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Stress and the Fire Chief

It is becoming difficult to pick up a fire magazine without reading some comment on post-incident stress. A lot of time and attention has been focused on the recovery of personnel who faced a set of traumatic circumstances in a short period of time, such as a major airplane crash, major trauma incident or loss of a fellow firefighter. So this column is long overdue.

Most of us recognize when we are under stress – but the pain and discomfort that comes from the symptoms of stress are sometimes independent of its cause. In other words, there are strenuous sets of circumstances in which a person comes away exhilarated instead of stressed. There are other sets of circumstances when limited action or frustration can result in a high degree of stress on the human body.

One example has nothing to do with emergencies, as chief officers, we often face stress that has absolutely nothing to do with a field emergency. This stress is a crisis or condition of the management and administration of a fire department. In my opinion, this type of stress, while it is not as glamorous or topical as post-incident stress, is responsible for a lot of casualties at the top of fire departments.

What is the focus of this column? Stress from behind the desk. If stress is allowed to become persistent or reoccurring in an individual's career, the job of running a fire department can often be more stressful than that of running emergencies.

For example, how much stress is induced in a chief officer when he is informed by the city manager or budget officer that there must be a 10 percent reduction in the fire department budget? What happens to the blood pressure and the heart rate when a councilman announces, in an open forum, that he or she would like to see the fire department consolidated with a neighboring agency, privatized, go to a public safety concept, or reduce the manpower from four-firefighter engine companies back to three because of economic reasons?

There is just about as much stress behind the desk as there is on the end of a nozzle. Unfortunately, some believe it is simply a matter of the "territory." Fire chiefs or chief officers are expected to handle that kind of stress in silence – in spite of the fact that this stress might be as physically and mentally debilitating as some of the reactions that occur after major emergencies.

Please do not consider this column to be a contradiction of the seriousness of the stress that does occur in emergencies. I believe post-incident stress is a serious problem. It must be dealt with now and in the future. There are several reasons post-incident stress is becoming a problem. First, we now have large numbers of people serving as emergency responders who have not faced these conditions in the



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military. In addition, there are increasing numbers of emergencies that are so catastrophic that we, as a profession, have never really faced them before.

Stress from behind the desk is not meant to be contradictory to post-incident stress. Instead, it is a parallel problem that needs to be recognized by key staff officers.

You won't get much information on stress from contemporary fire service textbooks, because stress is not considered to be an element of fire management or technology. Yet, a great deal of time and effort has been spent on stress in other fields.

The late Hans Selye wrote on this topic many times. In reviewing some of Selye's work, it became clear that one important cause of stress for top managers is ambiguity. Not being able to control a set of circumstances results in a psychiatric implication. Not being able to adequately deal with a set of circumstances, which results in frustration, can often create stress too. Therefore, it is axiomatic that the more one removes ambiguity from job environment, the lower the stress level may become. You will note I said *may* become. There are no guarantees in the development of a stress-reduction methodology because each of the techniques I will propose has degrees of effectiveness that are directly related to the amount of emphasis by the user.

Some of these rules are going to sound trivial or like clichés. They are not. After talking to hundreds of chief officers, I found that sometimes we fail to recognize that our problems are caused by a failure to follow basic principles. While we might be sophisticated in the development of some aspects of fire protection technology, we have been circumspect when it comes to dealing with basic management principles.

The first rule of removing ambiguity is to know your job description and what is expected of you. I have talked to people who were undergoing conflict with their superior, and were amazed to discover that there was a big opinion difference over what that person's true job was. This can happen in a variety of circumstances.

This occurs more rapidly when someone serves as the number-two position in an organization and is then promoted to chief upon the superior's retirement. Often the number-two position is radically different from that of the chief. Yet the relationship between the two jobs results in the number-two person believing he or she is imminently qualified and prepared to pick up the reins. Depending on how thorough the superior officer has been in briefing the subordinate, it is possible there might be a lot of role ambiguity upon the assumption of the new position.

One fire department promoted an individual, who had been heavily involved in the "nuts and bolts" of the organization, to fire chief. Upon his promotion, he found himself becoming bogged down with



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details. He also got into conflict with the city manager because he failed to meet major project deadlines such as budgets and community intra-agency activities.

The harder this person worked the more behind he got. He never utilized effective delegation techniques because he felt that the job he was doing was the job he was supposed to be doing. The city manager, on the other hand, recognized the individual's talent for technical functions, but wanted him to function on a different plane.

