Inappropriate Off Duty Behaviors Amongst Albuquerque Firefighters

David W. Downey

Albuquerque, NM Fire Department
CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

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Abstract

The problem was that the Albuquerque Fire Department (AFD) had seen an increase in inappropriate off duty behaviors by its firefighters in the last year. The purpose of this research was to identify the causes of continued inappropriate conduct so that the public trust is protected. Through a descriptive research methodology, questions about causes and prevention of inappropriate off duty behaviors, peer intervention and public trust consideration were answered. The procedures included interviews and a literature review. The results identified stress, group dynamics, organizational culture and alcohol use as contributors to the problem. Recommendations included the creation of a Values Statement, leadership training, alcohol awareness training and improved marketing of the AFD.
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Introduction

Through many years of dedicated, professional service, fire departments have earned the trust and respect of the communities they serve. The Albuquerque Fire Department (AFD) has established a public trust in its community through one hundred nine years of service.

Firefighters of today are bestowed almost unconditional trust due to the service tradition established by firefighters of the past. Fire departments enjoy a right of entry to businesses and private residences that no other government agency has, including law enforcement (Edwards, 2005).

The problem is that the AFD has seen an increase in inappropriate off duty behaviors in the last year and it is negatively impacting the public trust. The purpose of this research is to identify the causes of continued inappropriate off duty conduct so that the public trust is protected. A descriptive research methodology was used to answer the following questions:

1. What causes firefighters to engage in inappropriate off duty behavior?
2. What prevents firefighters from engaging in inappropriate off duty behaviors?
3. What prevents peers from stopping inappropriate off duty behaviors by firefighters?
4. Why do firefighters not consider the impact of inappropriate off duty behavior on public trust?
Background and Significance

The AFD was ordained on June 13, 1900, and consisted of a Fire Chief, Two Assistants, a Treasurer, and a number of enlisted men deemed necessary by the Fire Chief and Fire Committee of the City Council (Ordinance No. 120). Today AFD consists of six hundred seventy-four uniform personnel and forty-five civilian staff. The membership is sworn to protect one hundred eighty-two square miles of the City of Albuquerque, and provides aid to the unincorporated regions of Bernalillo County and surrounding tribal lands. The residential population of Albuquerque is over 500,000. During business hours the population swells to over 700,000. AFD is a full service department providing emergency medical services, fire prevention, suppression and investigation, wildland fire protection, technical rescue and hazardous materials response. In 2008, AFD answered 120,964 calls for service (Number of Unit Responses).

The public trust AFD has earned was established through the professional delivery of the listed services. Recently, however, a dramatic increase in inappropriate off duty behavior has begun to negatively affect the public trust. Between January and July 2009, six firefighters were arrested for charges that included driving while intoxicated, domestic violence and assaulting an officer (Proctor, 2009). Between September and November 2009, three more firefighters were arrested for driving while intoxicated.

Although 2009 saw an alarming increase in incidents involving off duty conduct and arrest, this problem has existed within the department for several years. Between 2003 and 2008, firefighters were arrested for driving while intoxicated, possession of stolen property and solicitation of a minor via computer. AFD is a proud department with a long standing history of
quality all-hazards service delivery. These incidents have tarnished the public trust and are undermining the department’s reputation.

The AFD has consistently handed down disciplinary action to all members that have been arrested. Disciplinary sanctions have ranged from unpaid suspension to termination. These actions, however, have not had the preventative effect desired. Other responses to this problem have included the appointment of a behavioral health officer, a contact list and phone number for the intoxicated to receive a ride home, and fire station visits by the Fire Chief and his staff to discuss the problem. Though these efforts had good intentions, they were reactive measures to a problem that requires proactivity. Continued implementation of standard procedure and discipline are a technical solution to this problem and it has not been successful. This challenge requires adaptive change. An adaptive challenge requires new discoveries and adjustments from numerous places in the organization. It requires changing attitudes, values and behaviors. When dealing with people’s heart and minds and the need to change, not just their preferences and behaviors, it is more than a technical issue (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). The purpose of this research is to identify the underlying causes of inappropriate off duty conduct and determine adaptive solutions in an effort to preserve the public trust.

