

## Sometimes taking no action is a big mistake

**Frank R. Myers**

Thursday, November 09, 2017

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With the [recent firing of six City of Miami firefighters](#), many have taken notice. Anytime there is a controversial issue that impacts a public-sector employee, it makes headlines!

Supervisors and administrators need to take any type of racial, sexual, hazing harassment seriously. There is no place for it in the fire service — period.

I recall having to go to "sensitivity" training provided by the Anti-Defamation League early on in my career. The City of Miami was going through "growing pains" with a recent influx of more immigrants, affirmative action at its peak, and the consent decree being used.

During those days, there was much animosity toward minorities. And many firefighters and officers did not agree with "skipping" over names on promotional lists to attempt to fill quotas in the effort to move minorities to the forefront.

During the training, we were given different scenarios that involved people's race, the way they dressed, their surroundings, etc. We had to break up into subgroups to discuss among the group our impressions of what we were seeing differently and the way we interpreted it.

Most of the results from the groups was that we needed to treat everyone fairly and honorably and not make assumptions based on their appearance. However, there were still a few dissenters that held their ground and their beliefs.

The department did need a making over and a change in policy so that there was fair, progressive discipline across the board for all firefighters. Rather than the shift commander making the decision about how improper behavior was going to be handled, they now had to follow specific guidelines that applied to all.

During my assessment center training when I was studying for promotion, all complaints that came from anyone in the station that implied improper behavior based on sexual, racial, uncomfortable work environment, etc., immediately needed to be documented, taken seriously and processed through the proper channels. Those involved needed to be interviewed to get a clearer picture, and fact-finding could be used to find out what occurred and who was at fault.

The officer was not the person to "accuse" anyone; that was administration's job. The officer had the ability to discipline for minor infractions, but anything that violated policy due to imposed government procedures, laws or rules needed to be sent up the chain of command.

When an incident of this magnitude occurs, and the person offended

reports the infringement to their supervisor, the supervisor needs to take immediate action. The way administration sees it, it starts from the top down.

The commander needs to maintain control of their personnel. If that person takes no action, then they are partially to blame even though they were not directly involved with the "hazing" or infringement. In other words, they need to be held accountable.

There is always a rumor mill that occurs when these types of situations occur. Sometimes the affected person is not well liked, instigating a hint or a message by the crew to move on or change.

If this is the case, it is the commander's responsibility to have a subordinate one-on-one conference to see if they can curb their behavior, personality, management style or whatever it is, and change for the better to make a more cohesive work environment.

This is where leadership skills come into play. Granted, the leadership style of the commander may be relaxed. Or they just want to be seen as a nice person and get along with everyone. The commander needs to have the respect of their subordinates and they need to separate themselves and not become too chummy with their crews.

Commanders need to have a more dominant presence — a command presence. They need to have confidence and be decisive in their actions and their decisions. If not, then they will not gain the respect of their subordinates.

It does not happen overnight. It takes time to get used to one's management style. However, if done correctly, and a bond of trust is developed, the result will be a well-oiled, fine-tuned machine with a positive work environment and a crew having confidence in their leadership.

The fact remains that some people, when it comes to the cohesiveness of the group, are like oil and vinegar. The commander needs to help those out of sync to try to cooperate and blend in with the other personnel.

However, they also need to have the character and ability to know when things just don't work out and when that person needs to move on. This is a sensitive situation and must be done eloquently and tactfully.

People are not that naive to know when they are not a good fit. If they are willing to develop and cooperate, they need to be given a chance, but if the attempt does not work out, and the results aren't positive, then it is time to move on. Sometimes people find out a lot about themselves and grow in the process.

It's all about team building. With the right management style, motivated people, presence and attitude, a great bond can be created. These work relationships can result in many fond memories and friendships, both on and off duty, that last for many years.

One thing needs to be remembered. We need to play by the rules when we are work.

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#### About the Author



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