CLOSING THE PERSONALITY GAP BETWEEN CAREER AND VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS

Executive Leadership

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ABSTRACT

In every corner of the United States, and all points in between, the fire service has been dealing with an issue that has created many problems. The City of Wenatchee Fire & Rescue and neighboring departments are no different, they have shared in this problem for a long time.

The problem is that many career and volunteer fire fighters have been at odds due to their unique personalities. In many cases this has created conflict between the two bodies during training and even emergencies.

The purpose of this research is to identify what needs to be done to close the personality gap between career and volunteers. By doing so, it will increase the effectiveness of fire fighters working together in areas such as operations and training. If nothing else, it should help in supporting one of the United States Fire Administration operational objectives. To help reduce the loss of life from fire of firefighters. This will be done through cooperation and respect between the two groups. By have these things, they should work better together, in a safer manner for their benefit and the people they serve.

Descriptive research was used in this study. This type of research helped determine and report the present status of the problem. It involves the attitudes and opinions of firefighters, both line and administrators, from around the country.

Three questions were developed for the purpose of this research paper. 1) What conflicts exist between career and volunteer firefighters? 2) How do other fire
departments address this problem? 3) What methods can Wenatchee, Washington area fire departments use to reduce this problem here?

Procedures included literature review materials, interviews and a survey that meets Executive Development guidelines. These were used to identify the fire service opinion of the personality gaps that exist and solutions to those problems.

The top five conflicts found were Union issues, training practices, egos, jealousy, and who’s in charge. The top three answers to question two were: 1) providing greater communication between those involved and all ranks; 2) providing fair and firm policies for both groups; and 3) provide leadership that can move both groups towards common goals and a team oriented atmosphere. Question three results showed that Wenatchee area fire departments must provide a number of things to make the answers for question 2 possible. First, leadership training that focuses on human relationships must be provided. Second, greater interaction, both socially and professionally, between career and volunteers must happen more frequently. Third, discussion panels must be established to allow both groups the opportunity to get together to air potential problems. And fourth, a peer review group made up of representatives of both career and volunteers should be initiated to evaluate established programs and recent incidents.
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INTRODUCTION

Past history of Wenatchee Fire & Rescue has been that they had an important support role to outside fire districts in the greater Wenatchee Valley. In the early 1980’s this role started to change and eventually ended where they are today, an isolated afterthought of support by those districts. Prior to this change Wenatchee Fire & Rescue was considered a top professional organization that could be counted on for support and emergency response. There was harmony between the career and volunteers in the valley. This good working relationship changed in the early 1980’s and there was a definite shift from harmony to discontent between the two groups.

Today’s relationship between the groups can be described as tolerable at best and very strained by both organizations when viewing the other. It is hoped that information and evidence can be obtained to reduce the unfriendly feelings, and that programs can be instituted to create better relationships that will close the personality gaps that exist.

The purpose of this research project is to identify the conflicts that exist today that contribute to poor relationships, to identify positive methods and procedures that produce harmonious feelings and to develop ideas that will recommend new ways for the groups to co-exist and get along.

This research study uses a descriptive research method.

The research questions to be answered are:

1) What conflicts exist between career and volunteer firefighters?
2) How do other fire departments address this problem?
3) What methods can Wenatchee, Washington area fire departments use to reduce this problem here?
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Wenatchee, Washington is located in the center of the State of Washington on the eastern slopes of the Cascade Mountains. The City has a population of about 24,000 and takes in approximately 7 square miles. It is a small urban area surrounded by rural and agricultural communities. The City of Wenatchee is a growing community and the population of the surrounding valley is about 50,000 that are spread over a two county area.

At the turn of the century Wenatchee Fire & Rescue was a volunteer department. In 1929 the department moved to combination status, which includes career and volunteers, with the hiring of the first paid chief. As Wenatchee was a growing city, the department also developed into full paid status with no volunteers around 1953. In these early years of a full paid department, the City had 40 personnel on the payroll. This staffing included the administration, line personnel; a well manned fire prevention office and was responsible for taking and dispatching all lower valley emergencies. This staffing level remained constant until about 1980 when manning started to dwindle. This reduction in personnel was attributed to other valley departments becoming better-trained and up to date with modern equipment. Equipment that Wenatchee Fire & Rescue was used to providing to handle or supplement emergencies that occurred outside their jurisdiction. Because of this upgrading of other area departments, the number of incidents the city was involved in also was reduced. With this reduction in need came the eventual reduction in personnel.

All fire service line personnel are trained EMT’s and provide basic life support for Wenatchee area citizens. The emergency medical field need has increased every year
since EMT certification became mandatory. Now 83% of all incidents are medical related. Because of this statistic it is becoming harder to justify the now 32-man department. This is because medical aid calls do not need the manpower that fire incidents call for. It has some leadership personnel thinking that maybe the City can do better by providing for the aid calls and then supplementing personnel for the fire incidents. Supplemented through some type of volunteer system like straight volunteers, part paid personnel, or college residence programs. Even though the City of Wenatchee can justify for now a fully career department, others in the area cannot and must rely on volunteers to supplement their paid personnel.

