



Firefighting, Legal, Officer Development

## The Fire Department Administrative-Operational Gap

9.3.14



By Pedro Cáceres

In most fire departments, a gap exists between the fire department administration (admin) and the men and women at the company level. In the hallways at headquarters, one can often hear “What is so difficult about this? Why can’t these guys figure it out?” Meanwhile, at the kitchen table at virtually every fire station, virtually the same conversations are happening. Firefighters wonder how the chiefs have forgotten where they came from and express disbelief of their latest general order. What are they thinking?

This is a simple example, but one we can all probably relate to, depending on what side of the line you are on. That’s the point. Why can’t both sides get it? Why is there a divide? What drives the disconnect between the admin and the companies? More importantly, how do we narrow the gap? How do we make the relationship better or at least easier to

there is an obvious disconnect in the way we operate and, more importantly, the way we communicate that can potentially widen the gap. In some cases, the gap is so wide that everyone operates in an environment of mistrust and resentment. No one at headquarters shows up to work thinking of ways to drive the fire department into the ground and, conversely, no one at the company level is looking for ways to purposely derail the department. Yes, we have personnel on both sides that sometimes have a personal agenda, but for the most part everyone's intentions are good. Most personnel at headquarters and at the company level are trying to do what they believe is best based on their unique vantage point. It is the difference in vantage points that sets the stage for conflicts.

### **The Company-Level View**

At the company level, virtually all tasks are completed as a team. Examples of this include fire/EMS runs, company training, adapting to an administrative directive, or something as simple as a meal at the station. These tasks then require the company members to be inwardly focused. It doesn't matter to the company members what else is going on outside their group (company, station, or shift). Their main objective is solve the problem or task at hand and move forward. All of the members of the team are focused on the task and contribute in their own way to determine and implement solutions.

At the company level, things are more personal. It matters how the members are doing physically and mentally. The primary reason for this is that human factors influence the ability of the team to perform. If someone is tired, stressed, hurt, or somehow not 100-percent, then the team has to make up the difference. The team can typically adapt and continue moving forward because it understands its own strengths and weaknesses. Responsibilities and accountability are often shared. This allows for personnel at the company level to take more risks in the solution to their challenges.

The point is company level members rely on each other more and have a stronger bond. Outside influences (even admin) can be seen as intruding and are often suspect to the team.

## The HQ-Eye View

In contrast, at headquarters the concept of a teamwork is somewhat lost—by necessity. Individuals at headquarters typically work out of individual offices and they lack common or shared tasks. Each individual in the administration has specific areas of responsibility with several specific concerns. Personnel at headquarters are also held accountable individually, which may lead to more conservative solutions.

While some of the areas overlap, the interaction between admin members is not as close as it is at the company level. Most of the interaction is done primarily to avoid conflicts in areas of responsibility and not as cooperation between members. This is not to say that admin personnel do not cooperate with each other, rather they tend to cooperate in a limited way (texting, post-it notes, emails), which results in limited feedback. Most solutions are generated individually with limited input from others.

Administration personnel are primarily concerned with outside influences, which affect how the inner workings (companies) of the department operate. In essence, the admin personnel form a protective circle around the companies as they manage these outside influences. These influences can range from budgets, politics, laws, standards, litigation, the general public, and many other issues. As the admin deals with these outside influences, they are “outward” facing.

Additionally, administrative personnel also have an increased personal and professional level of liability. This added responsibility and liability has a tremendous influence on the decision-making process for the admin personnel.

## Gaining Perspective

The headquarters staff is managing the department, dealing with the outside influences that affect everyday operations; the personnel at the companies, meanwhile, are “inward” facing, tackling everyday challenges with their backs to headquarters. With both administration and line personnel taking this stance, very little communication takes place, but the effects of their actions are often felt by both

takes place, but the effects of their actions are often felt by both.

I don't believe that there are any ill intentions by either side; it is simply a matter of perspective. Time is limited and everyone is focused on their own tasks. We forget to look behind us or around us. Whether you are at headquarters or working in the companies, we all strive to provide good service in a safe manner, understanding that certain hazards and inherit risks will have to be taken. The obvious question is how do we minimize the disconnect, or at least remind ourselves that we are all working together to achieve common goals? At the end of the day, the goals at headquarters are not much different than the goals at the company level.

Communication, patience, and balance would be a good start. These are important for both sides of the divide. Communication has to extend beyond memos, general orders, or standard operating guideline updates. Communication has to be exercised by both sides.

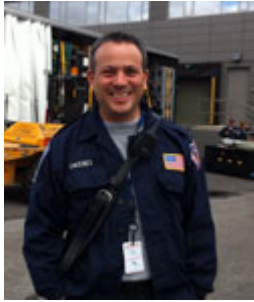
Headquarters should attempt to explain what factors influenced the decisions made, especially when they have a direct impact on the companies. Additionally, headquarters should seek to understand how the decisions made at headquarters affect the way things are done by the companies. Admin personnel should seek opportunities to interact with personnel at the companies. This interaction should be done in as informal a manner as possible, and as often as possible.

On the flip side, company members should seek opportunities to provide constructive feedback to the admin. Examples of this could be exploring ways to get involved in administrative activities like helping with special projects, volunteering for committees, training, or evaluating equipment or procedures.

In other words, look for opportunities to share your vantage point. Both admin and company-level personnel should ask questions respectfully and more importantly listen carefully to the answer. We need to be patient with the way things are done on the other side and seek to learn the process for getting our respective tasks done. Try to understand the influences and restrictions which affect the process. Remember, there

are many ways to achieve an objective and the best results will come from a balanced process which takes into consideration concerns from both sides.

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CIFA director in 2008. Beginning in 2009, he served as the Division Chief of Support Services for one year and then as served as Division Chief of Training and Safety for two years. After three years of service with the administrative staff, he returned to the companies and his merit rank of Captain. He is currently assigned to Engine 82. Captain

Cáceres is a member of the Indiana Task Force One (INTF-1) team as a rescue officer. Additionally, he is an adjunct instructor for Advanced Rescue Solutions. He has recently completed the Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) at the National Fire Academy (2013). He has an Associates of Fire Science degree from Ivy Tech State College. Previous to that he earned a bachelor of architecture degree and a bachelor of environmental design degree, both from Ball State University (1992)

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Arrival

Nozzle opening

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20 seconds of flow

30 seconds of flow



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