One of the five operational objectives of the United States Fire Administration is to “respond appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues” (United States Fire Administration, 2008). This research project will provide guidance in determining the causes and prevention of inappropriate off duty behavior, thereby protecting the public trust. Protection of the public trust is vital to the continued ability of the AFD to provide life and property saving services at the level to which it does today.
A goal of the Executive Development course is to provide executive fire officers “an opportunity to use research to solve real-world problems in their work environments (Federal Emergency Management Agency, United States Fire Administration, National Fire Academy, 2006). Another goal is the development of leadership skills that prepare executive fire officers to address organizational culture and change dynamics. Both goals are achieved through this research project.
Literature Review

The problem of inappropriate off duty behavior by AFD firefighters is complex and involves several factors. Although the author had some ideas regarding the causes of problem behaviors, he felt an interview with an expert would aid in focusing the research effort. The author interviewed the City of Albuquerque Director of the Office of Employee Health. She has been involved in employee health and wellness for nearly twenty years and has assisted many firefighters with behavioral health needs. After the sixty minute interview, the author was better prepared to begin the literature review. With the intention of determining causes of and preventive measures for the problem, a thorough literature review was performed. The literature review identified stress, group dynamics, organizational culture and alcohol as the pertinent factors involved in the AFD’s firefighter off duty inappropriate behavior.

Stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important (Robbins, 2005).

Firefighting is a stressful business. In fact, firefighters have been ranked as having the most stressful job in the United States (Boxer and Wild, 1993). Firefighter stress is usually associated with exposure to a critical incident or accumulated over time and developed chronically. Chronic stressors can include extended time away from family, job dissatisfaction, sleep deprivation, long work hours and exposure to life threatening events. Bacharach, Bamberger and Doveh (2008) suggest that the cumulative impact of multiple events in a given period of time may be more critical to the development of distress than exposure to any single event. They also state social context or work unit should be considered as a possible moderator.
of occupational stress processors. The Boxer and Wild (1993) research found that thirty-three percent of firefighters have at least mild emotional distress.

Although some stressors are positive, most are considered negative. The ability to cope with distress, or stress resiliency, varies with the individual. What motivates one person may overload another. The additive nature of stress, be it chronic, critical incident, or organizational, needs to be recognized. Excessive stress can lead to maladaptive behaviors such as drinking excessively or substance abuse. Maladaptive behaviors can evolve into inappropriate behavior.

Be it the apparatus, station or division, firefighters work in groups. As firefighters, work includes doing most everything together: responding to incidents, eating, training and relaxing. The work environment is a society unto itself. The dynamics of the group can be highly influential. Societal situations can have more profound effects on behavior and mental functioning of individuals than we believe possible (Zimbardo, 2007). For many, the fire department is a second family. Once a member, the traditions and values of the firefighter society are coveted. One desires social acceptance. The need for acceptance can lead to behaving in a manner that is contradictory to personal attitudes and behaviors. The incompatibility that individuals might perceive between behavior and attitude is known as cognitive dissonance (Robbins, 2005). Cognitive dissonance can be defined as inconsistency or disagreement between one’s beliefs and one’s actions. People prefer consistency and will try to avoid dissonance. Robbins (2005) also states the desire to reduce dissonance is determined by the importance of the elements creating the dissonance, the degree of influence the individual believes he or she has over the elements, and the rewards that may be involved in dissonance. In the fire department the elements creating the dissonance may be the firefighters themselves. The
desire to be accepted into the group means removing the inconsistency, which in turn may lead to a behavior that differs from one’s prevailing attitude. An individual compromises attitude for behavior as a means to acceptance. The firefighter society is steeped in traditions that have continued through generations. An individual that realizes a conflict between personal attitude and group behavior may likely believe their degree of influence is so limited, he or she rationalizes the behavior in an effort to minimize dissonance. The reward of dissonance is acceptance into the group and also influences the desire to reduce attitude and behavioral inconsistency. Social acceptance is a powerful force. So too is group pressure. Zimbardo (2007) states the need to be accepted, liked, respected or considered a “team player” is so powerful we conform to outlandish behaviors.

The fire department is often considered a second family for firefighters. The bond shared amongst firefighters is unique when compared to other occupations. Being a member of a family, though comforting and reassuring, can at times present a problem. One can become so entrenched in the family society that a loss of self-identity occurs. Many firefighters believe that being a firefighter is who they are. The Bowen Family Systems Theory describes this loss of self-identity as an undifferentiation of self. A togetherness force exists in which an individual’s behavior is a product of the family relationship (Papero, 1990). There is a balance between togetherness and individuality or emotional group driven and cognitive, autonomous decision making. Undifferentiation or loss of self-identity can lead to poor choices. Making choices that protect acceptance into the family may result in negative consequences for the individual. This force needs to be considered when making behavioral decisions. When an individual’s poor choices result in inappropriate off duty conduct, the act may reflect on the entire organization
negatively. The professional loss suffered by the individual may not be made up by the fire family either.

