

Bully for you

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As in any other occupation, we in the fire service have the pleasure or displeasure of experiencing many different types of people. Like fingerprints, no two personalities are exactly alike.

Some people are fun loving, always ready to crack a joke or laugh at something that seems humorous. Some employees are quiet and reserved, some are Joe Cool or like the character Fonzie of *Happy Days* fame, some are just taking up space, some are studious and some are just plain nervous. Some are outgoing or athletic, some are withdrawn, some are loud and some are obnoxious.

We even have people within the fire service who, at times, appear to be the most disgruntled people on the face of the earth and nothing anyone could ever do or say would please them. Then there are those who complain constantly about anything and everything possible just to hear themselves complain.

Every type of work environment has people just like this, as does every fire station. The end result is that we all continue to carry out the mission of the fire service, no matter what department we're in or the types of diverse personalities that fill our ranks.

There are certain types of people, however, who can disrupt the whole nature of our fire service community. These people bring with them hate, trickery and deceitfulness and can — and generally will — disrupt any harmony within the fire company. These people can sometimes be classified as overbearing bullies, but for our purposes we will refer to this kind of person as the perpetrator.

Most firefighters possess a certain amount of aggressiveness and ego, or else they would not have chosen this occupation. Firefighters by nature are aggressive — just ask one to take out a window to vent a burning structure and remember to stand back. But what are the signs and symptoms that someone is overly aggressive or a bully, and how do you as a fire officer deal with this individual?

Characteristics of the aggressor

This type of person is very ambitious, so it's important that the fire officer understand the reason for such ambition: The perpetrator is looking out for his own welfare and not that of the company.

The perpetrator even will try to convince everyone that his actions are solely for the good of the company. He will attempt to dominate those who surround him and eventually will succeed to some extent. The perpetrator usually will dominate new employees through their vulnerability and naïveté. This domination will culminate in the perpetrator perceiving himself as the center of attention, which becomes an obsession. The perpetrator is the type of person who needs to be the center of the universe.

Why are these individuals deemed aggressors in this sense? The perpetrator is the type of person who lacks the self-control needed to keep impulses in check. The causes can be behavioral, psychological or physiological. He has no way to stop himself or limit his actions. This is also true of compulsive liars, thieves or people with obsessive-compulsive disorders.

In most cases the perpetrator's demeanor is mainly a result of upbringing. During development from infant to youth to adult, the perpetrator developed pleasure and gratification through the use of aggressive or impulsive behavior. In some cases this could be his inherent natural disposition, or he may come from a household that could be considered dysfunctional.

Because of this person's aggression and impulsiveness adults, teachers and other children, including family members, gave the perpetrator what he wanted. In some instances people may have given this troublemaker his way just to get him out of their hair. This worked well for the perpetrator, especially when fear, intimidation and guilt were used as his primary weapons of choice. The perpetrator learned that these could be valuable and indispensable tools in satisfying his wants and needs and began using these weapons more frequently. Soon this trait becomes part of his nature.

This type of person also knows how to manipulate the emotions of those whom he considers inferior and weak. The perpetrator discovers quickly what buttons need to be pushed and when to push them. Basically, he considers others to be lower on the food chain. He may do this in an attempt to hide his own inadequacies and fears through aggressive and impulsive actions.

Why does he do it?

Why would someone threaten, frighten, terrorize or oppress others within an organization? It seems the perpetrator experiences feelings of gratification at the expense of others, which explains why he targets physically or mentally inferior individuals. The perpetrator believes that dominating someone else can help him accomplish a goal. In reality, he has very poor, less fruitful relationships at home, at work and within almost any community structure he belongs to. The perpetrator lacks the mutual respect for others with whom he has contact.

The perpetrator also may show signs of real concern about those to whom he feels close. This is because the perpetrator believes that he has possessive

control over other individuals. In reality the perpetrator is only concerned about how others will reflect upon his position in an organization and his power level within the demographics of the community. The perpetrator will show signs of compassion toward the individuals whom he controls, but this concern is only conditional upon the praise that someone bestows on him.

When one of the perpetrator's subordinates performs a task to perfection, the perpetrator will be proud. But the pride shown by the perpetrator is only pride in ownership, not pride toward the subordinate. This satisfies and brings the perpetrator a sense of gratification. Once a subordinate does not praise, feed or meet the perpetrator's needs, he or she will be shunned and lambasted. The former "property" of the perpetrator is now useless and becomes a target for retaliation. The perpetrator will then attempt to condemn and punish those who fall from his graces. This will be the reason why the perpetrator's personality seems to run hot one day and cold another.

