

HIREG GUNS

(Originally published in Fire Engineering Magazine, August 2000)

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Hired guns. Ax men. Snipers, or Sharpshooters. We've all heard the names they've been called; those people who are hired from outside the organization, usually for management positions. At fire departments, it is a particularly volatile subject. The grapevine rumor that goes around, almost without exception, is that the outsider has been hired to "lay down the law". But, is there any truth to this type of firehouse hype? And whether or not there is, can you successfully hire someone from outside the organization for a lesser Chief's position, say a Battalion Chief, or Shift Chief?

In the fire service the practice of hiring from outside the organization is still relatively new. It has been commonplace for the position of Fire Chief, or Assistant/Deputy Chief positions, but for the position of Battalion Chief, or Shift Chief, it is still considered a radical management decision because this person must walk the fine line between management and shift personnel which, in truth, he is still an integral part of. When the rest of the administration goes home at 5:00PM, the chief of the shift has to stay and be able to communicate and function with his crew. The focus of this article then, will be on whether or not you can successfully hire a person from the outside for a Shift Chief (Battalion Chief/ Shift Commander, etc.) position. Can a decision like this be successful, or because of the familial environment of fire service people and camaraderie of the shift personnel, is it doomed to failure?

The Shift Chief, typically, has the inherent task of deciding what action to take with an employee, whether it is a professional, or personal matter. In other words, he (or she) has to decide where the buck stops. More often than not, if the Shift Chief is worth his salt at all, the buck should stop at his office. After all, he is the one who gives the nod to the Fire Chief, for his employee's promotions, or the thumbs up/down for disciplinary actions. He is also the one who has to make the decision on what to do when the employee confronts him with a personal crisis in the middle of the night, say a sick baby at home, an accident with the rescue truck, or some other can't-wait crisis. The Shift

Chief is the one who makes the decisions on: who will, or won't, go into fires, or other hazardous atmospheres, staffing, and who steps up into higher positions (acting out of title) when the Driver, Lieutenant, or Captain is out for a day. He is responsible for these and numerous other operational decisions. He should also act as mentor, or advisor to his personnel for educational or professional matters and, more often than not, personal matters as well. Can a person hired from outside an organization, especially a fraternity such as the fire service, really expect to come in, forge the relationships he must forge in order to have a handle on his shift, and get on with the tasks at hand? My own experience says, yes, it can be done. But it depends as much on the individual as any other element. It also depends on the groundwork that has been laid by the upper level management prior to the placement of these positions.

Let me say this: it is a tough row to hoe. The decision to come into an organization from another organization is one of the most difficult challenges a fire officer can make. Typically, you take an upper-level chief's job after spending the bulk of your career with a singular organization. You've done your time, perhaps you're retiring, and/or looking for new challenges. If it does not work out, you put in a couple of years, pad the bank account, or pension with a few extra bucks and move on. But if you're going to take over, or establish the position of Shift Chief, you are probably in mid-career and can not afford for it not to work out. And, again, because hiring a Shift Chief from outside is such a relatively new concept, there is very little reference one may look to for guidance. Therefore, in an attempt to help others wade through this rather challenging transition, I have listed some suggestions and cautions which may help not only the person considering, or already in, the position but also the organization's management team who may be considering placing an outsider in the position of commanding a shift.

IF YOU ARE A CHIEF CONSIDERING HIRING SOMEONE FROM OUTSIDE FOR A SHIFT CHIEF POSITION:

Have justification: First you, the Fire Chief, have to ask yourself why you want to make this kind of decision. Perhaps you have a new department you have to fill from top to bottom. If that is the case, of course you have to hire from outside; there's no one to promote up. But if you have an established department and decide to hire from outside, you should have some solid reasons. In my case, the department was adding an EMS Division, with full transport capabilities and all related services. Management was looking for persons with established service records from organizations that offered more varied services.