While other area departments are struggling with recruitment and retention problems, Wenatchee Fire & Rescue struggles with relationship problems with those same volunteers they work side by side with.

The problem seemed to begin with the reduction in services provided to outside fire departments. There never seemed to be a reason why our services were no longer needed. Although, it seemed that the reduction in need came as a result in the upgrading of services of those other fire departments. A reasonable expectation that must be considered when services are no longer needed. But as this need eventually shrank to nothing, except automatic and mutual aid assignments, an air of resentment remained with our personnel who were used to being active in service to other departments.

This resentment occurs in many different places, from closed-door gripe sessions, to informal training sessions and even to the emergency scene where personal verbal attacks have taken place. This bitterness can be summed up in one firefighters words, “as career personnel, we are the best trained and are immediately available to help with other
departments in their time of need. It’s unbelievable that these departments can continue to use volunteers on first responses when we are here, ready, willing and able to help.”

One issue that can be drawn on is that Wenatchee Fire & Rescue was not prepared to deal with the change that took place in its reduction of service to outlying departments. Had the principles of the National Fire Academy Class “Strategic Management of Change” been used, there might have been a lot less tension, misunderstandings and might have even created good will between those involved. Some of these elements include finding the formal or informal leaders to help with a problem, open communication so all personnel knew what was happening and getting buy in from all people who were involved so they had a feeling of ownership. In fact better working relationships could have come out of the situation had everyone been involved and worked together to manage the changing needs and delivery services of all departments.

In a survey of Wenatchee Fire & Rescue Personnel, 13% still feel there is no need for volunteers in our department or the need to even associate with them. 62% concede there is a need for the volunteer but we do not need them yet. 21% feel it’s time for us to look at the future and recognize the volunteer as valuable and that we need them and should become a combination department. 4% had no opinion one-way or the other.

The need to become a stakeholder in a combination system is a very real possibility for Wenatchee Fire & Rescue’s near future. Budgetary problems caused by high overtime costs combined with service delivery issues have created a need to look at the combination system and the possibility of instituting it. Problems that are sure to come if a combination system is put in place are union issues, leadership, training equality and human relationship issues that are needed when dealing with volunteers.
Another issue that could become reality is that the neighboring Chelan County Fire District #1 is also having budget problems with issues such as city annexations into their district. Chelan County Fire District #1 totally surrounds the City of Wenatchee. This of course reduces the district tax base, which causes the financial problem. The obvious answer is the merging of the two departments that would be a tremendous savings to the taxpayer. No longer would there be a duplication of service for such things as paying the salary of two Fire Chiefs or the upkeep and manning of two maintenance departments.

With that merger comes an immediate need to address the issue of this research. Getting two very different service bodies to get along. Chelan County has an existing combination department where career and volunteers already do well together. However their problems exist on administration vs. line worker issues.

The other party in this equation is the full career department of the City of Wenatchee. We already know that there are some negative issues that its’ members need to deal with. With the real possibility of a merger looming, the need to be prepared is important. The results of this study could very well be a catalyst to bringing the two groups and departments together for a smooth transition into one big combination department. Again, managing change could be an asset to making this a reality.

The National Fire Academy Course “Executive Leadership” would also be helpful if its’ principles would be followed. Getting different groups to work together towards common goals is a leadership issue. Getting the personnel to follow a leader in an organization towards those goals could also be very beneficial. As the course states, there could be many different leaders to make this happen, both formal and informal.
However it is the formal leader, most often the Chief that will be looked upon to lead in this type of situation. The impact of the need for great leadership in these times is clearly pointed out in the Executive Leadership class. Case studies that were presented and even the film “12 Angry Men” highlighted the need that leadership is an issue when dealing with mergers or just opening the doors of communications between groups. This research is relevant to the Executive Leadership course in those issues of change and culture if not done properly can make or break a leader or organization.

Expectations of this research study will show that when enough information and communications are brought out, that any potential merger should become easier. If nothing else, a system of communications, training and relationship building should take place in Wenatchee Fire & Rescue to close the personality gap between volunteer and career personnel. At Wenatchee Fire & Rescue with 83% believing there is a need for volunteers and some maybe even in our own department, there is a good basis for improving those relationships. It is interesting the majority of these free thinkers come from a group of personnel that have fewer than 15 years of service each.

Research from this study identifies the most common problems encountered, methods of rectifying them or avoiding them and potential areas of improvement to bring the two groups closer by changing their relationship feelings. This study could also benefit other area departments who also have internal relationship problems between their career and volunteer forces. Once a department starts looking internally, they will need to look at their own organization culture, which may need to change.
This study will also have an impact on a USFA operational objective which states “reduce the loss of life from fire of firefighters.” This will be accomplished by establishing better working relationships between the two groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review search was conducted at the NFA’s Learning resource Center (LRC), the local library, personal books and the internet, in hopes of validating personal existing ideas about why there were personality gaps between volunteer and career firefighters in Wenatchee, Washington. This author believed that if conflicts could be identified, social and working relationships could be bettered between existing organizations in the area. Research questions were also intended to identify if the conflicts were local or if they were the same conflicts hindering others across the country. Literature review was intended to provide common answers to the conflict problems in hopes those local authorities and leaders would take the steps needed to resolve the issues.

