

# VOLUNTEERS CORNER

## THE ART OF DISCIPLINE

Discipline in the fire service too often is used as punishment rather than as a means of correcting a problem or behavior. The administration of discipline is not an enviable task. When parents discipline their children they say, "This is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you." Now I understand what they mean. And in spite of our best intentions, taking disciplinary action can create strained relations between an officer and member. As a result, discipline in volunteer or on-call departments too often is ignored or improperly administered.

Yet discipline is vital to a department's effective and efficient operation and reduces its chances of legal liability. Command and control must be maintained and certain basic behaviors are expected in order to properly discharge the duties of the fire department. This is not to say that fire departments should become excessively strict, thereby making the firefighters paranoid; they shouldn't have to constantly look over their shoulders while trying to concentrate on their job. An atmosphere that limits creative thinking and innovation is certainly not desirable—firefighters should not feel restricted because they are afraid to make a minor mistake.

Discipline should be viewed as an

■ **RICHARD A. MARINUCCI** is chief of the Farmington Hills, Michigan Fire Department. He holds bachelor's degrees in secondary education, fire science, and fire administration.

art—not necessarily an exact science—and should be administered so that it is perceived as reasonable and prudent. The administration of discipline in volunteer departments is a complex issue. Think of a basketball game, for example. The referees must maintain order, enforce the rules, and make sure the game is played fairly. They are not to adversely affect the outcome of the game. To do this, they are given a rule book and told to use their discretion. They call every game differently. Based on their experience and judgment, the referees determine which violations will be called. The best referees know when and when not to blow their whistle. By comparison, fire service organizations have their rules and supervisors responsible for enforcing them. Good supervisors know which rules need enforcement and when.

### WHY DISCIPLINE IS LACKING

There are many reasons why discipline is sometimes overlooked (either intentionally or unintentionally) in volunteer departments. First, volunteer organizations are generally close-knit, with strong friendships and a family atmosphere. In spite of the supervisor's best intentions, the administration of discipline can result in strained relations and the loss of friendships. Few people choose to socialize with someone who has taken disciplinary action against them.

There is also the attitude that because the employee is a volunteer, deviant behavior should be tolerated

to some degree so as not to create a negative climate. Can a volunteer organization set standards without risking the loss of membership? Because of the short supply of volunteers, are fire departments forced to be more lenient? Certainly some departments feel that any undue pressure will have a negative impact on their ability to recruit and maintain much-needed firefighters. On the other hand, some members may feel more discipline is needed to maintain high standards. When viewing discipline, consider that it will be perceived as negative. Volunteers probably will not wish to be associated with an organization that they feel is constantly "harassing" the membership. This emphasizes the need for reasonable and prudent discipline and its proper administration.

Another reason for insufficient discipline is the failure of some departments to invest the necessary time and energy to draft sound, fundamental rules and regulations. In order to instill discipline, a department needs rules. Department members must understand them and their role in maintaining discipline. The rules must not conflict with any state or federal laws, local ordinances, or the U.S. Constitution. Also, there are protected classes (race, religion, age, marital status) as well as protected activities (union, whistle-blower). Discipline provides control and direction so the department can meet its goals and objectives. It also establishes acceptable standards of conduct and allows members to modify their behavior. Rules

## VOLUNTEERS CORNER

### THE ART OF DISCIPLINE

define acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.

#### TAKING CORRECTIVE ACTION

In spite of the negative implications of discipline, corrective action should be its primary goal. The steps for minor offenses should be a verbal warning, written reprimand, suspension, and then finally termination. All verbal and written reprimands must include the violation, penalty, corrective action, and statement that future violations will result in further disciplinary action. Remember, behavior modification is the goal. In cases of severe offenses, some of the steps are omitted, as major violations require immediate action.

Enforcement of discipline should be done as needed to maintain control and achieve desired behavior, but it never should be taken to extremes. Excessive action threatens employees

and discourages innovation. Employees are less likely to take risks if they fear disciplinary action for unfavorable results. You must achieve a balance. Occasionally you overlook some rules: They may be outdated, or they do not apply to specific circumstances, or they're trivial, or their enforcement will only aggravate a problem. For example, police officers do not always enforce all traffic laws all of the time. Speed limits in a school district are probably strictly enforced, while some leniency is given to drivers on an interstate highway.

