

Human Resource Management for the Fire Service

An idea whose time has come.

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The following is another of the many fine research papers authorized by participants of the Fire Executive Development course at the National Fire Academy, Emmitsburg, MD.

Why do we need a Human Resource Management Program?

Presently, the human resource management (HRM) functions in most fire departments are disjointed, rely upon many internal and external entities, are uncoordinated and lack a focal point.

In recent years, the HRM profession in the private sector has continued to develop as a specialty, expanded in scope and influence, and has been proven to increase corporate profitability.

Fire chiefs must provide for HRM in order to make the most effective use of their most valuable resources and maximize service delivery.

What has changed in the fire service that indicates we need Human Resources Management now?

The key asset of an organization is its employees. They are the most expensive element, they require extensive development, and they represent our greatest untapped resource.

Consequently, recruiting and retraining employees has grown increasingly important and points to the need for HRM departments. HRM departments are continually being asked to create innovative recruiting, training, and development programs to devise management approaches that will retain and motivate the best personnel. It is no longer acceptable for an organization to accept average performance from its employees.

What is the private sector doing?

We don't have to reinvent the wheel when it comes to HRM as a consolidated program. Many of the more progressive private sector corporations have already

invented and tested this wheel and it's working well for them. After researching literature on private sector HRM, the following trends were evident.

Trend #1

The human resource function contributes to corporate profits

Traditionally labeled as an expensive center, this is no longer appropriate or constructive.¹ Today, a human resource department that is fulfilling its mission is not an expense center, rather it is an income generator. The staffing department goes through an extensive selection procedure to ensure that the best and most productive people contribute more to revenue generation than unproductive people. The development function assesses, counsels, and trains people so that their jobs skills will improve. Without question, skilled workers are more productive than those who are unskilled. Compensation plans motivate people to work hard and meet objectives. Employee assistance programs help employees with personal problems so that they can get back on the job and become productive again. There are countless examples of how the human resources (HR) function directly and indirectly generates income.

Trend #2

The role of the human resource department is expanding

The human resources role in business has changed. Not only will HR continue to carry out its traditional functions, but the indications are that HR attention is now being directed outward.² It has become more involved in general business decisions and planning, serving more frequently as a consultant to the business, performing more regularly as an equal part of the management team, and becoming more aware of the impact its advice, activities, and programs have on the bottom line.

Trend #3

Adopting the Strategic Planning Model for HRM

Janet R. Andrews has developed a method for human resources managers to use when looking at the model of service delivery they are practicing. While none of the traditional fire models is "good" or "bad" in itself, she does propose a sixth alternative, the Strategic Planning Model.³

This model assumes that the human resources department has a responsibility to be a proactive, integral component of management and the strategic planning process. The human resources department must determine a strategic direction for its own activities that will make it a proactive arm of the organization, one that helps guide the overall strategic planning process. To carry out this purpose, HRM must implement a regular dialogue with all departments to ascertain needs, evaluate present service use and satisfaction, and to educate employees about the appropriate use of organizational HR services.

Trend #4

The attitude of the CEO has the greatest impact on the HRM role in the organization

McDonough surveyed senior human resources executives in 1984.⁴ When asked to choose and rank the factors that will have the greatest impact on the HR role in the future, respondents ranked the six as follows:

1. A change in attitude of the top officer.
2. Government regulations and laws.
3. Economic and business conditions.
4. Societal trends.
5. Technological change.
6. International conjunction.

Clearly, these managers believed that the commitment or lack of same by the CEO had the most significant impact on HRM in the organization.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT THE CHIEF OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT?

Chief Alan Brunacini of the Phoenix Fire Department, when addressing executive level fire officers stated, "I'll bet you know more about your trucks than you know about your firefighters."⁵

Management consultant and Professor Peter F. Drucker states, "Our greatest asset is people." He went on to say, "Most managers know perfectly well that of all the resources, people are the least utilized and that little of the human potential of any organization is tapped and put to work."⁶

Many of the human resources development functions in the fire service have been handled by various divisions of its governing authority. Because human resource development functions are taking place outside the span of control of the fire chief, this individual may be losing influence on his/her most valuable resource. For example, in many instances the recruitment of people into career fire departments is not being done by those who will ultimately be responsible for their management, but instead by a municipal or county personnel department.