A large base of literature was found in the National Fire Academy LRC. The references identified were used due to their relationship with the research questions.

Much of the literature focused on the recruitment and retention of volunteers in the fire service. It has been identified that there are changes being made to the type of departments being used in America today. Both all career and all volunteer departments are changing to combination departments for many of the same reasons. The main reason is economics from the all career side and a more consistent, reliable force from the volunteer side. “Due to financial conditions, some communities that were served by an
all-volunteer fire department have considered and implemented the addition of career personnel. At the same time, communities served by an all-career department are considering the addition of volunteers.” (Granito, 1980) “In most instances, the combination department is implemented to ensure that some staff is always available to handle emergencies.” (Rielage, 1995) “The days of the pure volunteer are coming to an end. It’s a gradual evolution but it’s already happening.” (Grunwald, 1999) “Many fire departments entered the 1980’s with waiting lists of people who wanted to join. Now the same departments are lacking recruits.” (Wrightson, 1998) However it is clear that volunteers are needed by both sides in order to provide solutions to each of their problems. Volunteers have taken an unfair hit on the problem side, when in reality volunteers and career personnel share problems. “Volunteers should be part of the solution, not part of the problem.” (Moede, 1993)

Problems vary across the country, but they are all pretty much the same tune, different state. No matter where you’re at “one disadvantage inherent in the combination system is the conflict that often arises between career and volunteer members. This conflict works against the teamwork necessary to perform our duties in a safe and effective manner.” (Stern, 1997)

Ronny Coleman states in a recent 2002 issue of Fire Chief magazine that “there are issues associated with running a good combination department that can’t be overlooked, such as training and education of all personnel, communications, deployment and incident command criteria, compensation, career development and human relations. Without good programs in these areas your bound for conflict.” (Coleman, 2002) Egos also are present when dealing with both groups. “I find it interesting that many in the fire
service who started as volunteers gain a certain disrespect for volunteers as soon as they themselves become paid.” (Coleman, 2002)

Not every department is willing to realize that there are problems or they just don’t want to deal with them. “Conflicts between career and volunteer firefighters are like dealing with an old, eccentric relative – everyone is aware of the situation but nobody wants to talk about it.” (Sullivan, 1997) Because of this attitude, things just get worse until they come to a head.

Depending on the size of the organization, conflicts can be viewed in different ways. “Combination fire departments with fewer that five or six career firefighters and forty or more volunteers are so volunteer dominate that conflict is unlikely. However, a dozen career firefighters with threatened livelihoods confronting 40 volunteers is high in conflict.” (Benoit, 2000)

In every state of America, the Union issue arises as a high conflict issue. “When career firefighters are unionized, they have power beyond their small numbers, and volunteers are more likely to feel that their identity is threatened.” (Benoit, 2000) Benoit also states in 2000, “Career firefighters fear that their employers might replace their paid labor with volunteer labor; volunteers are thus seen as a threat to career firefighters job security.”

Perception of what is happening in an organization is a common thread too. “The threat of loss of power, status and identity engender considerable conflict.” (Benoit, 2000) When perceptions differ about things like responsibilities, “conflict between groups can arise when one group feels aggrieved about the actions of the other group.” (Benoit, 2000)
Along with job security and egos, there are other problems that are common. Harry Carter, PhD. writes in Firehouse, 1993 an article titled *A 21st Century Solution*,

There are a number of problems which can cloud the organizational and operational picture and lead to confrontations. 1) Volunteers dislike career people because they get money for doing what volunteers do for free. 2) Career people dislike volunteers whom they feel are rank amateurs doing a professionals job. (Carter, 1993)

Carters top five list of other conflicts include: different standards of performance; different training requirements; different requirements for officer levels; strict career rules and regulations and lax volunteer rules; and strict volunteer rules and regulations with lax career rules.

When addressing conflict, it is interesting to look at how each group views the other. “In making a comparison, each group (whether volunteer or career) usually undervalues its own rewards and overstates its’ own costs. Conversely, each group usually overestimates the rewards of the other group and minimizes the other groups costs.” (Benoit, 2000)

Yes there are many conflicts that can arise in volunteer / career relationships. They can be better understood how they happen and how they can be avoided or managed if everyone would communicate better.

“The cause of almost all relationship difficulties is rooted in conflicting or ambiguous expectations around roles and goals. Whether we are dealing with the question of who does what at work, how you communicate with your daughter when you tell her to clean her room, or who feeds the fish and takes out the trash,
we can be certain that unclear expectations will lead to misunderstanding, disappointment and withdrawals of trust.” (Covey, 1989)

Once the conflicts have been identified there are many different ideas on how to correct or avoid them. They all seem to have a central theme, leadership, teamwork, standard accountabilities, equal training and clear communications.

