

All Together Better How Alliances will Change the Future of the Fire Service

by Jada Hudson, M.S., LCPC

Fighting a fire, going out on an EMS call, or extricating someone from a traffic accident, all demand that you go into battle mode. You have a task ahead of you and someone who needs you. Nothing should slow you down. But...

What if another department arrived before you? Who, then, calls the shots? Did they do a 360° size-up to your standards? What if they missed something? It can get clunky when multiple cities work together, and one slip up could cost someone his life.

Deputy Chief of Carol Stream and former Fire Commissioner of Chicago, Bob Hoff, saw this problem and dreamt of a partnership in which multiple fire teams would work together regularly, and know exactly how to act when that time came. So, he was part of a group of fire Chiefs that formed the West Suburban Fire/Rescue Alliance. Comprised of the Carol Stream, Wheaton, Winfield, and West Chicago Fire Departments, the West Suburban Fire/Rescue Alliance shares resources, coordinates emergency dispatch, trains together, and assigns specific leadership roles to individuals in each department, in order to practice taking orders from leaders in other departments. Others have seen how well it has worked, and now the Bloomingdale and Roselle Fire Departments have joined the Alliance.

Battalion Chief Hugh Stott, from West Chicago, invited me to observe some of the Alliance's cooperative trainings, and I was impressed by their commitment to setting aside department boundaries for the sake of teamwork and safety.

This formal decision to cooperate has made the Departments of Wheaton, Winfield, West Chicago, and Carol Stream more efficient, effective, and safe. They share a dispatch system, which sends the closest available fire station to the emergency, even if that station is from another department. And, by training together regularly and frequently, they have effectively broken down barriers and built trust amongst themselves, so that whoever gets to an incident first has the authority and the trust of the other departments to do what needs to be done. Ultimately, saving lives.

The Alliance's supervisory level is organized into various chief roles. The "Incident Commander" carries the ultimate responsibility for the operation. The "Interior Chief" supervises what goes on inside the fire building. The "Plans Chief" monitors communications, checks on available resources, assists the Incident Commander, and assigns auxiliary tasks to supporting chiefs. The Safety Chief and RIT Chief responsibilities go to one single person until another department arrives and the roles can be separated.

Understanding fire behavior is crucial, and Wheaton Assistant Chief Jeff Benda gave me a lesson on how reading fire can save lives." Reading the color of the smoke gives fire fighters an intuitive sense of what is going on in the fire. Knowing the construction of the building gives insight into fire travel. And, knowing the personalities of those in neighboring departments helps when making important action calls. After training together, these departments know how to alter their tactical approaches. Clear. Smooth. Safe.

After seeing how smoothly and safely these departments work together, I am confident that if other departments formed similar alliances, our firefighters and our cities would be safer. But, how does a department go from operating independently to joining forces with another department?

Jada Hudson is owner of Hudson Clinical Counseling and an LCPC serving women, children and firefighters. She specializes in pediatric death and substance abuse. Group counseling available.

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The first step in forming an alliance is the decision to cooperate. Leaders must set aside their egos for the sake of unity.

As a therapist, I see a lot of conflict arise from ego. Whether it surfaces in the workplace or in the home, ego interferes with healthy relationships because ego, ultimately, boils down to fear. It sees that if someone else is in charge or gets what they want or makes a decision for the group or the family, I have to let go. That letting go causes anxiety.

How can ego and the tension it causes be replaced with unity? Practice. In the home, this looks like foregoing the right to call the shots and trusting that the other person will make an acceptable call. As trust is built, fear subsides, and ego loses its place.

In the fire service, practice also eliminates ego. What if you knew you could trust the people you were giving up control to? This is the beauty and strength of alliances. Each department practices letting go of various tasks throughout an emergency response, and each department grows to trust one another, so that ego and anxiety no longer interfere with any emergency situations.

Yes, transitioning to an allied fire service is a change. But, change gets easier with practice. Initially, change feels awkward, and it may cause anxiety. But, more practice will lessen that anxiety. And, soon enough, groups will find unity and trust that is well worth the effort to get there.

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