Organizational culture and group dynamics are closely related subjects. One element of firefighter organizational culture that is more strongly present than in other organizations is trust. The author understands levels of trust exist in all organizations, but do others refer to themselves as a brotherhood? A brotherhood is a group of individuals connected by a mission and the mission of the fire service is to serve (Crosby, 2007). Members of a brotherhood do for one another. Firefighters venture into harm’s way together and trust that each member of the team is protecting the others. Camaraderie, loyalty and pride are products of the brotherhood. Misinterpretation of brotherhood can be harmful. The brotherhood is not meant to be used as an excuse for unacceptable behavior. It does not serve as a blanket of security from wrongdoing. Members that violate the standards and expectations of firefighters should not be protected by the brotherhood. On the contrary, the brotherhood should support those that need behavior modification, not condone the behavior.

A true brotherhood would consist of confidants. Confidants are those a person can speak candidly with and be heard. Emotions can be shared with a confidant. A confidant is also someone who will tell a person what he or she does not want to hear (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). Confidants are trustworthy and loyal regardless of circumstance. There is an element in the AFD culture that deters open, uninhibited communication. Showing emotion or the admission of weakness is oftentimes used against the individual. The revelation becomes the subject of jokes and ridicule. The desire to ventilate to “trusted” peers, yet the inability to do so given the expected response, may contribute to employee distress.
With so many different social settings in the fire department, it can be difficult to find consistent organizational societal rules. Different settings include stations, shift, personalities and task responsibilities. For example, the social setting in the Fire Prevention Bureau is dramatically different from that of the busiest station in the city. In any social setting, however, a confidant can be found. When searching for someone to trust, true character is more likely to surface in situations where cultural and societal rules are less well defined. One should be more observant of the ways people act in these situations (Stroh, 2007).

Edgar Schein (2009) defines the culture of a group as:

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 17)

Once assumptions are accepted, they can strongly influence group behavior. Behaviors that are frequently demonstrated to coworkers may be accepted as routine in the group or organization. Assumptions and behaviors become a representation of the culture. If the assumptions or behaviors create an unacceptable element within the organizational culture, strong leadership is required to change the culture. When a leader accepts the challenge to change part of the culture, he or she must realize what he or she is asking. Culture change requires members of the group to alter the status quo or disturb the comfort zone. If the need to change involves the possibility of isolating oneself from the group, the change will be that much more difficult. The amount of effort required, however, does not compare to the amount of damage that could be done if the change need goes unaddressed. If the perception of those
outside the organization, in the case of the fire department the public we serve, is that the culture is untrustworthy, it may lead to a tarnishing of the public image. It is incumbent upon the leadership to protect the institution that is the fire department. Culture modification, when required, helps protect the employees and the public trust.

Alcohol use is another contributing factor in inappropriate off duty behavior. Two factors were identified as the predominant causes of alcohol use. The first factor was alcohol as a mechanism for coping with stress. In a study of firefighters from a large metropolitan department that measured work induced psychological distress and alcohol use, it was estimated that twenty-nine percent of firefighters had possible or probable current problems with alcohol (Boxer and Wild, 1993). A second study determined that organizational factors such as stress, adequacy of performance resources and social interaction contribute to the use of alcohol as a mechanism to cope with stress (Bacharach et al., 2008).

The second circumstance was the fact that alcohol use, and particularly driving while impaired, is a societal concern in our community. From 1997-2006, New Mexico had driving while impaired accident fatality rates nearly double the national average (New Mexico Department of Transportation, 2006). The State has more ignition interlock installations per capita than any other state. In Bernalillo County, of the three hundred forty-four people that died in motor vehicle crashes from 1998-2002, forty-four percent were alcohol related (DWI Resource Center, 2005). In 2003, the average blood alcohol content for an arrested drunk driver was 0.15. Demographically, the AFD is a reflection of the community it serves. Unfortunately, our driving while impaired statistics reflect the community as well. In 2005, 1.56 percent of Bernalillo County licensed drivers were arrested for driving while impaired (DWI Resource
Center, 2007). In 2009, 1.33 percent of our firefighters were arrested for the same offense. The social acceptance of alcohol use by firefighters as a means to relieve stress, relax or celebrate plays an important role in the problem the department is currently experiencing.