Before exacting discipline, conduct a proper investigation. Get the facts and determine if action is needed. Based on your findings, then determine the appropriate action and dispense the discipline. Know the rules and regulations. Too often employees have a better understanding of these rules and regulations than do supervisors.

The steps for discipline are as follows:

- Act promptly. Do not ignore

problems or discipline employees after the fact.

- Learn both sides of the story by asking the employee for his version.

- Determine if a violation has occurred.

- Check for mitigating or aggravating circumstances. Mitigating circumstances lessen the impact of the violation and often explain the reasons for improper behavior, while aggravating circumstances increase the severity of the violation.

- Decide on the appropriate action and take it.

- Document the incident. This frequently is neglected, and failure to document can cause future problems. As part of the documentation phase, make sure all records are centralized so that discipline is consistent throughout the department.

- Allow an opportunity for appeal through a grievance process. This gives the employee due process and allows the department to better defend its actions should legal action result.

## THE PPVs FROM LIFEJACK

- ◆ Choice of Kawasaki, Kohler, or Honda 4 Cycle Engine
- ◆ Aviation Style Variable Pitch Fiberglass propellers
- ◆ Choice of Size to fit every Application
- ◆ Fully Adjustable Tilt
- ◆ 5 Year Warranty
- ◆ Toll Free 1-800-877-9506



**18" Stinger PPV™**  
12,000 CFM \$890

**24" Brute PPV™**  
5 HP - 16,000 CFM

**30" Standard PPV™**  
8 HP - 22,000 CFM

For More Facts Circle 105 on Reply Card

## VOLUNTEERS CORNER

### THE ART OF DISCIPLINE

Determining the appropriate penalty is very important and can affect how your department is perceived in terms of fairness. Don't give the death penalty for misdemeanor offenses. Consider the nature of the offense, uniformity of enforcement, past department practices, and mitigating or aggravating circumstances. Make sure that the rules and procedures were appropriate and reasonable.

The employee's work record, past history, and length of service are important considerations. A firefighter with continual disciplinary problems requires different action than a first-time offender (except in severe cases). Also, a 20-year veteran probably would deserve more consideration than a probationary firefighter. If a good employee with a long tenure and a clean record makes a mistake, consider all the facts. Also, be open to the possibility that man-

agement may be partly to blame for the violation. Remember, most situations call for rehabilitation: You are trying to change deviant behavior through corrective discipline.

\* \* \*

Exacting the proper discipline is not easy, nor is it a desirable task for most people. Most of the time rule violations are not intentional and are not done with malice. These violations can interfere with friendships. They may involve very good employees. But everyone must accept their role and corresponding responsibility to maintain order.

Unfortunately, discipline is a complicated issue and there are no simple solutions or pat answers. Discipline must be administered by a reasonable and prudent individual, someone with a good sense of what is right and wrong. There must be a balance between what is good for the department and what is good for the individual. Without it, you cannot provide quality service. ■

## EDITOR'S OPINION

### SALUTE TO A BROTHER'S BROTHER

you and poured it into the pages of our magazine. You were his reason and his motivation.

So now Tom has decided to take that spirit with him to other areas, without the title of editor affixed to his name. But for Tom, titles are pretty meaningless anyway. As always he will be working with you and for you. You'll feel his presence in our books and videos and especially in the editorial soul of this magazine.

I know there will be many others joining with me as I salute Tom Brennan for his lifelong commitment to making this country a safer place to live in. We congratulate you, Tom, on your successes and know that there will be many more down the road. And most of all, many, many thanks for being you—a brother's brother.

*Bill Manning*

# HOTSHOT II



- Gear driven
- Completely re-engineered
- Compact, but powerful
- Heavy duty recessed magnet
- 50 watt halogen bulb
- Polycarbonate lens
- 10 ft. coil cord
- Meets SAE J845 Class 1 requirements

**Southern Vehicle Products**  
P.O. Box 8000 • Pinellas Park, FL 34644  
(813) 572-9142 FAX (813) 573-1610

**Southern VP**<sup>TM.</sup>

For More Facts Circle 106 on Reply Card