

10 KEYS

to Fire Department Success



To the casual observer, fire department operations may seem much the same today as they were in colonial times: The alarm sounds. The volunteers—or full-time, career personnel—race to the fire, apply copious amounts of water to extinguish the fire and return to the fire station for the next call. The fire fighters clean up the equipment, break out a deck of cards, pour a cup of coffee and swap anecdotes about the last big fire. The role of fire departments seems to be constant among the multitude of social and institutional changes.

In reality, fire departments have been as embroiled in change as other governmental operations. Like many public agencies, fire departments have received considerable pressure to diversify volunteer and employment opportunities to include women, minorities and persons with disabilities. State and federal governments have imposed massive mandates on fire departments to protect fire fighter health and safety as well as requiring training and equipment to respond to hazardous materials incidents. Outside organizations such as insurance companies and the National Fire Protection Association establish and continually raise fire department

safety standards. To the frustration of fire department personnel and government officials, it seems more and more difficult to have a successful fire department.

While all fire departments cope with outside pressures, some also struggle with internal conflict. In an emergency, most fire departments run like well-oiled machinery, with the lines of authority and individual roles and responsibilities clearly established. Between incidents, however, many fire departments are just like other organizations with personality conflicts, a resistance-to-change attitude and dissent over future plans.

Ideally, fire department personnel resolve internal conflicts on their own, guided by the department mission and goals established by the township board. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Sometimes an issue may appear too complex or beyond the ability of fire department personnel to resolve alone, and township officials perceive a need to intervene. This is typically not a good solution.

There are key differences between the township board's role of governing the township and the fire chief's role of managing the fire department. No matter how tempting, blurring these functions can have lasting unanticipated and undesirable consequences. On the other hand, ignoring a problem until it becomes unmanageable is equally irresponsible. The township board's challenge is to find middle ground without micro-managing the fire department or abdicating its responsibility by allowing poor management to compromise the quality of fire protection.

In my 25 years with the fire service, first as a fire department member and later as a consultant, I have had many opportunities to observe fire departments that function efficiently and effectively, as well as departments consistently embroiled in strife. The purpose of this article is to aid township officials and fire department personnel discharge their fire protection duties by providing the following 10 keys to a successful fire department. Each key is equally important, although one or more may resolve a long-standing problem or prevent a new one.

1. The fire department must be connected to the community.

Fire departments generally enjoy great community support. However, if residents perceive that the fire department is not meeting their expectations, it can be difficult to recruit volunteers, garner support for an extra-voted millage to fund the department and obtain voluntary public compliance with fire prevention codes.

How do fire departments connect with their communities? These five tips will help:

1. Foremost, fire department conduct must reflect favorably on the community at all times.
2. Fire department personnel must always be courteous and professional when communicating with residents and others.
3. Reasonable uniform and appearance standards should be enforced.
4. The department equipment and apparatus should be up-to-date and properly maintained.
5. The department should participate in community activities such as festivals, parades and other ongoing opportunities to promote fire prevention.

The way conflicts and problems are resolved will impact the community's sense of connection with the fire department. While arguments and disputes are inherent in any organization, it's best to face problems directly, dealing with them as quickly and quietly as possible. Grandstanding and exposing disagreements, management problems and personnel conflicts can damage the morale and effectiveness of the fire department. Disagreements must be resolved, not won.

2. The township board governs the fire department.

Townships are under no legal obligation to provide fire protection. For townships that choose to provide this service, Public Act 33 of 1951 (MCL 41.801 et seq) is the primary statute that enables a township to operate a fire department.

In general, the township board has the authority to decide how much money to spend on fire protection, define the fire department's mission, establish goals and policies to ensure the department runs smoothly and meets community expectations, select the department's staff, and monitor department finances and activities. Townships that have neglected to develop written goals, policies and procedures usually experience frequent misunderstandings over the proper roles of the board and the fire department.

