



A Summary of the Culture

Submitted by:

Dale G. Burke

Senior Associate

**The Rising
Group**

Verona Fire Department Culture Issues

As a part of the process of interviewing members of the Verona Fire Department and Fitch-Rona EMS District, I was also tasked with looking at the culture within the Verona Fire Department.

The following is a summary of the information that was provided to the investigator by those interviewed. All individuals were open with information provided to me and all expressed appreciation for the opportunity to speak openly to an objective individual in a safe environment, free from potential retaliation or retribution for their comments.

Some of the complaints are indicative of symptoms of larger concerns. Similar concerns were mentioned by multiple individuals. Some may seem unimportant or irrelevant in the big scheme of things, however addressing them will go a long way in positively affecting morale. The acknowledgement of listening is letting subordinates know command staff and city officials care about their needs.

The concerns identified below contain a compilation of the consistent information gathered from a sampling of the department. Verona Fire Department members consisting of command, full time, paid on premise, paid on call and interns as well as five members of the Fitch-Rona EMS district were interviewed.

The concerns listed are not in any priority order and like-minded comments are placed together to avoid creating an overly unwieldy list and to assist in focusing attention on core issues.

Inadequate fundamentals of organizational success

The department has no defined vision or mission, and no one can remember when any strategic planning was last undertaken. The belief is that command is happy to maintain the status quo. Creativity is not only discouraged but routinely quashed and as a result the department has not “engaged in anything new in the last fifteen years”. Pre-planning is non-existent, and things tend to happen last minute and without any apparent forethought.

Policy and Procedure Manual is outdated, never followed and not trained on. Most members have not seen it since the day they were hired and do not know where to find it. The Code of Conduct is for the most part overly vague.

Leadership concerns

Members identified examples of ineffective, inadequate and frequently a complete lack of leadership within the department. The belief is that leadership does not seek out or want input from subordinates. Leadership is not interested in innovation or continuous improvement and

appears content to maintain the status quo to the current and future detriment of the department and its members.

Leadership is overly autocratic and the refusal to delegate results in even mundane needs not being met (i.e. t-shirts, expired ID cards, badges and name tags not issued, ignored milestones such as work anniversary and birthdays, no clocks or artwork on walls in fire station).

Leadership appears focused on appearances (the facility, the equipment and leadership needs) and controlling all decision-making at the expense of caring for or about, all other department personnel and their needs. Leadership does not respond in a timely manner (if at all) to requests from subordinates. Leadership is not transparent and there is little or no communication with subordinates.

Leadership prefers conflict avoidance and as a result, complaints go unaddressed and accountability with consequences is absent. Members do not believe anyone is held accountable for unacceptable behavior. There appears to be a complete lack of discipline. Complaints taken to the chief level seem to disappear, as no one ever knows whether anything happened with the complaint. The assumption is that nothing happened as the behavior continues. Members say they have stopped complaining because nothing happens.

Leadership rarely if ever, responds to calls for service and even in those rare instances, never assumes a command role on scene.

Professionalism and accountability concerns

There is an accepted lack of professionalism within the department and the perception of an overly relaxed environment around the station. Intimidation is occurring masquerading as humor. There is an atmosphere of complaining that occurs within the department reportedly non-stop. This involves members complaining about leadership, members complaining about other members, and leadership complaining about members. Most of the time this complaining is done behind the backs of the people they are complaining about and in the presence of other non-involved members. This has led to what several members labeled a toxic, hostile work environment which wears on staff.

Members believe that even where minimum requirements exist in terms of training and attendance/sick leave, there is no consistent application of consequences. This leads to mistrust and claims of favoritism and nepotism.

There is a belief that because not all members are trained to a consistent and adequate skill level for the positions they hold that the safety of other department members and potentially the public could be at risk.

Performance evaluations of personnel are rotated through the lieutenants annually and are considered ineffective. The belief is that if the Lt. likes you, your eval will be satisfactory but if

not, you're in trouble. They believe this is a retaliatory tool that can be used by certain Lieutenants towards members who may have "crossed" them at some point during the review period. Considering there is no consistency among the Lieutenants in how they do things or what their expectations are, personnel are left to try and guess which Lieutenant they need to please the most.

Unable to determine when or if department members have ever been offered or encouraged to attend, cultural sensitivity training or inter-personal communication training.

Career Development

There is no defined career development path within the department and members do not feel supported in their efforts to attain additional training or add beneficial skills. Members believe that there is an air within the department that suggests the only way to get ahead or achieve success is to "take out" your perceived competition.

Negative department reputation

The department has a state-wide negative reputation within the fire service, primarily because of a small number of individuals within the department who have behaved disrespectfully and unprofessionally both within the VFD, with members of the general public and with other outside mutual aid partners (Police, Fire and EMS). These few members never take responsibility for their behavior and have never been held accountable. They have been hiding behind the union for years and should never have been retained by the department during the transition from a district to a city department. This negative atmosphere and reputation makes retaining current staff and recruiting new members challenging and can result in potential staffing shortages.

No formalized intern program

The intern program is not a program at all. There is no manual or structure to it. Supervisors are simply instructed "don't give them shit work and don't kill them." Interns are totally dependent on a few willing members for mentoring and coaching which is hit and miss. There is no defined path to success and interns view themselves simply as cheap labor for the department.