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Officer Development Series – *Leadership Skills*



Subordinate Problems, the “3U” Method

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

Ask any fire officer if he or she has had problems with a subordinate, and you will likely receive a look that sarcastically implies, “Are you kidding me?”

It is inevitable, when a group of individuals with different personalities spend any significant amount of time together, those personalities are going to clash, and problems will surface. Some may “appear” to be minor problems, like the avoidance of daily housework duties, or a sudden lack of interest in the job. Others are much more serious, like refusing to obey orders around the fire house, or worse, on the fire ground. Minor problems are sometimes the byproduct of a personal issue that has surfaced in the individual’s life; however, every problem should be immediately addressed by the subordinate firefighter’s supervising officer – you. By doing so, you will be able to determine the reason for this change in behavior, and identify any issues that can be resolved before they grow to become major problems, which will inevitably end up in the Chiefs office, or worse.

When you, as a new officer, find yourself in a situation where you must step in to resolve a more serious issue, a private conversation between you and the firefighter may promptly escalate to the dreaded “meeting with the Chief”. If you thought being on the receiving end of the subordinate interview could be intimidating, just wait until you find yourself on the delivery end. After all, this isn’t a mere job interview we’re talking about. This is a legitimate problem that needs to be dealt with and corrected without delay; otherwise it would have never made its way into your office.

This article will help guide you through the “fact-finding” process when interviewing a subordinate firefighter. Let’s begin by defining the word subordinate and insubordinate.

sub•or•di•nate *adj.*

1. Belonging to a lower or inferior class or rank; secondary.
2. Subject to the authority or control of another.

in•sub•or•di•nate *adj.*

Disobedient to authority

The “3U” Method

Fire officers must learn to deal with subordinate issues like conflict resolution or sub-standard performance. There is no shortage of information teaching you how to conduct a formal subordinate interview and address serious problems, but this article is about helping you ascertain whether or not the problem actually is serious. To make this determination, the best technique I found is the “3U” method.

The goal of a fact-finding interview is to determine what the problem is and to attempt to develop a solution – preferably together. This can only be done after concluding if the firefighter is **Unaware**, **Unable** or **Unwilling** (otherwise known as the 3U’s). If you fail to make this determination – whether informally, or formally – you will not be able to take the appropriate corrective actions.

Here is a brief description of the 3U’s:

- ✓ **Unaware:** Not aware or not conscious of what is going on.
- ✓ **Unable:** Lacking mental or physical capability or efficiency; incompetent.
- ✓ **Unwilling:** Boldly resisting authority or having a defiant attitude. Insubordinate.

Consider it your job, as the officer, to determine if the subordinate is unaware that there is a problem, unable to fix it, or unwilling to fix it.

As you gather facts, you should begin contemplating your course of action. You can do this by thinking:

If he's *Unaware*, I will...

If he's *Unable*, I will...

If he's *Unwilling*, I will...

After determining which category the subordinate firefighter falls into, implement the appropriate solution. This may include some form of training, standard operating procedures and/or department policy review, counseling through the Employees Assistance Program or Critical Incident Stress Debriefing, and/or a variety of other possibilities – all depending on the issue(s) at hand. Here's an illustration of how to deal with each of the 3U's, individually. Consider the following example.

A third year firefighter has been displaying uncharacteristic behavior from what he has become known for. He is considered to be an ambitious and enthusiastic firefighter, however, over the past few weeks he has been showing up late for work, performing below standard, and complaining frequently about various issues – in the firehouse and on the fire ground. After receiving complaints from other firefighters, you bring the firefighter into your office to speak with him about the way he has been acting. You begin to ask the right questions and probe for answers.

Depending on the response(s) you receive, you should be able to determine which of the 3U's you are dealing with. *Note:* Although these are serious issues, this is an informal “fact-finding” interview, the information you discover during this process may lead to a serious underlying problem that will require you to take firm and immediate action.

If he is **Unaware** of his actions, perhaps the talk will be enough for him to take the appropriate corrective actions. You should still schedule some form of training, such as reviewing any related policies and procedures. You should also discuss what you expect from the firefighter and have the individual acknowledge, so there is no misunderstanding. The key word here is awareness. If the problem

persists, you will no longer be dealing with a firefighter who is Unaware. You will now have to address the issue based on the understanding that the firefighter is either Unable or Unwilling to correct the situation. After meeting with the firefighter, document the incident for your records.

If he is **Unable** to change his actions, you have a more serious situation on your hands. This firefighter will be showing signs of incompetence. It is tough to generalize how to deal with this situation, but there are some basic steps you should begin taking. First, the actions outlined in the previous paragraph must be repeated to ensure the firefighter is, in fact, aware of what is expected of him. If it becomes clear that the firefighter is unable fix the problem(s), or if this is a repeat offense, you will have to make your superior officer aware of the situation. Again, your department policies and procedures should be followed at this point, but be sure to document the actions you have taken so far. You may have to refer to your notes at a later date. Be sensitive to the possibility that the firefighter may be dealing with a personal issue that is leading to his inability to function at an acceptable level. If this is the case, private counseling may be the answer. Either way, if this is a repeat offense, you should have the firefighter write a special report explaining what is happening.

If he is **Unwilling** to change his actions, more drastic measures must be taken. In this scenario, it is assumed that you have already ruled out the possibility that the firefighter is *Unaware* or *Unable*. This is a firefighter who is boldly resisting authority, or having a defiant attitude. This firefighter is insubordinate, and the situation must be immediately bumped up the chain of command and dealt with at a higher level. There may not be much you can do to a person who complains, but there are definite actions a department will have to take when a person consistently shows up late for work and performs below an acceptable standard. Once again, your department policies and procedures should be followed, and your actions should be documented. Your report, along with the special report completed by the insubordinate firefighter, should be immediately sent to your superior officer.

Whenever you bring a subordinate into your office to address issues of concern, and it becomes obvious the individual is at fault, disciplinary action is necessary. Don't be fooled to think that this

always mean you have to ‘drop a hammer.’ This simply means that the 5 steps of progressive discipline should be followed. They are, in order: Oral Reprimand, Written Reprimand, Suspension, Fines, and Termination.

If, in fact, the issue at hand requires more than “a talk” with the firefighter in question, the appropriate solution should be determined by your department head and only after proper counsel. It’s wrong to jump the gun and think that an individual who has not had any problems in the past is deliberately doing something wrong. The right thing to do is determine if the firefighter is Unaware, Unable or Unwilling. Then address the root of the problem properly.

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