It is best if the township board does not stray into fire department administration. Instead, day-to-day management should be delegated to the fire chief. For example, the fire chief should be responsible for disciplining fire fighters if necessary. In turn, the board holds the chief accountable for the department's performance. The township board should become familiar with how the fire department operates and is obligated to deal with problems through established channels, following appropriate procedures with respect for the fire department's chain of command.

Some townships prefer to delegate the responsibilities outlined in PA 33 to a committee or commission. PA 57 of 1951 allows a township board to create a fire administrative board consisting of five members appointed by the board for six-year staggered terms. The township board should specify in an ordinance or resolution the precise duties of the fire administrative board. The power to adopt a budget and raise money through taxes or special assessments must remain with the township board. ➤



Delhi Charter Township Fire Inspector Craig Whitford (center) checks hydrant pressure at a construction site in Ingham County. On-site inspections prior to occupancy help developers comply with township building and fire codes.

3. Insist on professional management.

Perhaps the most important action the township board can take to ensure the smooth operation of the fire department is to appoint a good fire chief. The National Fire Protection Association recommends the fire chief be appointed on the basis of merit and qualifications, and be removed only for cause (NFPA 1201).

It has been a tradition in volunteer fire departments across the country for fire fighters to elect the chief. This practice is not allowed under Michigan law, contradicts NFPA standards, runs counter to the proper line of authority between a legislative body and personnel under its jurisdiction, and compromises proper department accountability. The fire chief must be appointed by the township board to ensure the chief is accountable to the board for department administration.

Whether or not a fire chief is full- or part-time, the chief's administrative duties are as important to the success of the fire department as his or her technical fire science knowledge. Residents expect the fire department to use its financial and personnel resources wisely, and good public relations skills are critical to maintain community support and confidence.

The fire chief's leadership and management skills will influence department morale more than any other factor. The fire chief should pursue educational opportunities to hone management skills.

4. The fire chief manages the fire department.

Not merely the "Number One Fire Fighter," the chief is also responsible for carrying out the department's mission as defined by the township board. This is done in a manner consistent with the policy directives and prohibitions developed by the board, using resources authorized by the board. To accomplish this, the fire chief's daily duties should include the following:

■ **Leading**—The chief must earn the fire fighters' trust, and they must be willing to follow the chief's orders without question in an emergency situation. The chief must also be able to maintain the interest and commitment of personnel during inactive periods.

■ **Planning**—The chief must be able to anticipate and provide for the immediate needs of the department as well as the township's future fire protection needs. The chief must recognize that an annual budget appropriation is expected to fund the department sufficiently for a full year, barring any unforeseen circumstances. ➤

Fire Department

The township board should periodically, in a collaborative and collegial approach with the fire chief, explore the following questions to determine if the township is getting the most fire protection it can for the money spent. To benefit from this activity, copy and complete this worksheet, and use it to foster discussion between the board and the fire chief.

Fire Department Mission and Goals

1. By consensus of the township board, what is the fire department's mission? *(The mission should clearly define the fire department's role in fire suppression, fire prevention, emergency medical services and other public safety tasks.)* _____

2. Is the fire department accomplishing its mission? Yes No
If no, why not? _____

3. What goals has the township board set to enable the fire department to accomplish its mission?
Goals: _____ How is each goal measured? _____

Fire Department Liability Issues

1. Do the fire department's employee recruitment, selection and discharge practices comply with state and federal laws? Yes No Unsure

If no, list areas that need to comply. _____

2. Are state and federal civil rights-related laws observed? Yes No Unsure

3. Are fire department personnel treated equitably and fairly? Yes No
If no, list administrative or personnel policies that need to be updated or included. _____

4. Identify the areas where the lack of a written personnel policy could cause poor management decisions or expose the township to liability. _____

5. Are the fire department's written personnel policies followed? Yes No
If no, list practices to bring into compliance. _____

6. Does the fire department have written standard operating procedures? Yes No
If yes, which procedures should be updated or added? _____

