



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

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## Dealing with Conflict

Any person who is the role of a regulator is going to have to be accustomed to dealing with conflict. Regulation implies power. And power often results in circumstances in which people resist. In the job of a fire marshal however, people are refusing to follow a particular path of instruction or refusing to do certain kinds of things should not be regarded as a personal attack. Granted, personality might take the shape of creating circumstances when people do not get along very well the fire marshals job in dealing with conflict is to be the person who resolves it rather than creates it.

There are a myriad of personalities that can result in conflict with you as the fire marshal. However, they all have one thing in common. Anytime there is going to be contention between what you want to accomplish as a fire official and some other person there has to be a contrast between what is in the public interest versus what is in the private interest. Therefore, conflict should not be based on personality but rather on the concept that the laws or regulations that we are attempting to enforce are in contrast with the personal agenda of someone who does not wish to comply. It is that simple.

As a fire marshal you may be called upon to resolve conflict that has occurred by your subordinates rather than by yourself. It is extremely important that when there is a difference of opinion between one of your staff and the other person that you do not assume that either party is right or wrong. Conflict resolution has a great deal more with understanding both party's issues and not necessarily their positions. A particular danger to fall into is to believe that your own staff is 100% accurate. Another danger is to assume that the other person is criticizing then the bureau has made a mistake. Neither of these positions is tenable when it comes to resolving conflict.

The following model illustrates the fact that the most conflict comes about as a result of conditions that lead up to the conflict. Seldom is it like a bolt of lightning that comes out of nowhere. More often than not, conflict is generated over time, because of an accumulation of understandings and misunderstandings that go on between parties attempting to accomplish a particular agenda.

As you look at this model, the most important consideration is making sure that you have all of your facts before you make a decision.

There are several very good reference manuals that you can research that will provide you with very specific behaviors to utilize when dealing with very specific types of conflict. As stated earlier, as a fire marshal you can reasonable expect that there is going to be a considerable number of opportunities where you need to exercise this skill. Earlier on we stated that it could come from the outside where people are upset with your regulatory function but by the same token it could also be driven by internal forces as well. Your fire inspectors, plans examiners, arson investigators, public educators all have



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different perspectives on their functionality and there are times when the activities when one portion of the bureau raise issues with another element of the bureau. As stated earlier it is important that you not allow these kinds of activities accumulate but rather deal with them as effectively as you can when you see the signs and symptoms of conflict.

What do you see for signs and symptoms of conflict?