Fire service managers across the nation are realizing that human resources management has become more complicated in recent years. Changes in demographics, labor laws from all levels of government (with conflicting and often contradictory interpretations by the courts), combined with changes in attitudes and employee expectations, hinders the implementation of personnel policies that protect employee rights and provide for a smoother running and more effective work force.⁷ These developments, it would seem, dictate that more emphasis be placed on the HRM function. Closer tracking, coordination and control of human resources functions would be enhanced by the inclusion of an HR program within the fire service organization. As it stands now the HR function is at best a non-focused effort.

IS THIS AN ISOLATED PROBLEM?

To illustrate the problem if a disjointed and uncoordinated approach to the total HR picture, we conducted a poll of executive-level fire officers representing various sizes of fire departments throughout the United States. This was not intended to be a

comprehensive scientific poll but an effort to illustrate that the problem of coordinating the total HR package is evident at all levels of HR from recruitment to retirement, in all sizes and types of departments, and in all areas across the country.

Fire service executives were queried with regard to the HR activities in their organizations. The executives represented a cross section of the fire services as listed below.⁸

Texas

Industrial Cooperative
Combination Career/Paid Call
48 Personnel

Virginia

Municipal-County
Combination Career/Paid Call
1500 personnel

New Jersey

Municipal –Township
Combination Career/Volunteer
55 personnel

Missouri

Municipal-City
Combination Career/Paid Call
25 personnel

California

Municipal-State
Combination Career/Seasonal
2500 Career/3000 seasonal personnel

Washington

Municipal-City
Career
360 personnel

Zimbabwe, Africa

Municipal-City
Career
274 personnel

In an effort to illustrate present approaches to HRM, we identified 46 individual elements of HRM. These elements were grouped into four processes: manpower, planning, recruitment, selection and employment. Each department was asked to indicate

the section that has primary responsibility to manage that element (see appendix A for a list and description of these elements).

The response to this poll identified 28 different points or levels of primary responsibility for the different elements of the HR package. These different points or levels can be grouped into four distinct jurisdiction areas: department level, municipal government level, region or state level and outside-of-government level (see Appendix B for a listing of these levels grouped by jurisdiction area).

When you think about it, you will probably agree that there are too many individuals, too many programs, and too many jurisdictions involved to result in a coordinated approach to human resources development. These results were apparent in every department polled. It made no difference; large or small, east or west, municipal, industrial or state, they all had the same problem.

HOW CAN WE ADOPT THIS TO THE FIRE SERVICE?

The adoption of the human resource function into the fire service would be reflected by a new entity that would appear on the organizational chart. A human resources function would now be just as visible a part of the organizational framework as, for example, the fire prevention function.

The director or coordinator of the HRM program would in a broad sense be concerned with people who perform all of the organizational functions from the fire chief to the recruit fire fighter. Two guidelines should be adhered to when installing an HRM program into the fire department:

1. Maximize functional expertise.
2. Minimize organizational and administrative complexity.

The HRM director would be responsible for (at least overseeing of) the recruitment process, continuing education, appraising staff and operational personnel for promotional opportunities consistent with individual motivation and demonstrated capability, relocating individuals within the organization to maintain balance of involvement, and to reflect the changing need of the department.⁹

