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Group Dynamics in the Fire Service

One is a lonely number. We say that two is company, three's a crowd, four is a party, and five is majority rule.

As fire officers, we find ourselves working in groups quite frequently. We either enjoy group dynamics or avoid them. In view of the increased demands on the part of fire officers to interact at a personal and professional level with large numbers of people, it is important we understand group dynamics. Moreover, we must understand the processes in order to utilize them to achieve the mission, goals, and objectives of our organizations. This applies whether we're dealing with people internally to our own organization or externally.

For purposes of definition, in the fire service we can define a group as being practically anything larger than two people. Obviously, if two individuals are thrown together or choose to be together, there is a bipolar relationship that says that each has pretty much an equal power in the relationship. Granted, sometimes one member will relinquish a certain amount of their power to another and we can say that even at the level of just one-on-one relationships there is always a dynamic taking place.

In the context of the fire service we have large numbers of groupings that we must be prepared to cope with. First and foremost is the company level. As most officers are working their way up through the rank hierarchy they must take responsibility for leading one or two other individuals. Of course, we have the shift configuration which means that company officers must frequently interact with their peers on other engine companies and on the other shifts, then there is the superior and subordinate relationships, i.e., company officer to battalion chief, battalion chief to division chief, etc. There is also the group dynamic of the fire service vs. interacting with the rest of the community.

This can get to be a complicated topic. In the context of a short column of this nature, it is almost impossible for us to cover all the variations in group dynamics. For example, there are some excellent textbooks that go into defining roles and relationships in groups. There are entire courses in psychology that deal with group dynamics. What we are interested in looking at here is your dynamic. Specifically, your dynamic with other individuals. It really doesn't make much difference at what level this interaction occurs. What is important is your understanding of a couple of very simple ground rules in group dynamics and your application of these ground rules in dealing with other human beings. For purposes of definition, we are going to discuss three elements of group dynamics. The first of these is listening skills. The second is feedback loop. The third is acting on information.

Let's explore listening first. Most of us come equipped with two fairly good ears, yet, some of the greatest misunderstandings occur in group dynamics because people are simply not listening to one another. It's standard practice for many of us when we start into a dialogue to think about what we are



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going to say next instead of listening to what the other person has to say. One of the most powerful tools you can exercise to keep yourself in control of group dynamics is to listen very carefully to what other people are saying. It follows, too, that you have to listen to how they are saying it. Such things as verbal inflection, body language, and even our choice of words often sends messages that are far different than what people are receiving.

One of the common mistakes people make in group dynamics is assuming that the person who is doing most of the talking is doing most of the influencing. In actuality, that may or may not be true depending upon how that person's point of view is being adopted and accepted by the listeners. It pretty much makes no difference whether you're talking about one-on-one relationships with another person or sitting in a room with 500.

Many of us, for example, may have had conversations with someone very close in our family. It could be a wife, child or parent. Frequently, in these kinds of back and forth exchanges, someone will finally say, "You simply aren't listening to me." I know I have been guilty many times of failing to pay attention to detail in conversation, especially in small groups.

There are a couple of techniques that can really enhance a person's listening skill. One of the most important ones is to maintain eye contact when you're actually listening to someone. If you're staring out the window looking at your nails or fiddling with something when the other person is talking, they almost always get the impression that you're not listening. Maintaining eye contact with another person gives them the impression that you are not only hearing them but you are understanding them. In actuality that may be an assumption; however, it's a good start toward making sure that your listening is focused.

The second is when you're listening to people; give them some acknowledgment and even encouragement to continue explaining themselves. This can take the form of either eye movement, slight nods of the head or even exclamations of verbal support.

The thing that makes the listening skills important is the second element; the feedback loop. Whenever you're engaged with another human being it is important to have a clear-cut understanding of what is being said. It is not undesirable to periodically ask for clarification or ask for expansion on what a person is saying. Giving a person a chance to reiterate their point of view and even to the point of having you repeat it back to them in some cases is not all that bad.

The feedback loop is exactly what it sounds like. It means feeding back to someone what you think they are saying. It doesn't mean repeating it word for word. It often means rephrasing, interpreting, molding the words and sentences to your own vocabulary. Then, hopefully, if the other person is engaged in good listening skills the two of you will come to similar conclusions about what you're talking about.



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Obviously, both listening skills are something to be practiced by one person to the exclusion of the other. Feedback loops only work well when both parties are making a concentrated effort to make sure the communication is accurate and comprehended. For example, if a person is in a group of three to five people listening, feedback is not all that difficult to engage in. On the other hand, if you are in a large room participating in a staff briefing or, worse yet, listening to a lecture, you might be practicing good listening skills but the feedback loop may be distorted.

That's why the third element of interpersonal dynamics is so important. It's the action element. Action can be taken on several different levels. One of these is called consensus. That is, when everyone agrees to do something the same way. The other is unilateral. You choose to take an action that may be different than what the action is from the other party. What makes group dynamics dynamic is when one of these two courses of action is actually manifested during the exchange. In other words, the group comes to some conclusions and decides to do something or the group has weighed all the factors and people decide to do something differently.