If no, identify the areas where the lack of a written operating procedure could lead to poor decisions or expose the township to liability. _____

7. Are fire personnel trained to operate emergency vehicles? Yes No

Evaluation Worksheet

8. Do all department personnel comply with MIOSHA regulations? Yes No

If no, what steps must be taken to ensure compliance? _____

9. Have any MIOSHA violations been identified? Yes No

If yes, what has been done to correct the problem(s)? _____

10. What reports and other forms of communication does the board expect from fire department personnel? _____

11. Does the fire department keep the board adequately informed of department activities and issues of public interest? Yes No

If no, what can be done to improve the communication process? _____

Fire Service Delivery and Daily Administrative Issues

How is the quality of fire protection measured? Several years ago, the Michigan Legislature charged the Michigan Fire Marshal to develop a system to objectively evaluate fire departments. The evaluation system was just completed when the Legislature eliminated funding, so the state never implemented the system or established a scale to interpret results. Nonetheless, the system is instructive in the types of questions that township boards should ask fire departments. Many of those questions are included here.

1. What is an appropriate and reasonable response time for the fire department to reach the furthest perimeter of its service area? _____

2. What is the average response time for the first apparatus to arrive at structure fires? _____

Is this response time acceptable? Yes No

If no, what can the fire department do with existing resources to shorten response time? _____

What additional resources would be necessary to shorten response time? _____

Would the resulting shorter response time justify additional expenditures? Yes No

3. Does the fire department have the capability to apply water at a sufficient flow rate and quantity to effectively extinguish any fully involved structure fire in the township? Yes No

If no because of occupancy hazard, construction material or size, which structures exceed the fire department's ability to effectively extinguish a fully involved fire? _____

Is this acceptable? Yes No

4. What resources are needed to expand the scope of structures to which the fire department can effectively respond? (For example, a ladder truck that can reach multi-story buildings.) _____

Would the potential benefit justify the cost? Yes No

5. Should the township consider adopting and enforcing a fire prevention code? Yes No

6. Are the existing fire codes effectively enforced? Yes No

7. What fire safety education programs does the fire department conduct? _____

Are these programs effective? Yes No

If no, why not? _____

8. Are fire department personnel adequately trained? Yes No

9. What command officer classes have the fire chief and subordinate officers taken? _____

10. Do all fire fighters meet the Michigan Fire Fighters Training Council's training/testing requirements? Yes No

11. Does the department document state and local training courses and in-house training programs attended by department personnel? Yes No

12. Does fire apparatus perform to manufacturers' specifications? Yes No
Is the equipment reliable? Yes No

When does the department plan to replace or add new apparatus? _____

13. Is the department's communications equipment effective and reliable? Yes No

If no, when will the department fix or replace it? _____

14. Is all fire department equipment maintained on a regularly scheduled basis? Yes No

If no, what can be done to correct this? _____

15. Does the department keep maintenance records? Yes No

If no, what can be done to correct this? _____

16. Is there a written mutual aid pact with nearby communities? Yes No

If yes, is the township board party to the agreement? _____

17. Has the fire department implemented the incident command system? Yes No

If no, why not? _____

■ **Managing**—Typically, the chief's primary role is not as a fire fighter, but as someone who can effectively direct the response carried out by fire fighters in an emergency. The fire chief must ensure that there will be a sufficient number of fire fighters available at all times. Most fire experts recommend that a minimum of four fire fighters respond with each fire pumper. Obviously, major emergencies will require more personnel. Continually juggling duty schedules, as well as completing daily administrative and financial duties, requires a chief with effective management skills.

■ **Coordinating**—Individual fire fighters must understand the team concept of fire suppression and learn to work together. The chief must coordinate the specialized tasks of the department including apparatus operation and maintenance, rescue, salvage, emergency medical services, communications, training and fire prevention. The chief must also be able to work with the staff of other agencies such as public safety, police and sheriff's departments, building department, and possibly the water department.