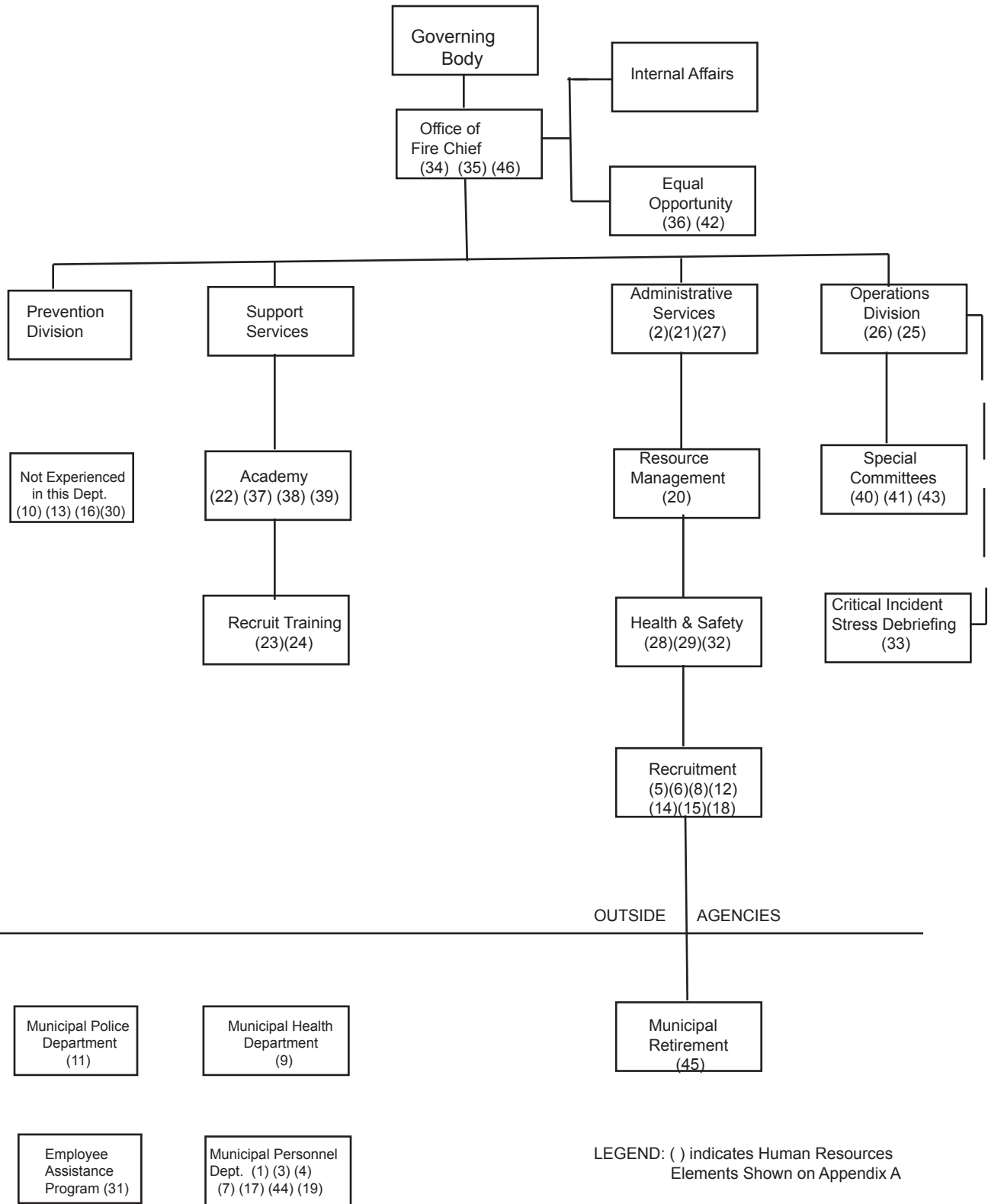
Much recent literature concerning management techniques advocates a subordinate-centered or participative-management approach. We in the fire service should be looking to the private sector for leadership in this area.

A study of the "success companies" in the private sector provides numerous positive examples of how the HRD function operates when properly utilized.¹⁰

A coordinated and integrates approach will certainly improve the overall quality of human resources development within the fire department organization.¹¹ It's time for fire service managers to take a close look at the successes in this area now enjoyed by many organizations in the private sector.

