperation. Unfortunately, "no comment" no longer means end of story. In fact, it is often interpreted by many as "I'm guilty" or "I have something to hide." Rather than being the end of the story, it is often the beginning—the media and the general public will often fill in the missing details in ways that may not be terribly flattering to the department. It is essential to take the opportunity to help shape the message that is presented. The public will want to hear the department's side of the story.

Before talking to the media however, it is important to consider what information and what message will be made available to the public. One way to do this is to compile a list of expected questions and to formulate responses. Reporters will want to know the basics: when, what, where, why, and how. Be ready to address these issues. The media will also ask difficult and probing questions. Compile a list of undesirable questions and then develop answers for those too. It is important to demonstrate that the department has nothing to hide while simultaneously providing the media with the facts so they can cover the story in the most accurate way possible.

The department will need a spokesperson to be its public face during the aftermath. Most often this role is filled by the chief or the public information officer. The chief may prefer to be the face of the department before the media. The public information officer can spend more



time working with the media arranging interview times, drafting press releases, and keeping track of the story as it develops, thus freeing up the chief and command staff to focus on handling the crisis. Keep in mind an effective public relations strategy is about more than answering questions when asked; it is about anticipating questions and answers, actively engaging the media, and presenting a consistent and coherent message.

The following media tips and tools are designed to help a department interact with the press and can be adapted for a variety of situations beyond firefighter arson.

Letters to the Editor and Op-Eds

Letters to the editor and op-eds can include statements about opinions and feelings. They should be written in clear and simple language. The chief can use letters to the editor to respond to negative press, while op-eds can be used to make an argument or state a position. For example, a chief from an affected department can raise awareness by urging others in the fire service to be proactive and adopt preventative measures. Submit these to local papers or fire service publications.

Samples are available in Section Three, and editable versions can be found on the Toolkit CD-ROM.

Writing a Press Release

Prepare a press release that frames the department's position. Follow these guidelines when crafting the release:

- > Make sure the message is clear and concise.
- > Be sure to include the who, what, where, why, when, and how.
- > Keep the document to under a page in length and make sure the most important parts are found in the first paragraph.
- > Identify the audience and tailor the message for them.
- > Tell the truth.
- > Don't use fire service jargon.
- > Use the present tense.
- > Use a standard font and double spacing. Department letterhead can be used.
- > Include contact information.

Once the press release is finalized, send it to designated media contacts. Use a media contact list to identify who should receive information and how to get that information to them.

A sample press release is located in Section Three of the Toolkit. The electronic version on the CD-ROM can be modified.

Interviews

The news media will most likely be interested in covering a firefighter arson story and will want to interview members of the department.

A news interview can be one of the most important steps to begin repairing the damage.

The request for an interview will probably come in the form of a telephone call or email from a reporter, editor, or producer. Determine:

- > The name of the reporter who will be on the story.
- > What kind of information they want.

- > Who else they are interviewing for the story.
- > How the story came to their attention.
- > How much time they need.
- > The angle or thrust of the story.

It is important to anticipate questions that may be asked, prepare information that is useful to remember, assemble facts that could be volunteered, and identify comments that probably should be withheld. The importance of preparation cannot be overstated. Those who try to wing it in an interview usually wind up underperforming.

Interview Tips

1. Know the reporter's deadline and story direction.
2. Understand the goals for the interview.
3. Focus on delivering key message points. Don't get sidetracked by dead-end questions.
4. Provide specific examples, data, or anecdotes to support messages. Tell a real story.
5. Pause before answering a question. Take time to think.
6. When an answer is unknown say, "I'm not an expert in that area," and bridge to some thing else. Never make up an answer or provide information that may not be correct.
7. Avoid negative language.
8. Leave the interview on a high note. Summarize key points in a positive manner.

How to Answer Questions

If possible, send the reporter a one-page fact sheet and supporting material ahead of time. Take another copy to the interview. The fact sheet should contain a brief description of the department, a quick summary of the incident(s), and a short personal biography. Few interviewers have time to read lengthy material, so the briefer, the better.

