

Caught in the Middle of Leadership
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Have you ever seen birds setting on a power line and wondered why the high voltage power that passes through the line did not electrocute them? Well, we know that the answer to that question is that the circuit is not complete unless the bird touches the grounding line so that the circuit is complete and the current passes through the bird. These birds “on the Line” can be compared to the middle management of fire departments. The company officer is the middle management of the fire service. Sometimes they are Captains, sometimes Lieutenants, and sometimes they have other names or ranks, but the bottom line is that they are usually in charge of a group of three or four firefighters and one or sometimes two vehicles. But one thing is always certain; they are always “On the Line.”

In an article back in 1999 Fire-Rescue Magazine compared the company officer to a person walking a tightrope. The article said that there are two characteristics of a good middle manager: (1) Supports the fire department in word and deed, and (2) Supports the firefighters in word and deed. If you think about those two characteristics carefully, you will see why being a company officer and being in the middle between the Chiefs and the Firefighters is such a balancing act.

The Fire Chief expects you to enforce policy, rules, and regulations. He expects you to carry out orders and meet deadlines. Sometimes there will be real conflicts between what is perceived to be the right thing to do by the Fire Chief and how the firefighters think it should be done. It is the company officer that gets caught in the middle. You may understand what needs to be done and by when, but you, the company officer, may not totally agree with the decision. Yet, you are the person that will be held accountable for completing the assignment – on time and within budget.

The successful company officer will “walk the tightrope” between these two positions. I have found from my experience that it is always best to be honest and open about your feelings. You may say to your firefighters, “Hey guys, I don’t totally agree with this decision either, but after all, we signed on to do a job and this is the job that we have been assigned.” I have found that it is best not to discuss the particular part of the policy or assignment that you disagree with, but to say, “After we get this done, we can discuss the pros and cons in more detail when we have some down time, in the mean time, lets just get it done.”

Be sure that you follow up on your promise to discuss the situation in more detail later. This would make a good discussion for a time when you are at the fire station with some stand-by time on your hands. As a responsible company officer, bring the discussion up yourself. Don’t wait until someone else has the floor and you have to be the referee. After bringing up the topic, have each person tell what their policy would be if they become the Fire Chief. Don’t argue

or agree with anyone until each firefighter has made his or her position clear. Take notes as they talk on the major points, either pro or con. At the end of each person's statement, ask him or her any questions you may have to fully understand their position on the topic. Once each firefighter has had a chance to talk, you can then give your opinion about the subject. Remember; never criticize the Fire Chief or the Fire Department – instead, tell the firefighters what your policy would be if you were the Fire Chief and why. Make sure you then tell them why the policy is like it is now. If you don't know why the policy is like it is now, then you should not be having this conversation. The Company Officer must be able to explain why a policy is like it is. If you don't know, ask.

Don't wait for an emergency to question a policy. During an actual emergency operation it is very important that everyone obey orders instantly and without question unless it is clear that you will endanger life by following the policy or orders. As a Company Officer, it is your duty to not only know the Fire Department standard operational guidelines, but to follow them. If an SOG is out of date or needs modification, you and the firefighters of your company should draft a sample of how you think the SOG should read and run it up the channels to see what happens. Who knows, you might actually change the policy. I know one thing for sure, if you go through the process of writing an SOG that the entire company agrees on, you will all be better for the effort.

Remember, you can't be touching both wires at the same time or you, like the birds on the line will, "Get the Juice." You must always do a balancing act. Spend some time with the firefighters – understand what they don't like or think should be changed. Make sure that you have carefully weighted all the pros and cons and questioned all the possible solutions. When you have what you believe to be a solid proposal, it will be your turn to take it the "chief." Don't go as a group. You will be tempted to defend the position your company has taken instead of listening carefully to what the "chief" has to say about your proposal or why the policy is like it is now. It is now time for your to represent your company to the chief. Be careful to fairly represent both sides. Tell the chief only what all the group has agreed. Don't credit or blame any one individual. Say "we" when you are talking to the Fire Chief and let the "we" mean all of the members of your company. When you go back to report to the company, once again, say "we" and this time let the "we" mean the Fire Department.

There can only be three answers when you return to the company: (1) The policy will not be changed, (2) The department will review our recommendations, or (3) The policy will be changed either in part or in total. If answer two or three is given, you have succeeded. You have a 67% chance of making constructive and positive change in your department if you follow this process. Remember – don't touch both wires at the same time, but for the sake of progress of your fire department and in the fire service keep flying back and forth between the wires in the name of good communication and employee development.