Selecting The Right Volunteers
By: Tim Holman BA, EMTP, CFO

For a Volunteer Department to be successful it must have an effective selection process. Accepting every volunteer who walks through the door does not create great organizations. Great organizations start with great people.

Hire For Attitude, Train The Skill. This is one of the most important rules that a Fire Department can adopt for the organization. Attitude will make or break the organization and it will make or break the firefighter. Therefore, hire good attitudes.

Look at your department; do you see any attitudes that are currently causing you problems? Most officers spend more time dealing with bad attitudes than all other problems. With that in mind, make sure you bring good attitudes into your organization.

It doesn’t matter how skilled the firefighter may be, if he/she has a negative attitude, that attitude will negate all the skills he/she has. Would you want a surgeon with a bad attitude to operate on you? How would you feel about flying with a pilot who has a bad attitude? Why would you send a firefighter with a bad attitude out to serve the public?

Take the time to meet with the current members of your department and ask what they identify as the ideal characteristics of a volunteer firefighter. List these characteristics and then analyze them.

Next, take a long hard look at your department. What are the specific needs of your organization? What type of volunteer firefighter would help meet those needs? Now design the selection process based on the answers to the above questions.

Tips for selecting the right volunteer:

1. **Identify the member expectations.** Determine what is expected from your firefighters, not just the technical skills, but also the general behavior that you expect. Write down these expectations and review them with those you are interviewing.

   Describe the expectations. Once you have reviewed the expectations, ask him/her if he/she agrees to abide by these expectations. **For an example of an Employee Expectations Agreement see page 4-6.**

2. **Use interview teams,** Interviewing new applicants with a team of five people has the advantage of multiple views. Each member on the team is listening and analyzing what is being said. One team member may pick up on something that another may have overlooked. Team interviews, if handled properly, can be very effective in choosing the right candidate.

   After the interview, the team should give their recommendation to the chief or assistant chief of the department. The team must be in full agreement before making their
recommendation. If one member is not sure about the candidate, this must be discussed with the team in an open manner. All team members must be open to each other’s concerns.

3. **Develop a list of interview questions.** By developing a good list of interview questions, each interview is consistent. The interview team knows exactly what they are looking for in each answer and it helps take away the guesswork associated with interviews. **An example of these questions can be found below on page 7.**

4. **Consider multiple interviews.** By interviewing the candidate two or three times, the team can pick up on trends in the answers to questions. It will also allow the organization to see how interested the applicant is. Is he/she willing to come back for two or three interviews? If not, why? Is the Fire Department willing to invest time, money, and training in an individual who they have interviewed one time? How can you tell what type of attitude an applicant has after just one interview?

5. **Train the interview team.** The interview team cannot be expected to perform at a high level if they are not trained properly. Failure to train the team is a set-up for failure.

6. **Change the team every three months.** By changing the members of the team every quarter, everyone in the organization has the opportunity to participate. Many volunteer departments constantly struggle with the problem of getting members to engage in the daily operations of the organization. By participating on the team they have more ownership in the organization and the process of selecting new firefighters.

7. **Team make-up.** When forming the interview team, consider the team make-up. One method that works well is placing four firefighters and one officer on the team. The frontline firefighters are the people who will be working with the new member so why shouldn’t they have some say in the selection process?

8. **Clarify organizational expectations and the candidate’s expectations.** How can the organization meet the expectations of a new volunteer if those needs are not discussed? Everyone must know their job description and the general expectations. This allows for a level playing field right from the beginning of the selection process.

**Summary**

By formalizing the selection process in your department you can help insure that the leadership staff is providing the organization with high quality members. It is far better to focus on the quality of people in the department, instead of quantity. Many volunteer departments have a large number of members on their roster, but only a handful who are actively contributing to the organization.
BIO for Tim Holman

As a speaker and seminar leader, Tim Holman has conducted programs throughout the United States. He speaks and trains on a variety of Business, Fire and EMS Management and Leadership issues, specializing in providing Fire and EMS Officer Development Programs. Fire Chief Magazine named Tim Fire Chief of the year for 2002. He has also been appointed to the commission on Chief Fire Officer Designation. Tim is frequently requested to speak at conferences and retreats across the country. He is known for presenting highly unique and motivating programs. Tim can be contacted at 937-408-1396 or htdholman@donet.com.
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Employee Expectations Agreement (example)

The following is a list of expectations that are not included in your job description. We feel it is extremely important for everyone to know what is expected of him or her. Please review the list and clarify any questions you may have. This list is intended to help you make an easy transition to our organization.

