



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Completed Staff Work

From time to time, when performing the activities and programs of our department, staff members are called on to do what is called a “staff report.” There are many personal biases, prejudices, and points of view regarding staff reports, but the most common response by someone who has been assigned to do it is: “Why Me?” The second most common response is: What do I do now? I would like to share with you some general guidelines to follow if someone inflicts such an assignment on you.

If you understand the general ground rules regarding staff reporting at the outset, it will make it a lot easier for you to participate in the process and, at the same time, make it a lot more effective for the department as a whole. It's not really that frightening an experience. As a matter of fact, after little practice, writing staff reports get to be a very good way of influencing the department's policy and practice, and that is not a bad place to be.

Generally speaking, when someone is assigned a staff report to do, it's a compliment. The reason the person was selected falls into one of the following categories:

1. He/she is the person with the most expertise and knowledge on a specific subject area.
2. He/she has an assignment that puts him/her in that area as a result of their job description.
3. He/she has access to information that is needed to make the staff report complete.

When some people are given a task of doing a staff report, they feel the assignment is a form of punishment. I believe it is just the opposite. The reason most fire officers give staff assignments to individuals is because they have confidence that a subordinate has knowledge that they don't possess and are looking for their input in order to help them make a decision.

If time permits, the selection of a person to do a staff report is often preceded by the identification of a problem that comes up at staff meetings. This does not mean that a person speaks up on a subject they are going to get “stuck” with a project. But it does not mean that if you remain silent you will be able to avoid being tasked with a staff report either.

What it means is that the various types of contributions that each person bring to the department is important to who is given the assignment. A good manager will try to determine who would be the best person for the job when handing off staff assignments. Sometimes rank is less important than knowledge.

If you are selected to do a staff report, you should look upon it as an opportunity to contribute to the department. if somebody has taken the time to designate someone as being worthy of a staff project,



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they should be prepared to guarantee that they will also take the time to review the end product thoroughly and make use of that information. Generally, staff reports are written for the express purpose of making decisions and therefore writing one will give you the opportunity to provide your superior officer with your expertise. Their expertise is found in them accepting your information and verifying its accuracy.

If you are given a staff project to accomplish, there are three things that are essential at the very outset. These are:

1. You have to know exactly what the objective of the staff report is going to be
2. You must have an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the officer that assigned the task and other members of the staff to determine the scope of the staff report.
3. There must be a time certain set for the completion of the staff reports.

Nothing is more frustrating than being asked to do a staff report on something that is ambiguous, as broad as the all outdoors, and has a deadline of sometime, someday. Staff reports are based on a “bias for action” that means that you have to know why you are doing it, what you are supposed to be accomplishing, and when it has to be done. Failure to provide any one of those three elements almost always dooms a staff project to failure.

There is a tendency, when most people are given a staff assignment, for them to come back periodically and check with their superior to see how they are doing. I indicated previously that it is most important that you engage in extensive dialogue up front when you have been given a staff report to accomplish. The reason for this is that your task is to put the report together in as “unbiased” a form as possible. Constantly going back to the person who assigned the staff report and touching bases gives the perception of continuity but, in fact, it makes the staff report have less impact when it is finally submitted.

A good fire office should be primarily interested in a staff report being generated by a subordinate officer being a completed project when it is turned in. Theoretically, if the staff report is being written on a major subject such as something that requires City Manager or Council decision, it is desirable that the assigning officer be able to take the report and transmit it directly to those particular individuals with a minimum of modification on their part. This means that completed staff works means just that; complete.

Lastly, and this may seem like a minor problem, but in fact creates a lot of credibility problems for the fire service, prior to turning in a completed staff report, the document should be thoroughly read and edited for grammatical and spelling errors. *American Fire Journal* once published an editorial about a chief officer who turned in a written report to the City Manager regarding a fire. In the process of describing the fire, he claimed the reason the fire got out of control was because the winds were



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“erotic”. Actually, the chief officer meant erratic. While it may have given a few laughs to those at city hall reading the report, it contributed one more nail to the box being built around the fire service that we don’t know what we are talking about.

