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Burning Personalities

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By Paul J. Antonellis Jr.

Conventional wisdom says firefighters have a distinct personality that's considered a very important ingredient in the performance of their emergency duties.

Fire chiefs, shift supervisors, training officers and human-resource officers should have some idea about the general personality makeup of firefighters, because personality traits play a significant role when interacting with people. In a research paper examining firefighter personalities, Allison Peters and Robert T. Scott suggest that firefighters' personalities are different from the general population. This will come as no surprise to a fire service administrator.

So how does the fire service identify and select the "right" personality for the job? Unfortunately, there's no right or wrong answer to this question. If personality is considered to be an estimate of an average of performance, the performance itself could examine such items as how one perceives oneself, how others perceive one, and what one normally does. To measure such items, a fire department must decide on a personality test to administer to firefighter candidates.

Generally, fire departments and law enforcement agencies use the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory test. The MMPI test consists of 567 statements that help to determine a subject's degree of paranoia, depression, mania or anxiety. According to *Staffing Organizations*, the MMPI was originally developed as a mental health-screening tool and wasn't intended only to select candidates.

There are hosts of other personality screening tools available to the fire service. In fact, different personality tests can measure for separate specialty areas. In any event, the test should be a piece of the puzzle and not considered as the sole reason for the selection.

FIREFIGHTER PROFILES

Selecting a test method and a specialty area is considered easy compared to examining the common personality traits found in the firefighters. As a supervisor or manager, an understanding of these traits may help you deal with the different members under your command or even selecting new members for your group.

TINKERERS

Firefighters are driven to find better ways to do their jobs. Even though a firefighter may have pried open a car door at an accident scene hundreds of times, he may spend his time off thinking of a better or faster way of accomplishing the same task. That firefighter may spend time at the salvage yard prying apart wrecked vehicles to find out what works and what doesn't.

Time and success are very important to the firefighter. Firefighters are never content with the status quo and tend to be highly organized. To the average person, a firefighter's desire to have things in such an orderly fashion and in control could be considered "obsessive-compulsive." Firefighters also tend to be easily bored, which makes them more inclined to find trouble or become unproductive. The end result is a troubled employee.

TEAM-PLAYERS

Firefighters don't tend to be loners; they seek out group activities on the job and off the job. Firefighters work and live in a group environment. From their very first day walking into a fire station, recruits learn that the fire service functions in a team environment. Firefighters train in groups, work in groups,

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live in groups and eat in groups. This close interaction favors people who are trusting, cooperative, dependable and determined. Because firefighters share so much of their lives with each other, they generally will build team values, foster increased team cohesion, and identify each member's strength and weakness.

However, some firefighter personality traits may conflict with the team environment. The fire service is generally looking for people who are assertive, upbeat and talkative. Each of these traits can be of benefit to the group, but they also can be a liability to the team.

In an interesting look at how firefighters work together, a study on work injury frequency and duration found that when firefighters cooperated in groups, injury rates were lower than when firefighters didn't interact with each other. Firefighters who are reluctant to interact with other firefighters may in fact be reluctant to ask for help when they're in trouble, possibly leaving them at risk of injury. Additionally, the researchers reported that firefighters who "tend to ignore safety rules and regulations not only had accidents more frequently but also suffered more severe injuries."

ANTI-QUITTERS

During my 20 years in the fire service, seldom have I witnessed a firefighter give up on a task. Firefighters will work at all cost to complete a task or assignment, sometimes placing themselves at risk for the betterment of the task.

Failure isn't in the firefighter vocabulary, so when firefighters are faced with a failed mission, they tend to take it very personally. Some administrators may think that a mission was a success without realizing that the troops may have viewed the mission in a different light. Sometimes the fire chief's viewpoint and the troop's viewpoint aren't the same, resulting in conflict.

DEDICATED WORKERS

Firefighting isn't just a job to firefighters; it's who they are. Firefighters strongly identify with the job, as evidenced by the off-duty clothing, homes and vehicles of many. They're highly dedicated people who love nothing better than a bigger and better challenge. On the flip side, a firefighter who loses his or her job because of layoffs, early retirement, disability retirement, regular retirement or termination will lose this identity, which can be personally devastating.

ADRENALIN JUNKIES

The majority of firefighters will tell you nothing feels better than having just fought a fire. They're risk-takers who demand highly stimulating activities both on- and off-duty. This is important for shift supervisions and fire service administrators to realize about the majority of firefighters. The next time you're faced with a firefighter conducting "risky behavior," you may want to consider that it personality-related.

HELPERS

Another common denominator in many firefighter personalities is the burning desire to help people. Firefighters enjoy helping out people in need. Firefighters are people who will place their own lives in jeopardy in order to save a life. They enter the fire service knowing that the fire service is a high-risk occupation and that they will place their own lives on the line for others. Firefighters in their off-duty time have a tendency for volunteering with local civic groups or raise money for Muscular Dystrophy Association in an effort to help others.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Being a firefighter is much more than the sum of training and education, but a person's aptitude for the job can't be predicted only by personality. A simple test can't determine which candidates will make good firefighters or bad firefighters. Selecting firefighter candidates must involve a host of screening programs rather than just one, because being a firefighter runs much deeper than a title and a test.

We have seen how firefighters tend to tinker, seek the best way of performing a job, work and live in a team environment, and prefer helping others in need. Firefighters tend not to be quitters. They are drawn to the high-risk occupation of firefighting and are highly dedicated to their career. Firefighters enjoy stimulating activities both on-duty and off.

The next time you're confronted with an employee issue, take the time to see the employee and what traits he or she brings to the table. Surprisingly, you may find that the very traits we look for in firefighters are what bring them into our office with employee issues.

As a fire service administrator, take some time to look at your employees and see what traits you see in each, not for what they are but rather "who" they are. You may be very surprised if you look at your employees through a different lens. Fire service administrators should never look at their human resources as a liability; rather they should view them as invaluable resources.



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A former chief of department, Paul J. Antonellis Jr. has more than 20 years of fire/EMS experience and 11 years of law enforcement experience. He is on the faculty for two colleges teaching in the undergraduate and graduate fire science program, has lectured to emergency service providers nationally and internationally, and has authored and published many articles and two books. He has associate's degrees in criminal justice and fire science technology, a bachelor's degree in fire service administration, and a master's degree in labor and policy studies.



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