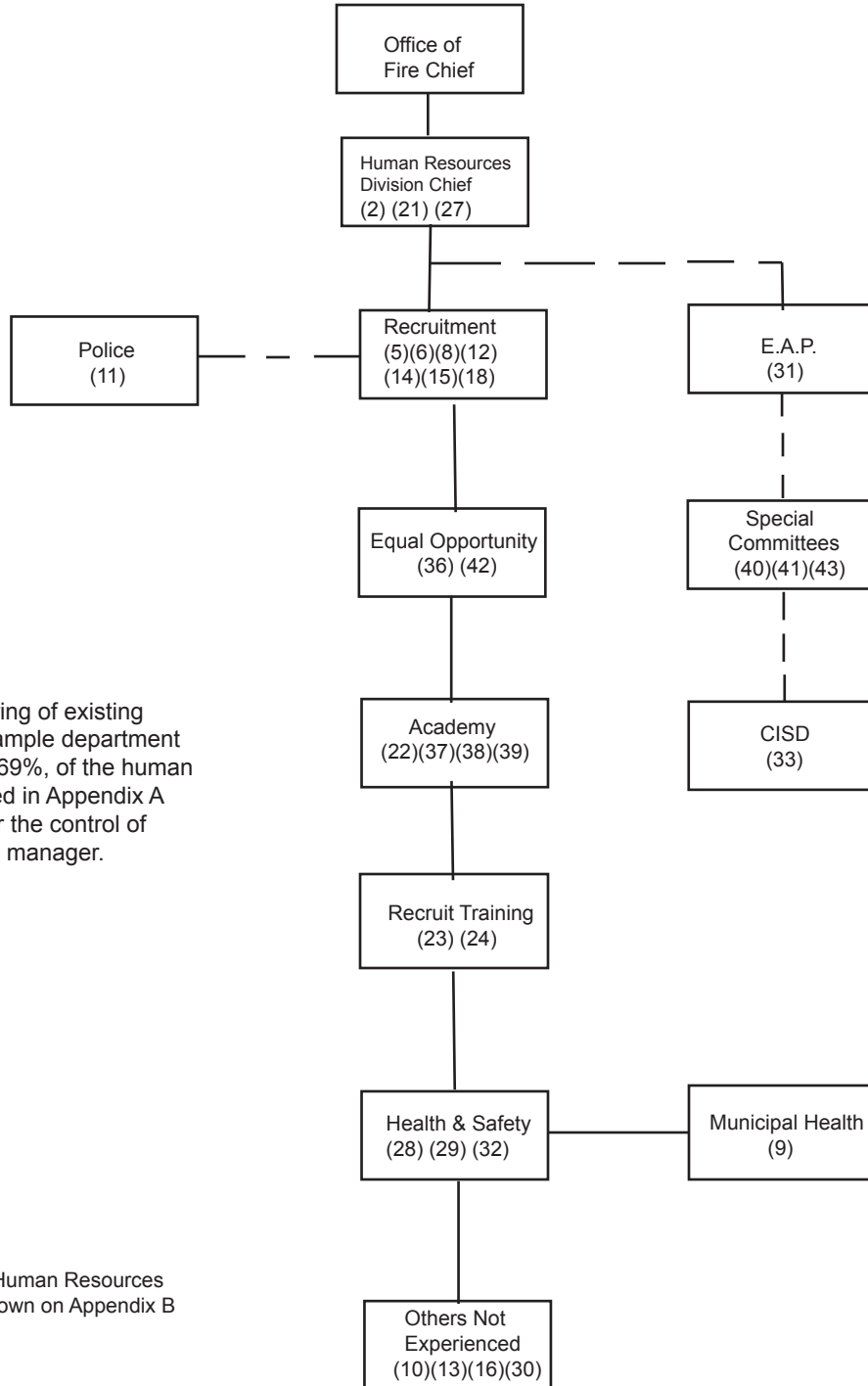
To demonstrate how this may work in your department compare Appendix C & D. Appendix C is an example of the typical department today and shows levels of an organization that handles 46 elements of human resource development (refer to Appendix A for reference number). Appendix D is an example of how that same fire department could be restructured to include an HRM division. This example not only includes and controls 69% of the HRM elements, but offers a platform to coordinate all of the remaining outside-handled elements resulting in a cohesive, comprehensive package.

Appendix C: A Typical Fire Departments Table of Organization



LEGEND: () indicates Human Resources Elements Shown on Appendix A

Appendix D: Human Resources Management as it Could be Restructured within the Fire Department



NOTE:

By a simple restructuring of existing functions within the sample department up to 32 of the 46, or 69%, of the human resource element listed in Appendix A could be placed under the control of one human resources manager.

LEGEND: () indicates Human Resources Elements Shown on Appendix B

CONCLUSION

To restate and emphasize our problem, let's use an analogy. Equate your department to a football team. Each jurisdictional level represents a potentially different game plan; each level of the organization represents a separate coach; and a touch down represents maximum development and effectiveness of the human resource. How can we score a touchdown if we have 28 different coaches in the stands, all calling in plays at various times of the games, working from four different game plans? Where is the head coach in all of this? How do you think this affects the fans (the public you serve) and the players (your employees)?

It's time to stop fumbling the ball and start looking around for a head coach. Look around at what the successful teams in the private sector are doing and see if you can adopt their game plan for your team.

Human resource management for the fire service – an idea whose time has come.

¹ Fitz-enz, Jac. "How to Market the HR Department." Personnel, March 1986, p. 24.

² Edward F. McDonough III, "How much Power Does HR Have and What Can It Do To Win More?" Personnel, January 1986, p. 22.

³ Janet R. Andrews, "Is there a Crisis in The Personnel Department's Identity?" Personnel Journal, June 1986, p. 92.