1. **Maintain and promote a winning attitude.**
   - Look at problems as opportunities. How can we improve?
   - When you bring a concern to a supervisor, also bring two possible solutions.
   - Do not engage in chronic complaining. Be part of the solution not part of the problem. Complaining does little to improve the organization. Help us work towards positive solutions.
   - Don’t accept negative attitudes in others. Bring their negativity to their attention.
   - Avoid negative thinking. Negative thinking is contagious and limits our potential.
   - Remember that attitude is a choice; choose to have a good one.
   - Develop a “Can do” attitude. You are in control of your potential.
   - Focus on making a positive impact on others and the organization.
   - Seek out opportunity and ways to implement.
   - Deal in FACTS not assumptions.

2. **Practice the Golden Rule.**
   - Treat others the way you wish to be treated.
   - See value in others. Everyone has value.
   - Care about the other members and help them succeed.
   - Focus more on the positive attributes of others instead of the negative.
• We will not ignore the negative but we will emphasize the positive.
• Help energize others by being motivated yourself.

3. **Be a team player.**
   • Participate in meetings and trainings.
   • Help your fellow EMTs succeed.
   • Remember that we win and we lose as a team, not individuals.
   • Keep communications open.
   • Always seek win-win solutions.
   • Have fun. Enjoy working with the group.
   • Make a safe environment.
   • Build relationships to improve trust and understanding.
   • Allow mistakes. We will all make mistakes when we try new ideas.
   • Learning must take place when we make mistakes.
   • Poor performance is not tolerated.
   • Recognize fellow members for a job well done.

4. **Seek excellence.**
   • Increase your education and skill level.
   • Focus on helping to move the organization forward.
   • Finish what you start. Get help if you need it.
   • Seek to improve everything we do.
   • Think why we can, instead of why we can’t.
   • Choose to be data-driven. Get the facts.
   • Understand our budget is limited. How can we make the most impact with what we have?

5. **Do that which is right.**
   • Everything you do must be done in a moral, ethical, and legal manner.
   • Contribute to the mission and vision of the organization.
• Help accomplish our goals.
• Always consider the internal and external customer.
• Remember the 10 Commandments are not outdated.
• Be trustworthy and show integrity.

6. **Stay focused.**
• Remember that you’re here to help the organization succeed.
• Stay focused on contributing to the mission, vision, and goals.
• Don’t get distracted with personal agendas.
• You are our most valuable resource and we will support you through education, training, coaching and counseling.
• Every task that you engage in must be aligned with the mission.

7. **Participate.**
• Participate in meetings, trainings, special details, and emergency medical calls.
• Participate by communicating, asking questions, and offering suggestions.
• Participate by helping the organization be better today than it was yesterday.

8. **Capitalize on adversity.**
• We are constantly faced with adversity and problems. Don’t let the problems pull you down. Our job is to adapt and overcome problems.
• Seek out opportunity anytime you are confronted with adversity.
• Understand all of the facts when confronted with adversity.
• Help develop and implement the plan to overcome adversity.

I have reviewed and discussed the above list to clarify my understanding of the expectations. A copy has been provided to me for future reference.

________________________  ____________________
Firefighter  Date   Officer  Date
Interview Questions (examples)

- What do you expect from our organization?
- Review our expectations with the applicant.
- Why are you applying for membership with our department?
- How well do you feel you take constructive criticism?
- In what way do you feel you would be an asset to our department?
- What reservations, if any, do you have concerning this organization?
- What are your two greatest weaknesses?
- What are your two greatest strengths?
- What type of individual do you find difficult to work with?
- What will you do to make this organization the best Volunteer Fire Department?
- How do you define best?
- Give an example of a situation in which you would not be able to support our organization?
- What are your future goals in the fire service?
- As a member of this department, do you feel you should be held to a higher standard in the public’s eye? Why?
- Define “RIGHT.” How do you determine right from wrong?
- How do you respond to negative people?
- What can you do to help promote a positive attitude within our department?