If we put this into the context of the fire department we can see there are many situations in which group dynamics can take place. Earlier in this article, I mentioned that in a fire company one or two people sitting around a kitchen table swapping conversation over a cup of coffee might not have all the trappings of a dynamic situation. Yet, it's the most common place in which group dynamics take place in the fire service. Further, it is in the fire house where group dynamics can often build into tension and confrontation or into teamwork and cooperation.

At another level, obtaining cooperation from your officers in other assignments and in working with individuals toward the accomplishment of an overall vision or mission for the organization can be very dynamic. One of the first ground rules of group dynamics that must be accepted by those in a leadership role is that it is their obligation to manage group dynamics. It is not up to our subordinates or even our peers to have to learn how to interpret us. If we expect to lead people, we also have to be able to communicate with them and to understand what their concerns are about being our followers.

I bet almost every fire department at one time or another has had its "shift wars." These usually start when one or more people disengage themselves from a group dynamic process and begin to take unilateral action without adequate feedback or listening at the same time. This can even be as powerful as causing out and out hostility between individuals. I know in my own case I once had two company officers that had locked horns over a simple matter of ashtrays in the fire station. One entire shift was nonsmokers. The other shift was heavy smokers. The nonsmoking shift, instead of sitting down and having a rational discussion with the smoking shift, decided to engage in some form of guerilla warfare. Every time they would come on shift, they would go through the station, round up all the ashtrays and throw them in the trash can. In retaliation, the other shift started improvising and used practically



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everything for an ashtray. Coffee cups, food dishes, and even personal objects were being pressed into service to support the smoking shift. The nonsmoking shift increased their energy level and took defensive postures. The situation spiraled lower and lower until a suppression battalion chief got wind of the issue and came to their quarters. Both the company officers were brought into the room and a discussion was facilitated by the chief officer. It was obvious that the smokers were not going to become nonsmokers and vice versa. The battalion chief listened to both sides of the discussion and began to identify that the real problem was not smoking or nonsmoking but the condition of the station at relief time. The nonsmoking shift was offended by the sights and smells as they came on duty. The smoking shift was basically offended by what they thought was a high handed and almost arrogant approach by their counterparts.

The solution: A dishwasher. The battalion chief got both groups to agree that the real problem centered on coming onto shift, not going off shift. After discussion, the smoking shift finally agreed that they would police the situation and their last official act before going off duty would be to place the offending objects into the station dishwasher and turn it on. The other shift agreed that they would stop engaging in guerilla warfare and would, in fact, support the idea of specific areas in the station being designated for smokers, etc. The problem was ultimately solved but all three of those necessary steps were included. Someone had to listen, feedback had to be put into the loop to discover options and alternatives, and then action had to be taken that was either consensus or unilateral.

The one thing we have to guard against in the fire service is what I have often referred to as “group think.” Group think has been defined in some management circles as what happens when a large group of people begin to discuss among themselves a potential solution that may be overly simplistic or, in some cases, downright inaccurate. It sometimes comes sprouted as a consensus opinion. One thing that makes group think dangerous in the fire service is that it sometimes suppresses valid input, especially from those who are more junior in the group dynamic scenario.

Another myth of group dynamics is that any time a person disagrees with a group, that somehow or other means they are being disagreeable. In a good group dynamic situation all the strengths of the various personality types can be brought to bear without having to be disagreeable with one another.

For example, I tend to be what is called an intuitive thinker. I quite frequently come to conclusions and make decisions based on a form of “sixth sense” that is ill defined and in some cases hard to trace the logic. Therefore, I try to make it my habit of surrounding myself with people who have more in-depth analytical skills and who are willing to periodically point out to me certain errors and omissions in the facts supporting my intuitive decisions. It doesn't keep me from making intuitive decisions. It does make me from keeping stupid intuitive decisions.



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A true group dynamic is very much like a kaleidoscope instead of a painting. If you pick up a kaleidoscope and you rotate it, the little pieces of glass realign themselves with the mirrors and form a beautiful pattern that has symmetry and order to it. If you continue to rotate the device, the pattern will change and turn into something else. That's the nature of group dynamics. If an organization gets into a proverbial rut, all its decisions begin to sound almost identical. Then it's possible that there is no group dynamic going on. Perhaps the organization has lapsed into group think or worse yet become highly polarized over the rightness and wrongness of things.

As a leader in the fire service, the chief officer must look upon group dynamics as a very necessary part of keeping the organization dynamic. The opposite of dynamic is stalemate.

If we take that extra bit of time in our interaction with other human beings, whether they be our superiors or subordinates, to listen very carefully to what they are saying, give them feedback as to what you think they mean, and then come to an agreement on what course of action is going to be taken based on that interaction, our organizations will never become static. The human mind simply has too many creative aspects for any group of human beings to go stale for long.

The next time you're in a conversation and have an opportunity to serve in one or all three of those capacities, chances are you will also emerge as one who influences the outcome the most.