The perpetrator's personality leads him to believe that he should never show signs of ineffectiveness or that he is powerless within his community setting. The mindset of the perpetrator is such that if he appears to be ineffective or powerless among those around him then the opinion among upper level managers will coincide. The perpetrator feels that control and fear expressed by those around him will be enough to convince upper-level managers of his strong leadership. Those who threaten the control of the perpetrator will ultimately bring out anger and frustration in him, which will likely be brought to bear on the person who threatens the perpetrator's control.

Off-duty behavior

It's virtually impossible for the perpetrator to have normal relationships outside of the station. Power and control define the perpetrator's relationships with other individuals; to the perpetrator people are things, not humans.

The perpetrator will never consider the rights of fellow humans. Remember, this kind of individual is an expert manipulator who has the charm of a snake and also its bite. The perpetrator attracts emotionally sensitive people who are susceptible to his charms and self-confidence.

The perpetrator's charm is manifested through his attention to his victims, many of whom have been told that they have his support. This entices people to gather into his circle like moths to a flame because of promises of rewards in the future. Some of these promised rewards may never be provided due to the perpetrator's position in the work force. The perpetrator will then exploit this person for their selfless benefit.

The perpetrator also believes that he possesses superior intelligence and infinite wisdom over those around him. This brings justification to his actions and gives him the feeling that he is honorable and self-confident. Speaking in general terms, he is a hero in his own mind.

When the perpetrator decides on his target, expect a high degree of aggression and manipulation. Some of the perpetrator's favorite methods of attack are backstabbing, lying, deceit and slander. If you're in his sights, it will become the perpetrator's primary mission in life to destroy you, your career or your character, whichever falls first. In some instances he may attempt to destroy the entire organization, not just one individual. The perpetrator will be vindictive and belligerent, acting out the worst of all human behaviors.

Traits of the perpetrator

This kind of employee will show many traits in his method of madness. Some of these traits are:

?? Testing

The aggressor will test the target employee in an attempt to find out his or her weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and later use these against him or her.

?? Controlling

This person would rather control all functions within the organization, as he believes that he's the only person capable of running the show. When others within the department develop new plans, lessons or operating procedures, the perpetrator will try his hardest not to comply. Because the new policies are not the perpetrator's idea, he will ridicule the work of others.

?? Ambitious

The perpetrator is ambitious to the point of obsession and will focus on certain objectives, such as success, power and prestige. He will display tremendous amounts of zeal in pursuit of his personal goals. The company goals will only receive lip service from the perpetrator as an excuse for his own selfless goals or advancement. The perpetrator wants to be the only trophy on the mantel.

?? Confident

This employee thinks very highly of himself, exaggerates his own self-importance and believes himself to be legendary. He will take everything too seriously and never will laugh at himself. He also never will find fault in anything that he does; instead he will attempt to justify any mistakes.

?? Strong-willed

Always wants more but is never willing to sacrifice. Demands others take extreme action and demands commitments from them. Pushes his

own objectives during discussions on major issues and may be ruthless in seeing these objectives through.

?? **Argumentative**

Will sometimes agree with certain points or opinions, but then will turn around and argue or plead his point of view. Always challenging and contradicting others' point of view.

?? **Judgmental**

Places blame quickly and creates scapegoats. Exaggerates problems to the size of disasters no matter how minimal they are. Takes one person's criticism of another employee and reflects this as being the opinion of everyone in the department. Assumes that every employee who becomes a target is incompetent, not committed or lacking in qualifying experience.

?? **Critical**

Will never acknowledge his role when another employee makes a mistake. If things are not up to his rigid standards, others will be criticized. The aggressor will always be looking for something or someone to criticize.

?? **Damaging**

The perpetrator will try to ruin another person's character in many ways, such as discrediting his opinions, ideas or accomplishments. This will imply to others who give credence to the perpetrator that the target employee has a view that is skewed. The perpetrator will then tell others that his judgment is the only one that is correct. The aggressor suspects that there is a motive behind why someone is doing something.

?? **Vengeful**

Rumors will be spread. The perpetrator will start to bad-mouth the target employee in private, and will attempt to discredit the target employee's performance to everyone who will listen. The perpetrator will always come across as demeaning, condescending, and sarcastic.

What can you do?

As a fire officer who may have an individual like this under your command, or as one who works next to this type of person, ask yourself: What can I do as a fire officer?

If the perpetrator's actions disrupt the work environment, you must take action. Ignoring the troublemaker only leads others to believe that you condone his actions and leads to the perpetrator taking free reign of the situation. In today's politically correct fire service, the perpetrator's behavior is inexcusable. However, if no action is taken to control the behavior, then it may appear to all that the perpetrator has the superficial support of middle- and upper-level managers.