“Leadership must be proactive to meet the needs and expectations of both groups while building morale and unity. Individuals, career and part-time, must be trained on a team approach so that each can feel comfortable with the other and know what is expected. The team concept must be maintained by officers throughout the ranks, and the department should be driven by a dynamic mission statement that clearly empowers each individual to strive toward an established set of common goals.” (Rielage, 1995)

Expectations of rules, requirements and regulations must always be clearly marked out for all personnel. “Benefits and requirements must be clearly stated, with no surprise expectations. Explicit standards take the pressure off personality conflicts.” (Swartwout, 1992) Understanding conflict and what it is and how to deal with it is another story. “Managing conflict is not resolving conflict. In a Combination fire department, the tension among management, local government, career firefighters and volunteers will always be with us. The goal is to manage the tension so that it will be creative instead of destructive.” (Benoit, 2000)

Fairness in many areas is another conflict that arises. “They inevitably seek a fair relationship which does not require equal rewards or equal investments, but does require
that the ratio between the two be equal. Explanation and constant communication can reduce perceived violations of fairness.” (Benoit, 2000)

Cultural change is not an easy issue to deal with but many departments must do so if they are to make the switch from all career or all volunteer to combination departments. Leaders of the organization must take the lead to provide for understanding. “Real change only can occur if the leader successfully unfreezes the old assumptions and then refreezes them into the subconscious of the culture. The degree of success in this process depends on the leaders vision and dedication.” (Cook, 1990)

Understanding a department’s procedures, policies and personnel placement in the chain of command is important too. Each department must “establish standards for both career and volunteer officers. Personnel can better accept orders from people whom they feel have received proper training and sufficient training and have achieved a standard of excellence in the profession.” (Marinucci, 1990) “All members performing the same job should meet the same level of training. All firefighters must know the job equally well – whether receiving compensation or not.” (Stern, 1997) Formal operating instructions are best to clearly outline what’s expected. “Job descriptions should be clearly defined. Responsibilities should be clearly laid out for all members of the department whether paid or volunteer. All members should know a clearly delineated formal organizational structure. This will help guide members in their daily interactions.” (Stern, 1997)

The team approach was clearly the most useful tool recognized by literature review as the best means of reducing conflict. “Team cohesiveness is an essential element of an effective combination department. An avenue to successful team building is regularly scheduled joint training sessions.” (Sullivan, 1997) The team-building role
of all personnel is equal between career and volunteers. “Ask volunteers and staff to brainstorm expectations. Then ask them to divide them into healthy, unhealthy, or not sure headings. Discuss ways to strengthen healthy expectations and eliminate unhealthy ones.” (Vineyard, McCurley, 2001) Volunteer personnel must have additional reasons to participate in team development, even if it is for personal issues. “Volunteers must have some role in shaping their destiny and growth. The use of advisory or productivity teams with representation for volunteers creates a positive atmosphere that enhances professional development.” (Fisher, 1991)

**PROCEDURES**

There were three main elements of procedures used to conduct this research. First a search of literature review material was done at the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center (LRC) while attending the Executive Leadership class. Asking the LRC to conduct an additional search for materials that could also help followed this. Additional literature review materials were also found in this authors own books and the Internet at such sites as [www.madeforsuccess.com](http://www.madeforsuccess.com). Some literature review material was taken from research references in established ARP’s as references for study questions. The literature review material was collected between March 2002 and June 2002.

The second part of research dealt with conducting two surveys, one nationally based and one internal survey conducted at Wenatchee Fire & Rescue. Sixteen Wenatchee Fire & Rescue personnel were also given a simple questionnaire that dealt with the issue of the need for volunteers. The purpose of the survey was to find out what the current status was of conflict between career and volunteer firefighters. The questionnaire would also indicate the mindset of members on their local view of the need
for volunteers. The survey would also tell what was being done to combat the problem and what other ideas could be identified to prevent the problem in the future. The internal survey was to establish ideas our own members had on how to deal with the study questions.

The nationally based survey was sent to fire departments in every state of the union. Fifty surveys were sent to fire departments in each state with close representation from career, combination and all volunteer. They were sent to almost equal numbers of administrators and line personnel. This was done by keeping a hand account of whom the surveys were sent to and what their ranks were. Additional surveys were sent to board members of the International Association of Fire Chiefs and The National Volunteer Council. They were accounted for in state totals for record keeping purposes. All this was time consuming, but paid off in getting a good cross section of opinion in the returned surveys.

It was important that a survey of this size and cross section should be conducted to obtain the views from different perspectives. If all surveys were returned, there would be 2500 to review. This number was thought to be manageable due to the limitations of time required to complete the research paper. Other limitations of the survey feared that it would be passed off by the Chief to lower ranking officers to be completed, and this was found to be true in some cases. However it was determined to be a credible issue, due to the fact that the people answering had Chief officer rankings. Also cultural issues were found to be a factor in the answers provided and seemed to limit the vision of some because of their demographics and department lifestyle and work ethics.
An internal survey at Wenatchee Fire & Rescue was conducted in May 2002 where four members of each rank were presented the survey for their opinions. This was important information to get, as it was one of the reasons for taking on this research project. The involvement in the survey for all line personnel ranks was important as it provided views as to what each thought and what could be done to eliminate or prevent the problem.