Know what to say before the reporter walks through the door. Have three key messages ready, and get each of them into the interview at least once. Don't be afraid to repeat them.

Reporters generally begin with a couple of friendly, innocent-sounding questions. Don't lose focus at any time. Take advantage of a friendly question to deliver at least one key message. A reporter with a couple of accusatory questions will frequently wait until the very end of the interview.

Firefighter arson is an emotionally charged topic. Remember, don't lose control, and don't demand that the interview be halted – if this happens on camera, it makes great TV and terrible PR. Answer tough questions with vigor and clarity. Keep key messages in the answers, no matter how rambling, aggressive, or antagonistic the question sounds. Remain calm, centered, and focused on the positive. Also, remember that the audience is not familiar with the intricacies of the fire service. Use words and concepts that are easily understandable to the general public. Avoid fire service jargon.

Avoiding Certain Topics

There may be topics that cannot be discussed or revealed because of litigation, confidentiality, or security issues. If so, don't offer a peek at the subject. Just stay away from the topic. When asked about it directly, explain why it cannot be discussed publicly.

NEVER use the phrase, “no comment.” Unfortunately, this is considered by reporters and TV viewers to be an admission of guilt. There are other ways to avoid talking about a topic. Among them:

- > “It’s a bit too early to talk about that now – not until the investigation is completed. But I can tell you that we...”
- > “We find the allegations ‘disappointing’ and that’s all I can say for the moment.”
- > “That just deals with one aspect of a larger issue...,” then bridge to a key message.

Honesty is the Best Policy

Lying to a reporter can result in an ugly, avoidable news story.

The easiest way to maintain credibility is to prepare for the interview by anticipating questions and finding answers ahead of time. If an answer is unknown simply state this and offer to get back to the reporter or refer them to the appropriate source.



Handling Mistakes

If a mistake is made, don't fumble around trying to retrieve the answer. Just stop and say, "I'd like to restate that, if I may."

The same thing applies if a mistake was made earlier in the interview. Don't explain what the mistake was. Just say, "I'd like to go back to something we dealt with earlier," then repeat the answer – this time with the correct information or emphasis.

Anybody can lose his or her train of thought or get flustered under questioning. If this happens during an interview, try one or more of the following techniques:

- > Stop in mid-sentence and tell the reporter, "You know, I'm not sure I'm getting at what you want. Could you rephrase the question for me?" While the reporter responds, take some time to think.
- > Simply stop and say, "I'd like to answer that again." Then stop and think before going in a second time.
- > Ask the reporter to repeat a question. Don't try to answer if there is uncertainty.

Pause the interview if feelings of anger surface. Take a deep breath and regain emotional control. Then continue the interview when ready.

Above all, do not offer answers off-the-record. There is no guarantee that off-the-record comments will remain so. If something is stated, it is on-the-record.³

³ Media tips adapted from content provided to the NVFC by Levick Strategic Communications.

Working with Local and Elected Officials

Relationships with local decision-makers are critical to department operations. Local and elected officials may want answers in the aftermath of a firefighter arson incident. It is important to address their concerns.

Hopefully the department already has positive relationships with local and elected officials. Department leaders should be in contact with officials and their staff on a consistent basis, not just during budget cycles and catastrophes. These relationships must be developed and nurtured throughout the year.

The department will be under pressure from officials in the aftermath of a firefighter arson incident. Be prepared to face some tough questions. Reach out to them right away to mitigate the damage and be honest and apologetic. Don't forget to emphasize all of the ways the department benefits the community and focus on how to strengthen the department moving forward. Local and elected officials will likely face questions from the press or constituents. Department leaders can educate them on the circumstances surrounding the incident and help them to prepare talking points.

Here's a hypothetical situation to think about:

Two fire departments have had nearly identical firefighter arson incidents. One fire department immediately contacts officials, assists in the preparation of press releases, and develops fact sheets for the public. The other fire department gets contacted by officials after they received calls from the media, makes no announcement as to what has occurred, and does its best imitation of an ostrich sticking its head in the sand. Guess which one has started to pave the road to recovery?