In summary, the literature review identified factors that contribute to the off duty inappropriate behaviors of our firefighters. It was determined that although each factor contributes significantly to the problem, they do not just contribute individually. The factors are intertwined. The continuous exposure to trauma and critical incidents creates stress for responders. The need for social acceptance into the firefighter culture can be stressful and lead to dissonance. The organizational culture of brotherhood can be misunderstood and used as an excuse to deny the presence of problem behaviors. The use of alcohol, either socially or as a coping device, pervades our culture. The connections between these factors and their mutual involvement must be realized if the AFD is to solve this problem.

A series of interviews was conducted to assist the author in answering the research questions. The literature review was important in the development of the questions chosen for the interviews.
Procedures

The procedures used for this applied research paper were developed to provide a system so that the four research questions could be answered.

1. What causes firefighters to engage in inappropriate off duty behaviors?
2. What prevents firefighters from engaging in inappropriate off duty behaviors?
3. What prevents peers from stopping inappropriate of duty behaviors by firefighters?
4. Why do firefighters not consider the impact of inappropriate off duty conduct on public trust?

The procedures began with an initial set of interviews, followed by a literature review, and finally a second set of interviews. The first interview was with the Director of the Institute for Social Research at the University of New Mexico. The author contacted the Director through electronic mail with an explanation of the research to be done and the author’s role as a student in the Executive Fire Officer Program. The purpose of the unstructured interview was for the author to determine techniques for conducting social research and resources available at the University of New Mexico.

An interview with the City of Albuquerque’s Director of the Office of Employee Health was conducted. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss both research subject areas and to begin answering research questions 1 and 2.

A third initial interview was held with AFD’s Senior Chaplain and a Volunteer Chaplain that specializes in stress management. Research questions 1 and 2 were discussed, along with other research criterion.
Following these interviews a literature review was undertaken. The literature review began with online searches for statistics on firefighter public trust, alcohol use and driving while impaired figures in New Mexico. These searches, plus a search of the public library database, were in an effort to answer research questions 1 and 4. A search for sources at two student libraries at the University of New Mexico was conducted. The first database searched was in the library of social sciences. The second was the library for the school of business. The research focus was on organizational culture, group dynamics and stress. The resources of both libraries were evaluated for the purpose of answering research questions 1, 2, and 3.

The third part of the research process involved interviewing more than a dozen AFD officers. These individuals were chosen for two reasons. First, all have served many years with the AFD. The time of service ranged from ten to twenty-two years. Secondly, most are familiar with multiple aspects of the department, having worked in both the emergency response and administrative divisions. All interviewees were contacted through electronic mail and asked to participate in the research. Date parameters were set by the author, but exact date, time and location for the interview was chosen by the interviewee. Each interview was structured and scheduled to last between thirty and sixty minutes. Those interviewed were provided a description of the research purpose, but did not view the interview questions until the interview began. They were also provided with a confidentiality statement (Appendix A).

The author took hand written notes during each interview. Following the interviews, the author’s notes were reviewed to ensure the intent of the answers was captured and interpreted correctly. These interviews were done in order to acquire answers to research questions 1, 2, 3, and 4.
A limitation in the research was that firefighters that had been arrested for an offense associated with off duty inappropriate behaviors were not interviewed. Many are still waiting for their cases to be adjudicated and may be subject to further sanctions. In an effort to gain their perspective, AFD’s Behavioral Health Officers and supervisors were interviewed. These members have communicated with those that have had off duty behavioral issues and shared their knowledge of the experiences and causes of the inappropriate actions. Interviews with the firefighters themselves may have provided more comprehensive answers. A second limitation was that the research did not extend beyond the AFD. Surrounding fire departments could have been surveyed to determine if similar problems were occurring in their jurisdictions, and if so, what causes and prevention measures they had identified.
Results

After conducting interviews with several officers in the AFD, the author found the information necessary to answer the research questions.