Two highly regarded area chiefs were interviewed in July 2002. Chief Doug DeVore of Chelan County Fire District #3, in Leavenworth, Washington, and Chief Kurt Blanchard of Chelan County Fire District #7 in Chelan, Washington. It was important to get the views of people in the area who would not be afraid to speak their mind about the present status of the problem and their recommendations for solutions.

The Survey

The survey was administered equally between all 50 states. Fifty surveys were sent out in each state with approximately twenty-five going to administrators and twenty-five going to line personnel. Return results of each state are listed in Appendix B. There was a limitation on these surveys as they were sent via e-mail. As everyone knows who uses e-mail, sometimes the letter or attachments in your mailbox get deleted before being read.

Once surveys were returned they were stored and added to the count list of returns for the state for statistical analysis. Answers were also tabulated into common answer categories for each question. The survey is listed as Appendix A and to be consistent, the three research questions were used as the base for the survey.
Two interviews were conducted in July 2002. One on July 26, 2002 with Chief Kurt Blanchard and one on July 31, 2002 with Chief Doug DeVore. The purpose for both interviews were to get the local perspective on how things looked from the outside locally and how things were dealt with internally in their department. They were asked only the survey questions and their view on how things were in respect to each question. Some answers from each interview are detailed in the results section. Both interviews were conducted in each Chiefs office to give them the best comfort zone possible and hopefully reveal their best opinions. Each interview lasted about one hour.

RESULTS

All three areas of research, literature review, surveys and interviews provided a clearer understanding of what conflicts existed, what people did to deal with them and how to prevent them in the future. The results obtained accomplished what was wanted and that was in the form of information, opinions and ideas.

Question #1

Literature review showed that although the conflicts were the same, the order of their priority was not the same as the returned surveys. Most authors felt that the number one issue was the lack of leadership. They felt that leadership was the common element of much that was encountered in the areas of conflict. If strong, current leadership was provided, most conflicts could be resolved or prevented. Formal and informal leaders, such as discussed in the Executive Leadership class, was important to the success of each group. Identifying those leaders and using them to be the bond between personnel caught in conflict. They could also help establish and police fair and firm practices that are the
center of some conflict. The leader is identified as the mold or headstone for others to rely on for guidance.

Teamwork or creating a team atmosphere would also reduce conflict in the workplace. Career and volunteers should not only work together professionally but opportunities should be provided for the groups to socialize together. Understanding of the “person” was important issue that both groups should be aware of and not just the title or working body. The team-building concept provided for each group to better understand each other and their abilities and allowed each group to help or better the other.

Training of career and volunteer firefighters was the next important issue that the authors felt was important to provided. Training was to be provided either on an equal basis or by one of the groups so as to create a bond between the two. If both groups knew the capabilities of the other they would better understand where they were coming from and be able to create a line of trust that must exist. If one group was to train the other, a sense of teamwork would again be established and not a line drawn in the sand that one was better than the other.

Communications wrapped up the major reasons for conflict. It can be attributed to all three above that when it does not exist, none can prevail or be of any benefit. Leaders must communicate with the rest of the department about things like goals and objectives. Social skills can be better managed when the two know they can get together on an informal basis and know what moves the other. Communicating also means that the two are talking and resolving and planning on ideas like the future of the department.
By communicating doors would open that would otherwise be closed and issues can be resolved before they can become a problem.

On the other hand, fire service personnel that answered the survey had the same issues in mind but in a different order and with a longer list. Union issues far outweighed any other category of conflict. It was cited that the union positions on job security, pay, training, professionalism and who’s in charge were the big issues that drove a wedge between the two. Most felt that unions believed that volunteers would take their jobs away or reduce their chance for advancement and better pay. While the volunteers felt the unions were criticizing their abilities to perform and their desire to be there. Union members also believed that they were better trained because they did it all the time and not just on drill night. Volunteers felt that they received their training “on the job” because they responded to all calls twenty-four / seven and the career people only responded the days they were on duty. So it was a wash in the volunteers mind.

Egos and jealousy were next in conflicts identified. Usually this was a matter that one group felt they were just plain better than the other for a variety of reasons. A great many of the surveys stated that cultural issues seemed to provide fuel for the egos and jealousy that was abound.

A big issue that was mentioned was “who’s in charge.” There were many accounts of career vs. volunteer when orders were given. Who has the priority and the authority to be listened to? Many felt that a Captain was a Captain whether career or volunteer and they should be heard. Most administrators also felt that if training was on an equal basis there should be no quarrel about who orders what.
Team playing listed as number two with the authors, was number six with the fire service. It just did not have the priority that the authors gave it. There was a very clear message of a group versus group attitude is all responses. Some of the opposition was between career and volunteer and the other was firefighter versus the administration.

Respect issues also were listed as a problem. There were no communications in departments when this issue was mentioned. It always seemed to follow that they do not listen to our ideas or suggestions. They don’t want to hear what we have to say because we are either only volunteers or only the paid staff. There were even departments where the volunteer was at the top of the food chain and the career people were the ones complaining.