Conventional wisdom says to get out in front of bad news. Emphasize the vital services that the fire department provides, describe what has occurred and the extent of the problem, and identify what action the department has taken to assure that it never happens again. Department leaders must get in front of the problem and take a proactive stance in making bad news better.

There can be no surprises. Communicate directly to officials before they read it in the newspapers. They will want to know about the problem ahead of time and will appreciate not being blindsided. No one likes to deliver unpleasant news, but it can prevent humiliation. Use meetings with elected officials to not only give bad news, but to start working together throughout the recovery process.

Time is the one commodity that elected officials don't seem to have a lot of. Develop a one-page fact sheet that they can refer back to.

Keep in Mind:

- > Condense materials to one page.
- > Develop an uncomplicated timeline of the incident and highlight what steps the department has taken to address the problem.
- > Detail specific action items.
- > Make sure to provide the proper title and phone number of a contact person.

Most importantly, ask elected officials for their involvement in the recovery process. Invite them to town hall-type events at the firehouse to allow them to effectively respond to concerns. Create a unified front by developing key messages focusing on improvement and prevention, while simultaneously highlighting the positive aspects of the department. Remain in constant communication throughout the crisis and the recovery process. Detail potential firefighter arson prevention measures and ask for input and guidance. Listen carefully to their suggestions when developing a recovery plan and take action to incorporate their ideas when possible. Having the support of elected officials during a crisis can help a department weather the storm and get back on its feet.



Cooperating with an Investigation

Investigators will spend a lot of time working with the department in the aftermath of a firefighter arson incident. It is important that department leadership and members are cooperative and make themselves readily available throughout the process. Always be truthful and provide as much detail as possible.

There are several ways to assist with an investigation. For example, noting any suspicious behavior, keeping photographic or video records of the fire scene, and observing who is responding to incidents. An investigative checklist can be found in Section Three and on the accompanying CD-ROM. Refer to this list when dealing with a firefighter arson incident.



Repairing Trust within the Community

Firefighter arson incidents can significantly impact the community's perception of the fire department. Feelings of betrayal are not limited to those community members who may have had property damaged or sustained injuries. The wider community is likely to have a strong reaction that may have both immediate and lasting effects.

Citizens have historically viewed firefighters as protectors – brave and selfless individuals who will sacrifice their own personal safety for others. When a local firefighter is exposed as an arsonist, that vision is likely to be compromised. Since most fire departments rely on some form of financial community support – through tax revenue, surcharges, or community donations – affected departments may struggle to maintain their financial stability. Rebuilding the relationship between a department and its community can be a daunting task. It may take years to reestablish a favorable reputation, and in some cases, a department never fully recovers.

Silence and secrecy after a firefighter arson incident will not satisfy the community. Citizens will be angry and distrustful of the department. It is important to be transparent and willingly discuss how the department failed and how it will ensure another incident will not

occur. As previously discussed, the media is a great conduit for expressing the department's point-of-view. However, it may be necessary to go beyond press releases and interviews.

Consider hosting an open house/town hall meeting at the department to personally answer the public's questions and address their concerns.

- > Open the forum with a statement from the department. Be sincere and remorseful. Express the same outrage and anger that the community feels and offer a heartfelt apology.
- > Detail any prevention measures the department already had in place before the incident occurred. Explain how those measures fell short and what the department can/will do to improve them.
- > Outline new prevention measures that the department will be adopting (i.e. education, training, etc.) in response to the incident.
- > Open the floor for questions, and be prepared to deal with anger and judgment. It is important to remain in control and address each question or comment with sincerity and tact.