One of the most stress-reducing situations is when you have a thorough understanding with your superior about what is expected of you. I am referring to expectations on a daily, weekly, monthly, annual and professional basis. Good, honest communication between an officer and his or her superior is one of the first steps in removing conflict over performance.

Another inherent danger is in assuming past relationships are 100 percent reliable for making future decisions. There are two conditions which may alter job expectations. The first is a change of a superior, a city manager or other senior executive officer; the second is a change in the major policy and direction of the organization, such as a change in council policy. In both cases, previous expectations may stand to be reviewed. I am not suggesting that a fire chief become a chameleon who constantly attempts to rise to other people's expectations. To the contrary, being honest with oneself and being able to relate one's own expectations to his or her superior is an important part in removing ambiguity. If someone is intimidated by their superior, and fails to ask the right questions about these relationships, it can result in minor problems being blown out of proportion.

Rule number three is simple. Set realistic goals and do everything you can to achieve them with the resources at your disposal. Trying to set goals that are too far down the road, ones that are extremely altruistic or unrealistic, is going to result in frustration and stress. Having a realistic appraisal of what is available and what the capabilities are is equally important.

One chief I discussed this issue with took over a fire department that had rather complex fire prevention problems. However, the fire prevention bureau was ill prepared to resolve those problems in a reasonable time. Instead of asking the troops to put in more hours or to "get tougher" on code enforcement, this chief took a different tack. He set a goal for himself to upgrade the technical competency of the fire inspectors and devoted the first few years of his position to training the fire prevention bureau to undertake the task of code enforcement.

One has to recognize that setting realistic goals is part of the self-image created for a person in an organization. Unrealistic goals often give people a sense of failure, when in fact, they may be achieving a great deal. It is more important that goals be allowed to escalate as competency and capability enter an organization, instead of imposing goals in an attempt to achieve Herculean accomplishments. A good



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analogy of this is the breaking of the 4-minute mile. It took mankind a long time before Roger Bannister was the first athlete to break the 4-minute mile. It was a supposedly impenetrable barrier. After it was broken by Bannister, several people were able to run a 4-minute mile.

Goal setting and objectives measurement in an organization is part of stress reduction. It sets up a relationship between task activity and task achievement that allows people who use the system to monitor their own level of activity.

Stress-reduction technique number four is also basic. Have a game plan and work it. Almost everyone has a particular approach to their job they feel good about and they become successful in utilizing.

It is a good idea, for example, to determine what part of the day you intend to be the most productive, most creative or most efficient in getting your job done. Leave the remainder of your time open for the random activities that usually impact the fire chief's job. Do not be reluctant to set aside this time and utilize a closed door to enforce it. Sometimes our subordinates feel that a closed door means a closed mind. On the other hand, a closed door might mean that a person is devoting a specific block of time to accomplishing an objective, and subordinates will usually honor the sanctity of that decision.

Stress reduction, when it comes to the game plan, has a lot to do with how many different plays you have in your game plan. In other columns, I have mentioned that I utilize a lot of the time in my vehicle to dictate memorandums or letters. Some chiefs have told me they do not like to use dictation and feel uncomfortable talking to a machine. That is fine. What is important is not the specific technique you use, but whether you have a technique. I have observed that those chiefs who do not like to use dictation can survive quite nicely if they work out a system of time devotion to handwriting memorandums with minimal interference.

Among the specific plays you might want to be concerned about is how to handle deadlines. Some people do not mind being under the stress of having to complete something by a certain time. Others are "freaked out" by it. The individual who has less stress is the one who can decide that their level of ambiguity is in dealing with deadlines. I do not mind working on deadlines, because deadlines intensify my concentration on specific topics. On the other hand, if you are stressed out by deadlines, it is extremely important that you have a game plan to close projects long before they are due on someone else's desk.

The one thing to remember about time management is that you are not really managing time; you are managing tasks, projects, programs and activities that must be completed within a certain timeframe. This time management system cannot be more important than the accomplishment.

One thing that seems to reduce stress is to relate a reward to an accomplishment. It is not enough to



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prioritize all your tasks and drive yourself from dawn to dusk in attempting to deal with the “Type A” items on the list. It is more satisfying to accomplish a specific task and then reward yourself with some psychological freedom. Wander from the task for a short time before focusing on another task. This can be a coffee break, a brief conversation with a co-worker, a walk in the park, or any other form of psychological reward. The important thing is that prioritizing tasks has to also have, for stress reduction, a reward mechanism so every accomplishment gives a person the sense that they are not only achieving, but they are feeling better about it.