Delhi Charter Township Fire Chief Robert Hudson (right) reviews sprinkler and hydrant locations on construction plans for an industrial facility. The township also organizes a monthly meeting for potential developers to meet with the fire chief, downtown development authority and community development directors, and representatives from the county health department, road commission and local utilities to learn about inspection requirements.

■ **Communicating**—The fire chief must be able to explain department actions in a clear, unambiguous way. The chief must be able to discuss the department's needs, concerns and activities with the township board to foster understanding and create a cooperative atmosphere. The chief must be able to explain the department's expectations to staff, and speak publicly in a way that reflects positively on the department.

5. Make personnel recruitment and selection a high priority.

For many on-call fire departments, the number of volunteers on the department roster has declined over the last several decades. The reasons usually cited for the decline include the extensive training requirements, fewer self-employed residents who can leave work to respond to emergencies, new residents not committed to community service and many townships evolving into bedroom communities where few residents are available for daytime calls.

In addition, more stringent building construction codes have significantly reduced the number of structure fires, and some on-call fire fighters leave the fire service because their fire-fighting skills are not used as often as before. In areas where the fire service has expanded to offer emergency medical services, fire fighters have to respond to more and more incidents, and this sometimes leads to burnout. The ongoing training, business meetings and stand-by obligations can impose a significant hardship on on-call fire fighters and their families.

While some departments still have the luxury of a waiting list of potential volunteers or paid on-call fire fighters, many other departments need to advertise the opportunity to serve the community by being a fire department member. A recruiting coordinator can help by collecting names and referrals of potential applicants and making personal contacts to encourage participation. Departments may also make a special effort to encourage women, minorities and persons with disabilities to join. Students enrolled in community college fire science programs may also be good candidates for service in an on-call department.

A crucial mistake some departments make when facing personnel shortages is to lower department selection standards. While allowing persons with questionable judgment or character to join the department may seem necessary in the face of declining numbers, poor staff members can drive away excellent current and potential members, thereby exacerbating the personnel shortage. Departments staffed with full-time, career fire fighters may not suffer from a lack of qualified applicants, but still need to carefully screen applicants to ensure that only the best available candidates are selected.

6. Do not politicize the fire department.

The township board and fire department personnel have a mutual interest in avoiding an adversarial relationship. Decisionmakers such as the township board should welcome all viewpoints in developing budgets and reviewing draft policies and procedures, and the board should carefully consider the fire fighters' recommendations.

When decisions involve value judgments or allocating scarce resources, the board must balance the needs of the fire department against other community values and expectations. This may be difficult at times because it is easy to justify almost any purchase when it comes to saving lives and property. However, the township board must weigh the benefits of acquiring the latest equipment with the costs. While it is important to have up-to-date equipment, it may not be necessary to purchase every new apparatus.

No matter what decisions are made, it is never a good idea for the township board or the fire department to expose to the public conflicts such as disagreements about which equipment to purchase. Making a public reaction to an issue may make everyone look bad and problem-solving more difficult. It is best to keep controversial issues low-key and involve appropriate personnel to identify reasonable solutions, keeping the public informed, but not using residents as a tool to win an argument.

7. Comply with state and federal mandates.

While state and federal governments consider fire protection to be a local matter, a variety of laws impact volunteer and paid on-call fire departments. At times, compliance may be costly and inconvenient however, most of the requirements are intended to save lives and were developed with the participation of the fire service.

Township officials should be familiar with the general provisions of the following statutes and seek the advice of local legal counsel for specific guidance on how they apply in local circumstances. The following laws enable and constrain fire department operations:

- Township Police and Fire Protection law (PA 33 of 1951);
- National Fire Protection Association Standards;
- Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Act (PA 154 of 1974);
- Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response regulations (promulgated by OSHA in 1989);
- Right-to-Know laws, including PA 67 of 1986 and Titles I and III of the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986;
- Fire Prevention Code (PA 207 of 1941);
- Fire Fighter Training Council Act (PA 291 of 1966, as amended by PA 196 of 1987);
- Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 (Public Laws 101-336);
- Older Americans Act of 1965 (PLs 29-93);
- Elliott-Larson Civil Rights Act (PA 453 of 1976), and
- Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (PLs 99-150).