Pay was an issue with some because volunteers did it for the fun and enjoyment of service and they believed that career people did not have the same enthusiasm as they did because it was “just a job.”

Experience cited by the authors as a conflict showed that the differences between the two groups were an issue just as in the fire service cases. Both felt that conflict occurred when volunteers claimed they had more experience than firefighters because they responded to all calls. While career firefighters claimed better experience due to their professionalism and better training.

Subordinate versus supervisor was a bottom issue for the fire service. They just don’t understand our side. They won’t listen or they can’t make me do that, they have no authority. Comments made by those citing this as an item usually had comments on union issues too.
Question #2

How departments dealt with conflict was amazingly similar. The survey almost followed the literature review material down the line. Most cited the need for good or great leadership as being the catalyst for conflict management. Providing great communications and leadership skills was the key to harmony. The more people knew the more they understood and the more likely they were to get along.

Fairness with firm policies and respect for all was another key to equity. If everyone knew they were going to be treated the same and dealt with on the same level, whether career or volunteer, there was better relationships amongst personnel. Moving towards common goals was also a key to conflict issues and if everyone had a clear understanding of department goals and objectives, there would be less stress and conflict.

Providing a since of ownership for all members was another item of importance. If this leadership trait was present, surveys told us that there was hardly any conflict in the department. If everyone was a stakeholder in the department, there was more pride, better response and fewer issues.

Training with both groups present provided a forum for both career and volunteers to share ideas, techniques and thoughts. Both could see the others strengths and weaknesses and could assist or build off them. This was a common element to team building and an important step in getting along. There was also the need to provide equal training opportunities for all personnel to improve, with no one group given any advantage over the other.

Having clear, understandable job responsibilities and chains of command was a key factor on how people perceived the fit in. They knew on a daily basis what their job
was, what their responsibilities were and what was required of them. When this occurred there were no misunderstandings of what people thought about the other guy.

Question #3

This question dealt with how a department can reduce or eliminate conflict. Four simple answers were the key from both the author’s side and from fire service personnel. First leadership must be provided to bring all people and the next generation to an understanding that both groups can work together. Second there must be greater interaction between the two groups so that everyone can get to know each other as people as well as workers. There must be opportunities for both groups to socialize and to work together professionally. Either through training or emergency response, a forum must be in place for all to gather.

A department that wants to head off problems should create discussion panels and activities for all personnel to air ideas and issues. Communications is the key because no one person can read the mind of the other.

Finally peer review groups or advisory groups should be established to meet on a regular basis to review activities that have occurred. The good things that have happened should be discussed as well as the things that need improvement.

There were 2500 national surveys sent out with a return of 1564. This was 62.5% of all surveys. That’s a great return on a touchy subject and considering that a normal return of surveys can be expected to be about 17%. Line personnel had a clear edge in returned surveys of 68.5% compared to 56.6% returned surveys for administrators. Only two states returned all surveys but only on the line personnel side. Washington and Virginia both returned all 25 surveys sent out for line personnel. The weakest responding
state was Arkansas that returned only a total of 11 surveys. A vast majority of the states returned over 50% of the surveys sent to them. (See Appendix B)

Twenty-four surveys came back with the note attached that there were no problems in their department. Because of this, a letter was sent back to them because they must be doing something right. Not one of the 24 departments shared what they were doing.

The two interviews conducted were in the month of July with two Chiefs that I have a lot of respect for and of their opinions. They are Chiefs that are known in the region as people that can be counted on and ones that will give you an honest answer.

Chief Doug DeVore of Chelan County Fire district #3 in Leavenworth Washington provided great insight in how things should be. He credits the absence of conflict in his department with their team building atmosphere and family setting. Everyone knows the other and what their capabilities are. They know they have jobs to do and how to get them done. They know their chain of command and the personnel have respect for that. Best of all they credit their pride in their department that everyone takes part in.

Chief DeVore also realizes that he does have personnel that are new and need more training to catch up with everyone else. That is where he has pride in his staff to jump in and make sure that everyone has equal opportunities to train and get what they need. His staff and the other paid personnel are there to assist the volunteer to make them the best and provide what ever it takes to help them. He also believes that some career and volunteers are not equal in the area of training. The bottom line is that career personnel have more opportunities to get up to date training that the volunteers do not
have the time to get in. But he states that is where his personnel step in and share the added training with everyone to keep them equally close.

DeVore states that if a department has conflict, they need to take a step back and analyze where they are at and what they have to do to become a team player.

“Our communities were built on volunteerism and the career people need to realize that the volunteer is a much needed asset to not only our communities but our fire departments as well. The fact is that every community here in the valley can not support an all career staff and must be aided by volunteers.” (DeVore, 2002, Personal Communication / Interview July)

The other interview was with Chief Kurt Blanchard of Chelan County Fire District #7 in Chelan, Washington. Conducted in July 2002, with a raging forest fire burning just 10 miles outside his jurisdiction, Chief Blanchard was adamant about the need and support that career personnel must realize about volunteers.