Research Question 1 – What causes firefighters to engage in inappropriate off duty behaviors? The interviews revealed there are several causes of inappropriate off duty conduct. Stress was identified as a significant contributor to this problem. No one stressor prevailed; several different stressors were identified. Chronic stress can be caused by multiple visual exposures to trauma and suffering, high call volume, sleep deprivation and the firefighter society. Stress related to being a firefighter and its effect on family was mentioned many times. Being away from home for long periods of time was identified as the largest family stressor. The AFD work schedule is forty-eight hours on shift, followed by ninety-six hours off duty. Of the interviewees that spoke of the work schedule as a factor, the group was split on its effect. While some felt the schedule plays no part in off duty behaviors, others were certain it did. Of those that believed the schedule is a factor, most felt forty-eight straight hours at work creates both work and home stressors. A few felt the forty-eight hours at work was not the issue, but the ninety-six hours off duty enables problematic behaviors. Others stated the forty-eight hour shift is as stressful a work setting as ninety-six hours off duty is a setting for potential misconduct. Another felt the work schedule creates a part time job mindset. AFD firefighters have a convenient schedule for working a second job. This allows twice as many second job days that take away from the family. The appearance of always choosing to be at work increases family stress significantly.
A second cause of inappropriate off duty behavior is the culture within the department. The influence of the group on individual decision making is strong. Members desire to establish themselves as part of the team and in doing so may compromise their personal beliefs. The camaraderie can be a double edged sword. Though it offers a sense of belonging and protection, these same attributes can misguide behavior and obstruct intervention of witnessed poor judgment. A sense of entitlement is rampant. When guilty of unlawful actions, an expectation of “professional courtesy” from our law enforcement brothers in public safety exists.

It was suggested that a hero complex is present. Firefighters work in dangerous conditions, many times life threatening conditions, and almost always prevail. The AFD has not yet experienced a fireground line of duty death. This sense of invincibility while on the job carries over into off the job settings. It is believed that since nothing bad happens to one while at work, nothing bad will ever happen.

There appears to be a lack of compassion for one another in the AFD. Although we care for those in need outside the firefighter circle, we are less caring when one of our own displays signs and symptoms of someone in need of help.

The interviews also identified the use of alcohol as an element in poor off duty choices. When gathering off duty, alcohol use to the point of intoxication is socially accepted. More important though, the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism for stress was frequently mentioned.

It became clear during the interviews that most understand that these contributing factors have a synergistic effect. Although each factor alone leads to off duty inappropriate behavior, stress, organizational culture and alcohol are interrelated and have a cumulative effect.
Research question 2 – What prevents firefighters from engaging in inappropriate off duty behaviors? Those interviewed sighted several motivations that have prevented them from engaging in inappropriate off duty behaviors. Commitment to family was emphasized by many. There was an understanding that employment as a firefighter has provided them with a comfortable living and has allowed them to meet their families’ needs. The effects inappropriate behavior would have on their families make the choice not to engage in inappropriateness easier. Most also believe strong family support has been a prevention element as well. The maturity that comes with family responsibility led some to modify their off duty behavior.

Valuing the job was important to many also. The satisfaction and sense of fulfillment that comes with being a firefighter far outweigh the risk of losing the job due to poor off duty behavioral choices.

An understanding of the consequences of inappropriate off duty conduct has led to several of our firefighters putting diligent effort into having a plan before social engagements. When asked if they felt this was a trend based on the scrutiny the AFD is currently under or that a culture change had occurred, the results were split. Few were cynical and felt the current level of awareness will fade when the spotlight dims. Others felt the events of the past year have brought to the forefront a problem that has been present, but unaddressed, for many years. They were optimistic that the acts of those that have engaged in inappropriate off duty conduct, though damaging to those individuals, will send a message that translates into prevention practices.

None of those interviewed have been caught engaging in inappropriate off duty behaviors. When asked, however, if they had been guilty of such conduct and had just not gotten caught, all considered themselves lucky to have not been caught. Each had recognized that
behavioral change was necessary in order to avoid the consequences of inappropriate off duty behavior. This understanding has taken time to develop. They did not become victims of the risk taking ignorance of youth.

One would assume that the seasoned veterans of the AFD would have developed the same understanding. Yet in the instances of inappropriate off duty behaviors that have been publicized in the last year, all offenders had several years of service and had achieved rank in the department. When asked why recent incidents have involved the senior membership and not the young members that have less to lose, the consensus was that the luck of the senior members had run out. For most, many felt, it was just a matter of time before the individual was caught. After repeated instances of engaging in inappropriate off duty behavior and not getting caught, a sense of “I’ll never get caught” had developed.

Research question 3 – What prevents peers from stopping inappropriate off duty behaviors? If the inappropriate off duty behavior that resulted in arrest and tarnishing of the public trust was just a matter of time, therefore predictable, why do we as peers not intervene? The majority of the officers, when faced with an opportunity to intervene, did. Two distinct settings led to the intervention efforts. The first was when serving on duty and placed in a situation that involved an off duty firefighter. Serving as the responsible party while on duty made intervention a necessity. Steps were taken, while in an official capacity, to stop the inappropriate behavior and prevent further harm. The second was when in a one-on-one or small group setting. With few involved in the situation, willingness to intervene was greater.