Changing scenery or changing your work place is just about important to handling prioritized tasks as the list itself. One chief officer I worked with had a “ritual” with the closure of projects. Whenever we finished a major project, one of us would suggest that we go to a particular shop and indulge in a yogurt sundae. Each time we engaged in this activity, we would do something that made it unique, such as changing the types of toppings we had or where we took the food to eat. After a while, the ritual itself became a reward. It reached a point where we often felt like we were working to finish a project so we would have the opportunity to engage in the reward activity.

We also have to recognize that rewards are different things to different people. In other columns, I have addressed differences in personality types. The different kinds of personality orientations will result in people having a variety of perspectives on what constitutes compensation. It is irrelevant what you choose as your reward. What is relevant is that you establish a reward for accomplishments so that, in spite of the trials and tribulations in achieving a project, the reward compensates for the accomplishment in your mind.

Our next rule of stress reduction is one that Harvey Anderson, retired Los Angeles County chief officer, has constantly preached to the fire service – stay in good shape. By the time most of us reach the level of senior officer, we are not exactly ready to run the decathlon. That does not mean a person cannot take good care of themselves and be concerned about their general health. Some good stress reduction techniques include a good diet, having some form of exercise regimen, having annual physical and avoiding excesses.

Fatigue and stress are often mistaken for one another. Stress is usually something that results in fatigue – not the other way around. Learning to pace oneself in physical ability is an important part of keeping the fatigue level under control. It is sometimes difficult to keep from facing a fatiguing set of circumstances, such as long hours on emergencies or long hours in budget sessions; however, if an individual is in reasonably good condition, he can often endure more than his contemporaries.

My last suggestion is one that is difficult to be specific about – having a sense of humor. A lot of stress is created in the work place by our inability to look at ourselves, our situations, our co-workers, our subordinates and our superiors with any degree of humor. I am not talking about making fun of them or



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being a full-time comedian. Fun and humor have their place in the office. Many organizations will not allow their personnel to have birthday parties or recognize specific events in the office setting for fear that it will diminish the organization's professionalism. While I do not want to debate about the amount of time that can be devoted to such things, it is important for stress reduction to periodically have social interaction in an office setting.

I am also not talking about practical jokes. Humor in the work place has to do with looking at oneself in a realistic way and recognizing our own weaknesses and inconsistencies. It is all right to laugh in the work environment, even under stressful circumstances.

One incident that resulted in considerable stress reduction involved a budget hearing. The city manager told the city department heads there was going to be a critical eye placed on all the budget items due to lack of revenues. The city manager constantly used the phrase "bare-bones budget." After about the third time hearing this phrase in a presentation, a group of fire officers made arrangements to have some spare ribs cooked at the fire station that evening. After the meal, the ribs were washed, cleaned and immersed in a bleach solution until bone white. On the day the budget was presented, the city manager received a box with all the line items of the budget carefully printed in black ink on the ribs.

Unfortunately, this action didn't result in increased revenue for the fire department's budget, but it did break the tension of the situation and it definitely changed the mood of the discussion. As a result, there were some compromises made where reductions were to be made, and there was no personnel loss in the organization.

This is an area that is difficult at times, because one person's humor could be another's sarcasm or blind spot. There is a lot of material out today on humor in the work place, and it bears some study.

A final suggestion for stress reduction is sort of a replay of a previous column I wrote called "Walter Mitty Firefighting." As you recall, Walter Mitty was the individual who went through life daydreaming about the way things could be instead of the way things really are. One of the best ways to reduce stress is to anticipate what stressors may be coming your direction and do everything in your power to role-play your way out of the situation. This means anticipating problems and conflicts with superiors and subordinates, and anticipating what will occur at a city council meeting during budget hearings or the code adoption process.

While it is unlikely you will always know what will occur, by role playing your way through the scenario, you may be able to predict what you are going to do. Most top-flight professionals in the field of conflict resolution are adept at rehearsing events before they occur. Witness how trial attorneys get ready for courtroom presentations or how professional athletes engage in dress rehearsals before they play for a championship.



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While a lot of stress occurs at the scene of emergencies, we also find stress occurs while sitting behind our desk or standing in front of a political body. Stress is not going to go away. Stress is part of life. The more complex life is, the more stressful it is. You can do a lot to ensure your survivability as a command officer by developing a few approaches that reduce your stress.