He credits a great working atmosphere in his department to team building also. His program of recognition of the volunteer is one that gives pride and rewards to those who participate. “The department recognizes that if volunteers are made to feel a part of the team, that one day if they decide to become a career member, they won’t forget where they came from.” (Blanchard, 2002, Personal Communication / Interview July) This attitude provides the basis for a relatively conflict free work place.

A program that their department has begun is one that takes teenagers off the streets and provides them with an atmosphere of work ethic and pride in their skills. This is an explorer group that assists the regulars in a variety of job responsibilities. Then when they are old enough they can become volunteers or even try for career jobs. “What
a great opportunity for a kid to hone their skills and develop their abilities that will follow them through the rest of their life. Plus, it keeps them off the street where so much can go wrong for a young adult these days.” (Blanchard, 2002, Personal Communication / Interview July)

This study did successfully answer the research questions. Conflicts were identified from around the country, in the State of Washington and internally at Wenatchee Fire & Rescue. Research had a great wealth of information provided through literature materials, a national survey and personal communications. There were many ideas stated that deal with common conflict issues that anyone can replicate and put into practice. Because of these ideas and issues, fire departments in the Wenatchee Valley, Wa., and should be able to learn from what others are saying and provide their members with a conflict free work place.

**DISCUSSION**

The study results found in research of other departments in the State of Washington and around the country showed that there are no significant differences in the findings from the materials stated in the literature review. Most generally agree that the ball must be started with a strong commitment from leadership that promotes goals and objectives and a genuine concern for the individual. “The department recognizes that if volunteers are made to feel a part of the team, that one day if they decide to become a career member, they won’t forget where they came from.” (Blanchard, 2002, Personal Communication / Interview July)

The other is a better communication system that allows all personnel in the organization to know what every one’s responsibilities are. “Whether we are dealing with
the question of who does what at work, how you communicate with your daughter when you tell her to clean her room, or who feeds the fish and takes out the trash, we can be certain that unclear expectations will lead to misunderstanding, disappointment and withdrawals of trust.” (Covey, 1989)

The results also showed that all points of the research indicate that there are common items that literature review material states as well as comments from surveys received. Departments must be willing to provide:

- Equal access to training.
- Identical training.
- Qualifications that are fair.
- Equal performance standards.
- A leadership that can provide strong communications, common goals and objectives and a team building process.

The process of providing strong leadership is the key element for producing a near conflict free environment. If personnel are accounted for as individuals with individual needs, a team based department can be developed. Today’s society has evolved around the “me” generation and whether we like it or not, we must treat personnel on that basis. If we don’t recognize the needs and rewards of career and volunteers, the volunteers will leave. It is tough enough recruiting volunteers in today and harder yet keeping them without giving them an excuse to leave. “Many fire departments entered the 1980’s with waiting lists of people who wanted to join. Now the same departments are lacking recruits.” (Wrightson, 1998)
A basic issue with both groups was that of Unions and the differences that are inherent. At Wenatchee Fire & Rescue the Union issue is also one of our problems. Even though the majority of our people feel it is necessary to start looking at the volunteer system, there are enough “Old Timers” that still believe the concept that volunteers are taking away jobs and we should not have anything to do with them.

The results of this study showed that most everyone agreed that there are common elements that lead to conflict. There are also common elements that department leaders need to address that lead to conflict resolution or even elimination.

The purpose of this research was two fold, one to find out what conflict was out there and the second what can be done to reduce the personality gap between career and volunteer firefighters. I believe that the results showed classic examples of what was learned in the Executive Leadership class. If a department were to follow those examples, they would stand a better chance of obtaining a conflict free work place. If conflict can be eliminated and the personality gaps closed, we can help in supporting one of the United States Fire Administration operational objectives. To help reduce the loss of life from fire of firefighters. If no conflict is exists, then people must be getting along and an apparent team atmosphere must be in place, which should help accomplish this goal.

Now that all the results are in, Wenatchee Fire & Rescue personnel can become better firefighters by becoming better friends and coworkers with volunteers. This will be accomplished with better leadership, better communications, better interactions and better understandings of the people involved. With this in mind, Wenatchee Fire & Rescue will have a better chance of preparing for the future that includes some form of
alternative manning, like volunteers. The implications for our department are simple, get on board and learn to get along, or we’ll suffer through many more years of misunderstanding and conflict.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Research findings from all points of view say there is light at the end of the tunnel. Conflicts can be overcome and new beginnings can be a part of revitalized ambition in career, combination and volunteer departments. Results showed that there are a great number of people out there from Chiefs to Firefighters that want the same things. Those being a great organization to work for that provide equity in rewards, fairness in duty and training, leadership and communications on all levels.

Research showed both locally and nationally that conflicts do exist and that there are reasonable cures for each one. Internally at Wenatchee Fire & Rescue the problem has been identified that there might also be a cultural issue that needs to be dealt with also.