None of the interviewees described an intervention that occurred while in a large group setting. Group dynamics and peer pressure tend to inhibit taking action. Research on bystander
intervention has shown the more people that witness an urgent situation, the less likely any of them will intervene to help (Zimbardo, 2007). An individual, when amongst others that could also help, feels little pressure to act as opposed to when alone with an individual or with few other observers.

Those that intervened seem to have a self defined limit on the degree of intervention. There was a balance between intervening appropriately and meddling in another’s affairs. Taking the first step and actually asking if someone would like help is the most difficult part of the intervention effort. If the one in need stated assistance was not needed or wanted, a second effort was rare. Respondents were willing to assist but were unwilling to insist. A few stated that one can only offer assistance up to a certain point, and beyond that point the person needing help would have to live with the consequences of his or her decision.

Research question 4 – Why do firefighters not consider the impact of inappropriate behavior on the public trust? Firefighters are a trusted group. Internationally, firefighters rank as the most trusted group when compared to other professional groups (Gfk, 2009). When asked what public trust means, the officers stated a wide range of definitions. They included:

- The fire service is a calling that comes with great responsibility.
- Employment as a firefighter established a social contract with the public to provide life safety services.
- Not only is a firefighter what one does, it is what one becomes.
- People know when a firefighter lives in the neighborhood.
- An expectation exists to help someone in need, even when off duty.
All of these statements reveal the sentiment that firefighters have a duty to serve. Through continued vigilance to that duty, public trust has evolved.

The public trust enables firefighters to do their job. Firefighters are granted access to homes and businesses. They can provide personal care to strangers and the children of strangers without question. They are trusted, and therefore, held to a higher standard of conduct and behavior whether on or off duty. However, when asked if the value of public trust is appreciated by AFD firefighters in general, most felt it is not. A feeling among many is that off duty time is personal time and that there is no responsibility to represent the department. Some feel firefighting is just a job, so off duty conduct, like most jobs, should not matter.

Continued inappropriate off duty behavior will negatively affect our organization. The AFD relies heavily on funds from General Obligation Bonds to purchase apparatus and rehabilitate firehouses. We have never been denied a bond request by the voters. Albuquerque Public Schools can no longer stake that claim. In February 2002, the public voted against both General Obligation Bonds and a property tax renewal after the misspending of building maintenance funds during the previous school year (Schoellkopf, 2002). In the opinion of the voters, the Albuquerque Public Schools could not be trusted to spend public money in a responsible manner. The voters sent a message. With continued arrogance and spite for the public trust, the AFD may get sent a similar message.

No tangible explanation for a lack of consideration for the public trust was provided by those interviewed. All understood what public trust is, and its significance, yet struggled to explain why the public trust is not valued by all of our members.
Definition of Terms

General Obligation Bonds: A common type of municipal bond in the United States that is secured by a State or Local government’s pledge to use legally available resources, including tax revenues, to repay bond holders (General Obligation Bonds, 2010).
Discussion

Both a review of pertinent literature and interviews with AFD officers found there is a combination of factors that contribute to inappropriate off duty behaviors amongst AFD firefighters. The factors jointly identified included stress, group dynamics, organizational culture and the use of alcohol.

The job of firefighting is the most stressful occupation in the United States (Boxer and Wild, 1993). Repeated exposures to traumatic events and the social context of the workplace create stress for firefighters (Bacharach et al., 2008). All but one of those interviewed suggested stress contributes to the current problem. In addition to workplace stressors, family stress was found to be important as well. Although the literature noted the cumulative nature of multiple stressors, the interview results did not show a similar understanding of stress. None of the officers interviewed described the compounding effects of multiple stressors.

The author saw this misunderstanding of stress dynamics as significant. Stress in the AFD is considered part of the job and through time, firefighters and their families will adjust and accept it. This belief is misguided. Workplace stress should be relieved while away from the job. However, if family life is stressed due to the workplace, home may not provide stress relief. Though work and family stress may be caused by specific factors, for firefighters, one cannot but affect the other. The constant presence of distress cycling between work and home prohibits escape from stress. Eventually the cycle of stress can lead to coping by way of maladaptive and inappropriate behavior. If the behavior results in an arrest for driving while intoxicated, for example, the firefighter will be subject to disciplinary action. The predominant form of discipline in the AFD for this infraction is demotion to Firefighter First Class. This is the lowest
non-probationary rank in the department. If it was understood that a cause of this behavior was distress from both the workplace and home, would the best solution involve the additional financial stress a demotion creates?