If you are a company officer preparing a staff report, you should rely extensively on the professional secretarial staff of the department to review finished documents. There is a small book you can obtain that has common spelling of some 10,000 commonly used words. And most computers today have spell check on them. There is no excuse for misspelled words in finished documents. Review your material thoroughly prior to submittal. The finished document should be just as professional as you are.

It is also appropriate, if you are given a staff assignment, for you to feel you have the right to come to your superior and discuss any of those three issues mentioned earlier. By assigning a staff report to a member of the organization, the assigning officer is delegating the authority to act or collect information on certain elements of the department. Your confidence level in whether your research is going to be meaningful is directly related to your comprehension of what the staff report is all about in the first place.

Teaching people how to write staff reports is an awful lot like trying to tell someone how to play music. Some people have an ear for it; others have to have sheet music in order to play the game. In both cases, however, there are some specific strategies that can help anyone prepare staff reports.

One of the basic ground rules is before you start writing a staff report; you must do ALL of your homework. That means collecting ALL of the facts, details, information, resources and other support materials that related to the subject before you start to write your staff report. All too often, people start off the wrong way by trying to write the report and then try to find facts to support their position. Most importantly, a good staff report should be generated from the facts.

The second ground rule prior to writing an actual report, you should sit down and develop an outline of the facts before trying to write sentences. In preparing the outline, I often use 3 x 5 cards, or index cards, to jot down main issues or key points and use that to organize the outline. The outline should follow a format somewhat like you would engage in a normal conversation.

That is to say, you don’t walk up to someone and engage in a conversation without going through some introductory phases. An outline should follow a similar layout. The beginning of the outline should be an introduction to the subject and the finish should be a conclusion or summary.

The third ground rule of staff reports is to always write at least one “rough draft” of a report prior to putting it into final form. By developing a rough draft that is double spaced, it will allow you the



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opportunity to read your material for additions and corrections. It would also allow you to let someone else read the staff report for their input.

The fourth ground rule is to write extensively and edit ruthlessly. Personally, I have found the most successful staff reports I have personally generated have been no more than two to three pages single spaced. Staff reports that tend to go on longer than that become somewhat of a burden on the reader. Therefore, in preparing a staff report it is better to collect all the information, develop an expanded outline, and write an extensive report; then go back and edit it down until it is comprehensive, concise, and to the point.

It may seem that the middle two portions of that exercise are somewhat futile, but they aren't. All too often, when someone is trying to prepare a staff report and trying to keep it brief, they leave out some of the more pertinent details and add in "flowery" information that is not necessarily relevant but sounds good. When we use the term "write long," it doesn't mean five or six times the finished product length. It is not uncommon for an edited staff report to be anywhere from a half a page to several pages shortened by going back and reading the paragraphs aloud. Removing unnecessary modifiers, transition words such as "and" eliminating irrelevant facts and pruning the sentences so they are more concise is an appropriate exercise.

The last ground rule, and one of the most important, in writing a staff report is make sure that specific recommendations are included. When assigning a staff report, the bottom line should be that somebody should do something about something. Don't ever hesitate making a recommendation that is direct and to the point. The reason they are called recommendations is that they are not, in fact, action themselves. They depend upon the reader of the staff report taking that input and utilizing a decision making process. A staff report that is basically historical and does not provide a direction for the reader is not really contributing to the decision making process.

I fully realize that this overview on completed staff work is by no means a comprehensive study in report writing. It's merely an overview on my part of my perspective on the use of written documents to advance the state of the art in the fire service. I would strongly encourage readers to participate in report writing seminars, courses of instruction in English and creative writing, or other opportunities to learn more about written reports.

We all hear the lament that we have too much paperwork. I appreciate that perspective. We should do everything we can to eliminate unnecessary paperwork. But, staff reports are grist for the mill of decision making and are not unnecessary. To the contrary, they are vital to the job of a fire officer in the administration and management of resources.



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As we indicated at the outset of this column, your personal input is vital when you are asked to do a staff report. Your impact and contributions to the decision making process of your department is going to be greatly dependent upon your ability to develop and complete staff reports.

The ability to do this kind of work does not come easily. I admit that. Like the small child who once asked a famous violinist how he got to Carnegie Hall, the answer is simple. It's practice! Practice! Practice!