

The Company Officer Balancing Act

By Paul Strong

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Company officers (CO) have many responsibilities. Aside from the emergency scenes, they have nothing less than a balancing act going on in the fire station (or should have). Our business is all about people, including our own people that we serve internally. We take care of each other like the family that we are. But are CO's taking care of the needs of their firefighters as best as they can? Sometimes not. The

CO is getting the work of the organization done through the firefighters. Most of the time this particular work is scheduled for them. The CO gets to the station and opens up a calendar that shows them what is taking place for the day (Station tour, move up to another station to provide coverage while they go train, scheduled training for their crew, inspections, public relations events, and many other things. All the while, their firefighters may have projects, responsibilities, or needs that are important to them but possibly lower on the priority scale than some of the other items on the list which they battle time for. This is where the CO can pay attention can make a difference.

The goal is to keep your firefighters motivated and operating at a high level as long and as much as they can. One of the biggest way to keep a firefighter motivated is to make sure his/her needs (projects, responsibilities, etc.) are being met, or at least a solid attempt is undertaken to show that the CO cares about meeting the needs of their firefighters. One way or another, the CO needs to find a way.

When a CO gets caught up in the calendar of scheduled events and tasks, and forgets to have 1-on-1 conversations with their firefighters to see how things are going with them, the CO will eventually see de-motivation in firefighters. Maintaining balance among the crew with everything that needs to be done for the organization and everything that needs and wants to be done by the crew can be difficult if the CO disengages from the relationship they should have with each member on their crew. That relationship should have a foundation of trust and communication.

When you (CO) start to feel the day-to-day business is getting overwhelming, find out how your people feel about it. Are their needs being met as well? Or have you recognized that they aren't and taken the time to talk with them about priorities and balance and how you plan to bring their needs back into focus.

Finding and maintaining balance between the needs of the organization and the needs of your crew can be difficult. Add in the emergency responses and you've

got yourself a challenging juggling act. As a CO, make time where you can to support those things your firefighters want or need to be successful in different areas of their job. It could be that one of your people has wanted to reorganize part of the apparatus bay. By doing this, their pride level and ownership of their station grows stronger. This, in the end, keeps him/her operating at a higher level.

Once again, it's all about the people, both internally and externally. CO's are the engine that drives the organizational machine. They worked hard to maintain the balance between the people up the chain, down the chain, and the people on the outside who call for our assistance.

Paul Strong entered the fire service in 1990. He is currently a shift captain at the Valley Regional Fire Authority in King County Washington and owner of 3 Sixty Training. Paul has served as a Shift Captain, Department Training Officer, Incident Safety Officer, Medical Program Specialist, Haz-Mat Technician, and Technical Rescue team member as a Rope/Dive Rescue Technician. Paul continues to present the 3 Sixty series classes at conferences, training officer's associations, and individual fire departments. He is the Creator and Lead Instructor of RIC for REAL, The Road to Fire Service Leadership, and Fire Ground Practices - First on Scene. He is an adjunct instructor at the Washington State Fire Training Academy and has lectured at many conferences including IAFC Fire Rescue International, FDIC-Indy, and Washington State Fire Training & Safety Officers Association. Paul has taught and consulted for numerous agencies and has been published in Fire Engineering Magazine. His approach to fire service education and training is effective, thought provoking, and intense. For more information, please visit www.3sixtytraining.com.