The author understands the department must take swift action to protect the public trust. In fact, the disciplinary actions have been praised by the public (Anonymous, 2009). Yet, the imposed disciplinary measures have not shown to be a deterrent to inappropriate off duty behavior. The cumulative and cyclical effect of stress needs to be better understood by all department members.

The strength and influence of group dynamics is important to understating the current problem. The societal situation can have a profound effect on individual behavior (Zimbardo, 2007). If the societally accepted behavior is in contrast to personal beliefs or attitudes, dissonance is present. Dissonance is defined as inconsistency or disagreement between one’s beliefs and one’s actions (Robbins, 2005). The literature also stated individuals will attempt to avoid this inconsistency. This is done by evaluating the importance of the elements involved, the degree of influence one believes he or she has over the elements, and the rewards that may be involved in accepting the inconsistency (Robbins, 2005). The interviews showed department members do have a tendency to compromise their personal beliefs in an effort to be accepted by the group. The importance of the brotherhood, lack of individual influence in the group and the reward of acceptance all constitute reasons for accepting the norm, even when it is contrary to individual beliefs.

A strong example of group dynamics at work was revealed when the officers interviewed were asked about intervention in an effort to prevent inappropriate off duty behaviors. Research
indicated the levels of intervention are affected by the group dynamic (Zimbardo, 2007). None of those interviewed had intervened when in a large group setting. Most did, however, attempt intervention when in a small group or one-on-one setting. Given that firefighters often find themselves in large groups, be it at the firehouse on duty or at a social gathering off duty, taking action to stop inappropriate behavior is unlikely. Even when an attempt to intervene is made, it is not often strong willed. If the individual that needs intervention denies the outreach, insistence on giving helps wanes. Given this finding, the belief that firefighters will always be there for another is weakened. As such, the probability of continued inappropriate off duty behavior continuing as frequently as it has remains high.

The culture of an organization is typically represented by a shared set of assumptions that have been learned by a group as it has solved problems (Schein, 2004). Once accepted, the assumptions strongly influence group behavior. The culture of the fire department is also built around trust. We entrust our peers with our lives. This level of trust, however, is not present in all organizational circumstances. During incident operations involving life and property protection actions, firefighters take the steps necessary to make sure the right things get done so everyone stays safe. When personal well being needs attention, there is hesitation to act. This hesitation can come from either the one in need or the witness to the need.

The author felt a lack of confidants exist in the AFD. A confidant is a person one can speak freely to, with emotion, under any circumstances (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). A confidant listens and communicates honestly, even when the truth may hurt. Many in the AFD choose not to act in this capacity. Rather, they find it easier to avoid conflict, be it with the individual or the group.
The use of alcohol as a mechanism for coping with stress is a concern the AFD should take more seriously. The research conducted revealed work induced psychological distress, adequacy of performance resources and social interaction are each causes of alcohol use as a stress reliever (Boxer and Wild, 1993; Bacharach, et al., 2008). The prevalence of alcohol use at off duty gatherings was mentioned during the interviews. Though the astute group interviewed saw the use of alcohol as more than an element in social get togethers, most believed the members are blind to the use of alcohol as coping mechanism. It is generally believed that the use of alcohol is entitled as a way to relieve stress or relax.

The author understood the acceptance of alcohol consumption in the firefighter society both as a stress reliever and stress avoider. It is also felt that the misunderstanding of acceptable alcohol use is damaging to individual firefighters, their families and the organization as a whole. If the condoning of alcohol use persists, a continuance of the current problem can be expected.

The value of public trust is not appreciated by enough AFD members. The importance of public trust while on duty is well understood. The breakdown in understanding its significance while off duty is troublesome. Firefighters are firefighters, twenty-four hours, seven days a week. As such, there is an expectation to act consistently and responsibly. Whether firefighters believe that this is a fair and reasonable expectation is irrelevant. If the public served expects a higher standard of conduct and behavior, than that is how it shall be. The public trust cannot continue to be compromised by persistent inappropriate off duty behaviors by our firefighters. The consequences of a loss of public trust would dramatically change, for the worse, the way we deliver service.
If the individual members do not begin to address this issue, the organization had better. Over time organizations develop myths about how they operate. There are shared cultural values, and at the same time, shared implied assumptions that more accurately reflect what actually goes on. Nothing changes culturally until the consequences of actual operating assumptions create a public scandal that cannot be avoided (Schein, 2004). The AFD is dangerously close to such a public scandal. Even though there has been positive public response to the actions the department has taken, these opinions are based on values rather than the in-house assumptions. To avoid the demise of the public trust, the department needs to address the cumulative effects of stress, group dynamics, organizational culture and the use of alcohol so that the health of the department can be preserved. Such action will protect the public trust too.
Recommendations