⁴ Edward F. McDonough III, "How much Power Does HR Have and What Can It Do To Win More?" Personnel, January 1986, p. 22.

⁵ Alan Brunacini, Health Fitness Newsletter, June 1986, VI, #1

⁶ Peter Drucker, Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974). P. 308

⁷ Lee Feldstein, Fire Personnel Practices, 1986, International Management Association.

⁸ Survey conducted by authors on 11-10-88 Emmittsburg, MD

⁹ Harry Hickey, Public Fire Safety Organization, A Systems Approach, NFPA 1973, p. 132.

¹⁰ Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., In Search of Excellence, (New York: Warner Books, 1982), p. 3-26.

¹¹ Ibid., pp.235-78

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APPENDIX A

Manpower planning process

1. Job specifications—establishing the specifications and requirements for each position.
2. Manpower needs—assessing numbers and levels of manpower needs.
3. Compensation levels—setting the compensations levels.
4. Benefits package—setting the benefits package levels.

Recruitment process

5. Pre-employment counseling—educating individuals and groups on possible employment in the department.
6. Advertising—announcing the exam process to the public.
7. Application distribution—preparing and distributing applications to the general public.
8. Application processing—receiving and evaluating applications.
9. Health screening—reviewing health questionnaires and/or physical examinations.
10. Drug screening—testing and reviewing drug testing results.
11. Polygraph—testing and reviewing polygraph tests.
12. DMV check—review of driving records.
13. Psychological evaluation—testing and reviewing psychological evaluation tests.
14. Background check—review of law enforcement records.
15. Physical agility test—testing and reviewing physical agility tests.
16. Interview—conducting, evaluating and rating results of face-to-face interview.
17. Written exam—preparing, conducting, evaluating and rating a written exam.
18. Employee contract—special contract provisions that are a condition of employment, i.e. no smoking.
19. Develop candidate list—gather all of the above results and evaluate and present as a rated list.

Selection process

20. Equipment and supply outfitting—assigning uniform and equipment items to the new employee.
21. Employment forms—preparation of all forms needed for new employee.
22. In-service indoctrination—educating and counseling the new employee and/or family on responsibilities.
23. Recruit training (fire)—first level training in fire topics to acquire the skills to begin employment.
24. Recruit training (EMS)—first level training in EMS topics to acquire the skills to begin employment.

Employment process

25. Probationary appraisals—preparation and evaluation of probationary appraisals
26. Performance appraisals—preparation and evaluation of performance appraisals.
27. Pay for performance/MSA—evaluation and determination if pay increases or decreases are warranted.

28. Health—coordination of all health benefits and programs for employees.
29. Safety—establishment and implementation of safety programs.
30. Wellness program—establishment and implementation of a wellness program to promote health and fitness.
31. EAP—coordination of employee assistance programs.
32. Physical fitness—establishment and implementation of a physical fitness program.
33. Critical Incident Stress—provision of counseling for critical incident stress situations.
34. Discipline—responsibility for discipline programs.
35. Grievance—responsibility for processing employee grievances.
36. Sexual harassment claims—responsibility for processing claims of sexual harassment.
37. In-service training—normal training relating to skill levels required in the job.
38. Internal; special education—special training outside of the department not normally included in in-service training.
39. External special education—special training outside of the department training program.
40. Promotion exams—coordinating all aspects of promotion exams other than assessment team.
41. Career development—establishment and implementation of programs for employee career development.
42. Affirmative action program—establishment and implementation of programs related to affirmative action.
43. Assessment center—coordination of an assessment center.
44. Retirement counseling—establishment and implementation of a counseling program for retirement candidates.
45. Retirement—coordination of the retirement process.
46. Termination—coordination of the termination process.

APPENDIX B

List of organizational levels with primary responsibility by jurisdiction:

Department level

1. Office of the chief.
2. Administrative division.
3. Operation/suppression division.
4. Training division.
5. Internal affairs.
6. Personnel.
7. Recruitment.
8. Chaplain.
9. Supervision.
10. Employee

Municipal government level

11. executive officer.
12. Administration.
13. Personnel.
14. Finance.
15. Law enforcement
16. Medical.
17. EAP.
18. Training.
19. EEO.

Region or State

20. State personnel board.
21. Joint apprenticeship program.
22. Training.
23. Legislative.
24. Law enforcement.
25. Department of Motor Vehicles.

Other

26. Union.
27. Outside contracts.
28. Advisory council.