The Fire Chief also has to make the decision, if he is looking outside, as to whether or not he will allow inside officers to compete for the position as well. Again, if you as chief decide to open it up to inside as well as outside people, you must have a good reason for looking outside in the first place. Do you not have enough qualified personnel to sit for the testing of the position? If there are not enough qualified people in your organization, you need to ask yourself why. Did they not know the position was going to be opening? Did they know but failed to prepare themselves? Did you allow them time to try to prepare for the position? Has the position been through several evolutions already, but failed, or did it not meet your goals? *Finally, whether or not you allow inside people to compete for the position, as chief, you will be met with great resentment and resistance.* You should know that ahead of time and prepare yourself for it. Most of the inside people will harbor the feeling that they have been betrayed by their chief and infiltrated from the outside. Once you have made the decision to hire from outside, you must be unwavering in your conviction and you must lay some solid groundwork before these people come in.

Lay the groundwork: This type of decision is not made over night. It usually

takes at least a year or two to get the funding and commission approval (at which time you may also be doing the justification mentioned above). *During this time you should be keeping your inside people informed.* Tell them that the position is coming and if they intend to compete for it they must prepare themselves through education, or committee work, practice assessment centers, or whatever requirements will be placed upon the position. If they are still not ready then, when the position becomes available, they will have no one to blame but themselves. Laying the groundwork also works hand in hand with justifying going outside in the first place. If you are say, adding an EMS division and you want people who have emergency medical background, you need to let the insiders know that. That way they can obtain their paramedic licensing, or whatever requirement you've placed on the position. If they do not make the attempt, again, they can't blame the chief.

Be firm with your convictions: If you do go outside for these positions you need to tell your insiders that this is your decision and stick by it. *You must convince them that the reason you made this decision is because you were looking for the best people to fill the positions and now that you've brought these professionals in; they must learn to work with them.* Discipline for not working with these people will be quick and severe. These people may not have “grown up” with your organization but they got their hard knocks at other organizations, no less and no more than your own. They should be established professionals who obtained the position through hard work and perseverance. They are coming in to do a job for the municipality/county you work for. They are not “head-hunting ax men”, or “hired guns”. (Above all, you must alleviate this fear so your personnel aren't constantly paranoid about losing their own jobs.) These people have shown a dedication to the fire service or they would not have gotten as far as they have. As chief, you must back up your decision and the people you've brought in, or it will never work. Believe me, the people you bring in from outside will be looking to you for direction and support; no one else will be even talking to them for awhile. *They will be*

resented for taking promotions away from inside personnel. They will be questioned and challenged on every move they make. Look for extra grievances on every little item. If the new outsider tries to increase training, disapprove leaves, limit sick time, or any number of hard-line decisions, he will be hit with “past policy” grievances, almost daily. As chief, it is incumbent on you to back up your new Shift Chief’s decisions. You brought them in for a reason, now you must stick by your decision.

Try to make it a positive experience: If you are bringing in outside managers, make sure you find the best people you can. Look for well-rounded individuals who have made a significant contribution to the fire service. Now, there aren’t that many Brunacinis, Colemans, or Branigans out there, but there are numerous individuals who have made some difference within their organizations and a good resume should reflect that. If someone has been in this field for say, 10 to 15 years, they should have some educational goals they’ve met and a variety of experience dealing with the many issues we face in the fire service today, i.e.: diversity issues, harassment and drug problem issues, haz-mat or mass casualty incidents, as well as EMS and fire command mitigation, perhaps labor-management negotiations, technical rescue knowledge and/or experience, administrative matters, publishing history, teaching or public speaking experience, personnel and citizen counseling experience, and, future planning. *These people are going to have to lead your organization into the future, so make sure you choose them carefully, not only for your own good but that of your personnel as well.* Believe me, the experience, or lack of experience in some of the above mentioned categories will show. If the personnel who work for these new managers don’t respect them, they will not grant them the authority they need to do their job.