8. Plan. Plan. Plan.

The township board, fire chief and planning commission should meet periodically to share perceptions of township growth and development and infrastructure needs as they relate to the fire department. Community growth results in increased fire and other emergency incidents, and more equipment and personnel are often needed.

The board, chief and planning commission must make sure there are sufficient water lines and hydrants in developing residential, commercial and industrial areas, and that site plans for new developments allow for effective emergency responses. The fire chief should survey new buildings that will require unique fire suppression strategies, and response protocols should be developed and explained to fire department personnel. The chief should also keep the board informed on pending equipment acquisitions and replacement so that sufficient funds can be set aside or financing methods can be determined.

In addition, PA 67 of 1986 authorizes a fire chief to require hazardous materials information from local businesses. The chief may request copies of Material Safety Data Sheets from local businesses to develop an emergency response plan for specific facilities or a general plan to respond to any hazardous materials incident.

9. Evaluate the fire department.

How good is the township fire department? Is the township getting the most fire protection it can for the money spent? Townships can evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the township fire department without having to hire a consultant. Using the evaluation worksheet on Pages 12-13 will help the township board better understand the fire department's strengths and weaknesses. Some evaluation criteria in the checklist are subjective, but even a subjective evaluation is better than none at all.

10. Maintain good communication and relations between the fire department and the township board.

The public typically holds the township board accountable for quality fire protection. However, the board's policies and procedures cannot anticipate every decision facing fire department personnel, and trying to find the mythical line between politics and administration is like hitting a moving target.

The township board, fire chief and fire department personnel need to continually reach understandings about the expectations for the department's policies and administration. The board and fire chief must frequently communicate about how the department is carrying out fire department policies and procedures set by the township board and what department needs the board must address.

A great fire department is a community's pride and joy.

Good communications are two-way. The department, usually through the chief, needs to routinely keep the township apprised of problems and solutions, department challenges and successes, and how well the department is meeting its mission and goals. As the community grows and expectations change, the fire chief needs to communicate how it is responding to the evolving fire service needs and identify any new policy issues the board should address.

The township board plays a significant role in the morale and motivation level of the fire department. Whether full-time or on-call, department personnel need to know that the community and its leaders appreciate their efforts. If the board fails to recognize the sacrifices and professionalism of the department personnel, the fire fighters may feel that their extra efforts are unnecessary or may develop resentment at what they perceive is being taken for granted.

There is nothing wrong with the township board and the fire chief meeting in public to discuss issues of concern. If the subject matter is sufficiently sensitive to require discretion and confidentiality, the township supervisor or another board member may need to meet privately with the fire chief. The board or individual board members may offer advice to the fire chief or direct the chief to outside resources to resolve a problem. The fire chief should also be given a chance to solve the problem.

These 10 keys can open the door to success

While no fire department is immune from stress and conflict, all are capable of emerging from challenges stronger and more viable. A great fire department is a community's pride and joy, and this does not just happen by accident. It takes a deliberate and conscious effort by the township board and the fire department, working together to meet community expectations. Or one might say, the keys to department success are kept in more than one pocket.❖

For more information, see On-Call Fire Departments: The Township Board's Responsibilities, written by G. Lawrence Merrill. This 125-page book published in January 1994 is geared for township board members and fire department personnel. Chapter topics include motivating and retaining personnel, determining compensation, financing the fire department, and contracting for fire protection. State and federal laws that impact fire service and fire department liability are explained. The book costs \$18 for MTA members and \$25 for non-members. To order, call the MTA Education Department at (517) 321-6467.