It is recommended that Wenatchee Fire & Rescue either provide or learn new leadership skills that can focus on human relationships in the fire service. These relationships must be about reducing the personality gaps between our career firefighters and the surrounding volunteers. Internal surveys at Wenatchee Fire & Rescue showed that the majority of our members realize that the day has come that volunteers might be a part of our every day life and we must start to prepare ourselves for that day.

The purpose of this study was to find out what problems existed in the Wenatchee Valley, what our members had to do with the conflict between career and volunteer
firefighters and what we as multiple fire service agencies could do to provide for our members.

To solve the conflict problems, a number of things must be done.

- Area problems must be identified by bringing representatives from all agencies together to a forum that allows communications to flow freely and people can understand what conflicts are occurring.
- Leadership must provide greater communications to all personnel involved and at all levels of service.
- Leadership must be provided that can move both career and volunteers toward common goals and a team-oriented atmosphere.
- Fair and firm policies must be in place.
- Greater interaction between career and volunteers must be provided both socially and professionally and on a frequent basis.
- Discussion panels must be established to allow both groups the opportunity to get together to air potential problems.
- Peer review groups made up of representatives of both career and volunteers should be initiated to evaluate established programs and recent incidents.

These are recommendations that will be presented to the area Chiefs Association for review and possible implementation. All departments in our area are aware of the conflicts that do exist and they would like to do something about them. But no one seemed to want to take the first step towards reconciliation."
between career and volunteer firefighters are like dealing with an old, eccentric relative – everyone is aware of the situation but nobody wants to talk about it.” (Sullivan, 1997)

I believe that this research project has showed that there are methods of conflict resolution that everyone can live with and provide for their members. This study can in part or whole be replicated by anyone. They must have patients though as the collection and review of thousands of surveys took a long time. Then interpreting the results took almost as much time. There are a great number of books and literature out there dealing with the subject of conflict and the practices of resolution. Fire departments must provide great leadership, communications and fair and equitable treatment for all personnel to make the department feel like a team oriented organization. And until this is done, according to survey respondents and literature review materials, you can plan on dealing with personality differences between career and volunteer firefighters.
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Appendix A

Research Survey

Dear Fellow Firefighter,

My name is Glen Widener, Battalion Chief at Wenatchee Fire & Rescue. I’m doing research for my final paper in the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National fire Academy. The title of the paper is “Closing the personality gap between career and volunteer firefighters.”

Even if your department is fully paid or fully volunteer, and your personnel have to deal with the other, would you still answer the questions below?

Would you mind taking a few minutes of your time and answer a few questions for my research? It will be of great help. I need perspectives from both career and volunteers to make this a well rounded survey.

1. What types of conflict, if any, exists between career and volunteer firefighters?

2. If so, how does your department address these issues?

3. What could a department do to reduce or eliminate these conflicts?

Again I hope you’ll take a few minutes to help me, it will be greatly appreciated.

Please include your name, department and address in your return e-mail.

Sincerely,

Glen Widener, Battalion Chief
City of Wenatchee Fire & Rescue
136 S. Chelan
Wenatchee, WA  98801
509-664-3950
APPENDIX B

Returned National Survey Results

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Administrative return totals 708 56.6%

Line return totals 856 68.5%
APPENDIX C

Survey results of conflicts

Survey results from question number one what types of conflicts exist. Results came from all surveys returned. The top ten conflicts are listed.

1. Union Issues
2. Training
3. Egos
4. Jealousy
5. Who’s in charge
6. Lack of team playing
7. Respect Issues
8. Pay
9. Experience
10. Subordinate / supervisor issues
APPENDIX D

Question 2 Summary

Question two dealt with how departments handle the conflicts in their own department. The top answers are listed below.

1. Provide total communication between all personnel
2. Provide fairness, firm policies and respect
3. Leadership to move to common goals
4. Create ownership
5. Provide training with both groups together
6. Provide clear understandings of job responsibilities and chain of commands.
7. Provide opportunities for all to improve.
APPENDIX E

Question Three Summary

Question three asks how department can reduce or eliminate these conflicts.

Top answer listed below.

1. Leadership training must be provided to bring the next generation on line.

2. Greater interaction between both groups, in social and professional settings.

3. Create discussion panels that can head off problems.

4. Establish peer review groups
APPENDIX F

Wenatchee Fire & Rescue Need For Volunteers Questionnaire

Circle the one most appropriate answer you believe in.

1. There is no reason for our department to have or need volunteer assistance.

2. We need volunteers to help at times, but for now we do not need them in our departments future.

3. Now is the time for us to start thinking about obtaining and using volunteers to supplement our work force.

4. I have no opinion on the subject or I just don’t know what to think.
APPENDIX G

Results of Wenatchee Fire & Rescue Questionnaire

1. There is no reason for our department to have or need volunteer assistance.
   
   Three personnel circled this answer or 19%

2. We need volunteers to help at times, but for now we do not need them in our departments future.
   
   Eight personnel circled this answer or 50%

3. Now is the time for us to start thinking about obtaining and using volunteers to supplement our work force.
   
   Three personnel circled this answer or 19%

4. I have no opinion on the subject or I just don’t know what to think.
   
   2 personnel circled this answer or 12%