Give them what they need: In many organizations, the management team is the last to benefit from any cost of living raises and the first to lose their long-range incentives, such as longevity, or educational incentives. Give them a salary that is commensurate, percentage-wise, with your own. Make their earnings a brass ring that

other personnel will continue to reach for. If they are getting paid less than your line officers, due to longevity, overtime, or other pay incentives, then they will not be respected by the men who serve under them. They will look like egotistical fools who sacrificed better living conditions for themselves and their families just to get a title. Keep in mind, these people left jobs, probably somewhere in mid-career. They have taken a big chance on your organization, so you must make that gamble worthwhile for them. If you don't, in addition to making the position look "title-only", *you may lose these people to other, better paying organizations and that is the last thing you want to do.* If these outsiders leave before they've accomplished the goals you brought them in for in the first place, no one will look any more foolish than you, the chief that brought them in. Additionally, if they do leave, who is going to pick up where they left off? Your line officers may not want the job once they've been passed over for the position previously. And again, some of the insiders may not want the position if they find that by going into management, they lose their incentives pay. If the people you brought in from the outside fail, word will get back to the city managers, or commission you work for and you will have lost a lot of credibility.

Finally, give your new Shift Chiefs all of your policies, administrative as well as operational. Make sure they have the most current S.O.G.'s, protocols, personnel manuals, and most importantly, a copy of the bargaining unit's contract. Without these items, your new Shift Chief can not make valid decisions. Lastly, go over the department's short and long term goals and make sure they are understood. You want to go forward with a team concept and no team can go make progress if they don't know the game plan.

**IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING COMING INTO AN ORGANIZATION FROM
THE OUTSIDE AS A SHIFT CHIEF:**

Be strong, personally and professionally: There are a great number of famous leaders who will spout, “you never get anywhere without taking chances, or accepting challenges”. Well and good on paper, or for those who’ve already made their mark and are looking back, but they’ve never had to last out a 24 hour-shift with a bunch of fire rescue personnel who don’t want you, the outsider, in their happy home. *The first thing you will find entering a new organization is an extreme amount of animosity. There will be those who feel you’ve taken not only their position away, but their future.* The rest of the shift will try to show solidarity to these individuals, even if they find they like you. There is a great amount of peer pressure within the fire service to be brothers to each other. However, this camaraderie applies only to the members of the organization. You will always be an outsider, even if you last 20 years in the organization. There will always be one guy on your shift who harbors resentment for you coming in, even if he was not affected by you taking the position.

You must learn to overcome this animosity. It will not be easy. But, you can do it, if you stick by your convictions. You must show confidence and establish a command presence. You may not make all the right decisions all the time but you better be in the ballpark and be able to justify your decisions. *The only way you can accomplish any success is by knowing your job.* If you don’t, it will show and the sharks will be on you in a minute, as they should be. I know of few other jobs that carry the responsibility of a Command, or Shift Officer. A good idea is to keep a copy of the bargaining unit contract right next to your desk, as well as all operational/administrative policies, S.O.G.’s, and medical protocols. Keep up with periodicals and trade journals. If you do know your job, or where to find answers, it will also show and your people will begin to come around. They will want to learn from you and, if you’re smart, you will begin to mentor these people. You should try to maintain a professional distance, separating your management responsibilities from your desire to make new friends, but not to the extent that your

personnel begin to of you as an aloof robot without compassion or empathy. They need to know you've been where they are and know what problems they face out there in the streets each day. Furthermore, if you have an opportunity to share your knowledge or experience as a mentor, you're a fool if you don't grasp it and often the only way to do that is by opening up a little.

Finally, when I say "be strong", I mean professionally, yes, but also you'll have to be strong personally. Your family may be supportive when you're not on shift, but believe me when I say a 24-hour shift can seem an incredibly long period of time when there is discord among your co-workers. In addition to that, you may not have your former support group. The people you used to work with may resent you for leaving. It sounds petty but in the fire service, again, there is a familial working relationship. When you leave to go to another fire department, your former "family" may feel that you left them "just for a title" and you may find yourself very isolated. That may not be important to some individuals but most people want to belong to a group (look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs). *You will begin to belong to your new department sooner, or later, but in the meantime, the old adage, "it's lonely at the top" has never been more accurate.*

Be fair and consistent: You will undoubtedly find people among your personnel whom you like, or dislike. That is the nature of people. However, as a Shift Chief, you no longer have the luxury of expressing this. You have to be as fair in your treatment of your "bad boys" as you do your "shining stars". Likewise, when one of your bad boys pushes the limits and you have to come down on him, you'd better do the same to your shining star if he pushes the limits as well. If you don't, it will show and you will be labeled as "playing favorites". This could get you into some hot water, so it's best to be consistent across the board. If there are educational opportunities, make sure all members are aware of them and try to assure they are made available to everyone (as budgets allow), not just your "favorites". Give equal step-up time to all eligible personnel. *Remember, you are*

from the outside and people are looking for you to make a mistake. Playing favorites is a mistake. Sooner or later it will catch up with you. That being said, keep in mind that no matter how fair and consistent you are, there will always be people in the group that perceive you as playing favorites, usually right after you solve a personnel dispute that does not go their way. Such is life and people. None of us perceive ourselves as villains but sometimes others do. Last word on it: don't hold grudges.