Repairing Trust within the Department

Not only does firefighter arson put fellow firefighters and emergency responders in danger, it creates an environment of distrust and suspicion within the ranks. The internal crisis that follows the betrayal of arson can be even more crippling than the external pressure being placed on the department. Some members may have feelings of distrust toward their fellow firefighters and department leadership. Members often have to deal with being associated with criminal behavior simply for belonging to the same department and are subjected to scrutiny and suspicion. Every member of the affected department tends to wear the stigma created by the firefighter arsonist.

Often the department is where betrayal and anger are felt most acutely and persistently. These bonds can be the hardest to repair. The road to recovery is challenging in part because it is not the organization that is the focus here, rather it is the people within the organization. Each person is likely to respond and react differently and at a different pace. In trying to make sense of how firefighters deal with and ultimately recover from the arrest of one (or more) of their colleagues, it is useful to consider the 5 Stages of Grief model: Denial, Anger, Bargaining/Self Doubt, Depression, and Acceptance. The range of emotions, feelings, and attitudes will roughly follow this common model—even if members progress through the stages at different speeds.

Denial:

It is very likely that many department members may initially express genuine disbelief that the individual(s) involved could have set fires. This is even more likely when the firefighter was a long-serving and beloved member of the department. In many instances the accused may be related or closely affiliated with other members, making it much harder to accept that they engaged in this sort of behavior. In some departments the allegations may exacerbate long-standing disputes or personality clashes and lead some to suggest that the individual was framed or somehow set-up. This is why it is very important to involve outside agencies with the investigation to ensure impartiality and transparency. While some members may never seem to deny what happened, or may have

been the ones to blow the whistle on the behavior, others may struggle to move beyond this stage. Hopefully the legal system will help to end any doubts about guilt or innocence.

Anger:

It is very likely that there will be considerable anger and feelings of betrayal after an incident. This anger may be directed at the accused as well as others involved. While anger is normal and even expected, it can be both demoralizing and detrimental to the department. It can drive a wedge between members, cause some to quit, or manifest itself in other unrelated issues. Regardless of how the anger comes out, if not properly acknowledged or addressed it can become a cancer that can slowly eat away at the organization. Allowing members to express their anger in a controlled manner during a controlled forum that focuses on developing concrete prevention strategies is often the best way to help them deal with their anger constructively.

Bargaining / Self-Doubt:

As the anger begins to subside, many members, especially those in command or supervisory positions, may become consumed by self-doubt and self-criticism. “What if I had done something different?” “I should have picked up on it much earlier.” “Why didn’t we notice?” It is easy to beat oneself up over missed warning signs or ignored indicators. This exercise can be useful in order to identify key procedural problems and develop supervisory and training strategies to ensure it does not happen again. However, it can be destructive if members are not encouraged to translate self-doubt into concrete action.

Depression:

As the immediate crisis subsides and the news cameras move on, the issue will likely still be fresh in the minds of department members. As members attempt to put the issue behind them there may be regular reminders—press coverage of a court hearing, a cutting comment by an angry citizen, a pall of suspicion cast over the other members, etc. This residual attention can begin to wear individual members down and lead to a shared depression

and the feeling that all of the department's good work never seems to gain as much attention as the arson incidents. Again this can be destructive, both personally and professionally, if left to fester. It is absolutely essential that all members, not just officers, be encouraged to keep an eye on one another. Self-destructive or self-harming behaviors must be addressed immediately by competent and experienced professionals. Encourage communication and offer assistance when deemed necessary. Utilize an established Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or look into starting one for department members. EAPs provide confidential counseling and referral services for your members and their families. Make arrangements with a chaplain to have one-on-one or group sessions with members if the department does not have, or is unable to provide, an EAP.

Acceptance:

The final and terminal stage is acceptance. Every member will reach this point at a different rate. It is important to note that true acceptance is different than simply ignoring or burying the anger—although they may tend to look similar. True acceptance does not require the thought that it is or was OK. Rather it requires acceptance that the incident happened, resolve to ensure it does not happen again, and the will to move on. Use the experience to help other departments prevent and recover from firefighter arson incidents—the fire service will be stronger thanks to this shared wisdom.