After analyzing the findings of this research, the author recommends four steps be taken to affect the changes needed. The first recommendation is the creation of an AFD Values Statement. The AFD has several rules and regulations that list behavioral expectations. The department does not, however, have a document that lists the values of its firefighters. Key stakeholders in the department need to be engaged and their buy in to the need for change secured. These change agents should then be tasked with beginning an organizational change from being a rules driven organization to becoming a values driven organization. To accomplish this, the AFD must go through three phases. First, the mission and values of the AFD need to be clarified. Second, the mission and values need to be communicated to the organization. Finally, the values must align with the department’s daily practices (Blanchard and O’Connor, 1997). Resistance to change is typically overcome when those being made to change realize they will not suffer significant loss. The change to a values driven organizational culture poses no loss. On the contrary, leaders gain solutions to solving problems when decisions can be based on values rather than rules enforcement.

The author recommends the implementation of leadership training. Firefighters in leadership positions need an understanding of cultural influence. They need to understand how to implement successful and lasting change. Leaders also need to understand organizational learning and unlearning. When the culture becomes dysfunctional, leadership is needed to help the group unlearn some of its cultural assumptions and learn new assumptions (Schein, 2004).

Alcohol awareness and driving while intoxicated prevention training should be provided to all AFD members. Such training would help an individual realize he or she may have a
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dependency or behavioral concern. It may also teach firefighters how to recognize the signs of alcohol abuse amongst their peers. The AFD has several awareness and assistance programs at its disposal. Some resources include the City of Albuquerque Employee Health Office, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, and the Driving While Intoxicated Resource Center, Inc. Having members from these organizations present AFD firefighters with confidential resource options would assist in preventing continued inappropriate off duty behavior.

Finally, the AFD needs to market itself better. In a thirty day period during 2009, three firefighters were arrested for driving while intoxicated. The arrests were present in the media for several days. In the same thirty day period, was it shared how many lives AFD firefighters saved? The AFD is involved in many community outreach programs. Infant car seat installation clinics, a Stand-by-the-Schools program, and the Junior Firefighter Academy are some of the community involvement activities of AFD members. Though not glamorous or heroic acts, these programs allow our firefighters to interact with the community in a non-emergency and educational environment. These encounters provide opportunities to demonstrate a commitment to service and to strengthen the public trust.

The author believes these recommendations are attainable by the AFD. The recommendations represent opportunities to improve both the organizational culture and health and wellness of our firefighters and their families. These improvements can create a workplace environment that minimizes inappropriate off duty behavior, while preserving the public trust.
References


Ordinance No. 120, City of Albuquerque (1900).


Appendix A

I am writing an applied research paper as a student in the National Fire Academy’s Executive Fire Officer Program. In an effort to identify causes of inappropriate off duty behaviors amongst Albuquerque Firefighters, I am conducting several interviews. I am interviewing department members with various ranks, backgrounds, assignments and responsibilities. Interviewees include Albuquerque Fire Department members that have been involved in inappropriate conduct. The purpose of the research is to identify causes or trends in an attempt to educate all members and prevent further harm to individuals and the organization.

Your answers will be seen and kept only by me. Input is anonymous. I am serving as a researcher only – none of this information will be provided to the department for further action. All disclosed information is strictly confidential. I also am the only person that knows who was interviewed.

Thanks you for participation in this research.
1. What do you think are the causes of off duty inappropriate behaviors?

☐ chronic stress
☐ alcohol/social drinking
☐ camaraderie
☐ sense of entitlement
☐ organizational culture
☐ 48/96 schedule

Other ________________________________

2. a. What has prevented you from engaging in inappropriate off duty behavior?

b. Have you ever been guilty of inappropriate off duty behavior and not gotten caught? Explain circumstances.

3. Have you ever been in a situation in which you could have intervened and did/did not? Why?

4. Have you seen a change in habits or behaviors amongst firefighters due to recent events?
5. What does public trust of firefighters mean to you?

6. Do you believe public trust is considered by firefighters when off duty? Why/why not?

7. How would a tarnished public image affect our organization?

8. Do we provide sufficient training and education to our members regarding off duty conduct and consequences? (not just disciplinary consequences)

9. Why do you think recent incidents have primarily involved senior members of the department?