Be aware this is a different department: You are now at a different department. There will be some things that might need to be changed but there will also be many things that you can not and maybe should not change. Everything was not perfect at your former department and it will not be here either. But, whatever you do, don't try to make your new department exactly like your former one. If you do, you may help build-in problems that existed in your former department. Try to take what was good about your former department and blend it with what is good in your new department. Hopefully, you'll be able to create an operational environment that takes the best of both worlds and which will be beneficial to all.

Give of yourself but be cautious: As I've stated previously, you have a responsibility to your position and you can not compromise this by becoming too close to your personnel. Sometimes people take advantage of that closeness. People have a natural tendency to exploit things you think you've told them in confidence and you cannot afford to let this happen if you're a manager from the outside. Remember, as management, you do not have the luxury of a union body to fight for your job. If you compromise your position, you are only a phone call away from the unemployment line. Be careful of what you say, as it may be perceived as something else. It is easy to become relaxed around fire rescue personnel but always be cautious of any terms that may come back to haunt you. Be aware of all harassment policies. Be cautious of jokes. Many jokes tend to be of a sexual, or racial nature. Even if you're not the one telling them, you should have a zero tolerance policy of any jokes, or other conversations, that might be

construed as sexual or racial.

On the other hand, you need to take a few hours of each shift to spend “off the record” time with your crew. *You will undoubtedly be busier than you ever imagined but you have to spend time with the people who are actually out there doing the job: your crew.* You have to develop a connection and this may take up several hours of your day, but if you set yourself up in the unapproachable ivory tower and your position is ever challenged, it is easier to oust the person who has not at least tried to establish a relationship with his personnel. You should listen to individuals who approach you and just want to talk. Often, it is an attempt to either begin a more personal relationship, or the individual may have a problem that only you can help remedy. Try not to give too much personal advice, often these people are just looking for someone to listen to them and you as an unbiased entity are given that opportunity. That being said, whatever you do, never, ever pass along a confidence the individual shared with you. There is no quicker way to destroy your credibility than to betray a confidence. Sooner, or later, if you follow this advise, you will find yourself eating with the shift members, running a good ship, having a few laughs, and generally feeling more at home.

ON A PERSONAL NOTE:

If you are considering making this move you must think long and hard about it. Yes, there is a great deal of satisfaction in obtaining the higher-ranking position. Additionally, being in a place where your input can make a difference, where you can help make the policies that will enable a department to run more efficiently (we hope) is also very gratifying. You will be fulfilling your professional goals and isn't that what we all hope to accomplish?

However, I would warn anyone considering this type of move to be cautious with your decision. Look at all the pension and benefits options. You are not only making this

move for yourself but for your family. There are other personal consequences as well, the loss of your fire department support group, that one can not put a price on. For example, my son was born right after I came to my new organization. Watching him grow is a joyous experience I would like to have shared with my former work colleagues but now, except for the occasional phone call, I don't get the opportunity that most people have to share those personal experiences during my working hours. A move like this is not for the faint of heart, nor the social butterfly. As I said previously, the workload is tremendous, and the benefits are likely less than you enjoyed while in a labor position. That is the conundrum of a management position. But, the opportunities for challenges is fulfilling as well. For example, it would have been years, if ever, before I would have gotten into the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program at my former department. I have learned an incredible amount of information that my former position simply did not allow me access to. And finally, I have had opportunities to meet and befriend a whole new group of people, some of which have impacted my life tremendously already. It has been a unique learning experience and for me, it has allowed professional and personal growth, that no school or class could ever have taught me.