Why then is there a need to act? The person who becomes a target for the perpetrator will first lose his self-worth, which will bring on depression and possibly a loss of interest about why he originally joined the fire service. A loss of power, a feeling of incompetence and a sense of being socially isolated will begin to affect the individual's performance.

This person may then experience despair, frustration and hopelessness while the focal point of the perpetrator's anger and retaliation. As a result, the perpetrator's target will attempt to avoid further trouble by seeking transfer away from the perpetrator or, in some cases, seeking employment elsewhere. As a fire officer, you must do something to divert this from happening.

Opting to do nothing will eventually increase the aggressive behavior and adversely affect the fire officer's standing in the long term. However, there are actions that can be taken to verify that you are dealing with an aggressive employee. Start by having a talk with the individual you feel is being targeted. Don't be surprised if this individual denies receiving punishment or retaliation from the suspected perpetrator. If the targeted employee won't talk or avoids questioning, then there are other ways to find out the truth.

One way to pinpoint a problem is to observe all interactions between both employees. Determine if the situation is a case of firehouse teasing, bullying or true harassment. Also, listen to the station grapevine, as it can be an excellent indicator as to what is really going on. Look for signs from the target employee such as tardiness, lack of incentive or drive, and wanting to leave work quickly once the relief shift has shown up.

Look for the victim to discuss transferring, changing shifts or seeking employment outside of the fire department. Physiological factors that may indicate a problem include sweating, shaking, illness, sleep deprivation and loss of appetite. Psychological factors include visible anxiety and depression. Behavioral factors may include irritability, being withdrawn or aggressive, and symptoms of alcohol abuse. As a fire officer you have a duty and obligation to stop whatever negative actions are being taken against other employees under your command. If you fail to address these concerns, you may be liable.

If you as a fire officer determine that a perpetrator is targeting an employee under your command, you may want to approach the root cause for the disruption. You may want to first approach the perpetrator and tell him you would like to talk to him about something that has been brought to your attention.

The station may not be the best place for this meeting. In most career departments, when an employee is called into the office it's for official reasons and a union representative must be allowed to sit in. It's best to approach the perpetrator outside of the fire station first. This alternative may calm any tensions that might be running high, and by doing so you will relieve the target from taking some heat. This meeting can occur in the parking lot, across the street, at a convenience store over coffee or at a donut shop.

While discussing the matter with the perpetrator, these simple suggestions may make the meeting fruitful and less stressful:

- ?? Look the employee in the eye,
- ?? Talk slowly to ensure what you are saying is being heard,
- ?? Do not raise your voice or conduct yourself in an aggressive manner,
- ?? Do not allow the aggressor to become loud or let the situation get out of hand, and
- ?? Take control over the environment.

At the start of this meeting, tell the perpetrator what you have observed and heard through the station grapevine; put the ball in play. Let him know where you stand concerning harassment and what might be perceived as violence in the workplace, as well as how his actions fall under these categories. Explain to the perpetrator the punitive actions that can be taken against him, such as suspension, demotion, transfer and removal.

As a leader you must be straightforward in your approach to the problem. Advise him that you would like to see a resolution to the problem or a change in his behavior. You may suggest that the perpetrator seek anger management sessions, employee assistance counseling or other professional services.

You can communicate your belief that his actions do not comply with the mission or goals of the fire company or department. Tell the offender that behavior like this will not be condoned or tolerated under your command. Remind him that if the aggressive behavior continues, official action will be taken as a result. Point out that the individual is a professional, as is everyone else in the station, therefore other officers and employees will not stand for uncooperative behavior.

Stand firm with this person; the perpetrator soon will realize that you are serious and that his actions against other employees will not be tolerated. The perpetrator is smart, and if you waver on your stance about aggressive or bullying behavior in your discussion, he will sense your indecision. You must continually monitor the situation; if modifications are not made and the behavior continues, then you are going to be required to act against the perpetrator officially.

You may want to advise the perpetrator that his actions have an effect on not only the target employee, but also on fire company's overall morale in ways

such as increased absenteeism and higher employee turnover, which results in higher costs of training and retraining.

Bullying even can be a contributing factor in premature death due to stress-related illness such as heart disease and certain forms of cancer. Even suicide and murder have been known to be connected to workplace stress, as these types of incidents have followed examples of aggressive behavior.

It's important to remind the perpetrator that all employees deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Employees should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood. No one should have to receive attacks upon their honor and reputation. Every employee has the right to protection under the law against such interference or harassment.

Honesty will send a message, and for a while the perpetrator's behavior may change, but remember, this may already be instilled into their nature and persona. Fire officers and other and senior staff members should maintain constant vigilance over the perpetrator's behavior to ensure that others do not become targets for the perpetrator. This is especially true if the perpetrator seeks no counseling after your discussion with them.

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