

ASK THE CHIEFS

Good counsel on teaching city council about overtime & staffing needs. PLUS: How to prevent & manage councilmember outbursts.

BY JOHN VANCE & TERRY GARRISON

B SHIFTER *Buckslip*, Aug. 6, 2024



Testifying to elected officials with preconceived notions requires educating them and building coalitions ahead of time. In this photo (from left), Police Chief Scott Boerboom, State Senator Paul Anderson, Fire Chief John Vance (me) and Assistant City Manager Perry Better team up to request funding.

Dear Chiefs,

I have been the fire chief in a medium-sized fire department for over two years, and things have been going pretty well. However, the other night at our monthly fire board meeting, a council member ranted about the high cost of overtime. I was caught off guard and tried not to get too offensive during the meeting. Has this ever happened to you? If so, how did you handle it during the meeting, and how did you follow up afterward?

*Signed,
Caught in Council's Crosshairs*

Some elected officials seem to make a sport out of blindsiding, demeaning and embarrassing department heads simply because they can. Fortunately, during my last 10 years as fire chief, I worked with a respectful council that rarely, if ever, blindsided any department head. They asked tough questions, but the city manager would spend the day before the council meeting

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on the phone with council members, gathering questions from the various city departments. This approach allowed the city manager to prepare department heads for any city council questions and concerns, creating a system that worked well. It allowed department heads to prepare and gather information, making the meetings more productive and equipping council members with enough information to make important decisions.

Establishing these relationship agreements minimizes grandstanding and other attempts to make departments look bad through badgering or aggressive lines of questioning. Building a relationship with your elected body based on mutual respect and a shared commitment to accomplish common goals (such as public safety) sets the stage for success for the body politic, the department, and the customers/taxpayers.

If you are not fortunate enough to have pre-arranged procedures for addressing concerns with elected officials, I have a few pieces of advice for handling contentious interactions:

During a Public Meeting:

1. Stay Calm & Professional: Maintain composure and avoid becoming defensive. Acknowledge the concern respectfully. George Bernard Shaw once said, "Never wrestle with pigs. You both get dirty, and the pig likes it." I try to remember that when the tone gets combative, or anyone in a public setting is trying to provoke an emotional reaction.

2. Listen Actively: Allow the elected official to express their concerns fully. This shows that you are open to feedback and you are trying to understand their concerns; this might be all they need.

3. Provide Immediate Information (if you can): If you have data at hand, briefly explain factors that contribute to overtime costs, such as emergency response demands, staffing shortages or mandatory training. Also, provide options and/or remedies that you have previously proposed.

4. Commit to Follow-Up: Express your commitment to addressing the concern by promising a detailed report later. Allowing time for a proper follow-up is pragmatic on behalf of the council rather than expecting an instant analysis. Make sure you follow through on the promise to deliver the requested information.

5. Find the Source of the Concern: Is the official just practicing good stewardship, or is another matter lurking below the surface? Many of today's elected officials are former activists who approach their elected posts with a spirit of advocacy, such as anti-tax watchdog groups. This contrasts with traditional elected officials who focus primarily on "doing the work of the people." Understanding the specific concern of the official can help you address it more effectively and strategically.

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After the Meeting is Over

1. Analyze the Situation: Review overtime records to identify patterns and causes. Consider emergency call volume, training schedules, sick leave and vacation time. Also, factor in staffing shortages and what it would take to be fully staffed, necessitating less overtime. Often, we can trace increased overtime back to a decision made by policymakers, such as hiring freezes, being unwilling to increase staffing numbers, or denying previous budget requests.

2. Prepare a Detailed Report: If the concern is legit (and not just a political statement), confer with your boss (city manager/county executive) to determine whether a detailed report is necessary. If yes, include data on overtime hours, reasons for overtime, comparisons with industry standards, and potential areas for cost reduction. Highlight any recent efforts made to control costs.

3. Develop a Plan: Propose actionable steps to manage and reduce overtime, such as adjusting staffing levels, implementing shift changes, and utilizing enhanced scheduling software. The plan may be to increase costs to hit staffing targets, ultimately reducing overtime spending.

4. Communicate with Stakeholders: Share your findings and proposed solutions with elected officials and the labor group. Determine the correct course of action and messaging for the issue. It is best when the union and fire chief are on the same page and do not react to the media prematurely or post extreme statements on social media. Communicate regularly with the labor group to keep them in the loop on proposed changes.

5. Propose & Implement Changes: Start implementing the agreed-upon strategies and monitor their effectiveness over time. Include incident outcomes and response times, and always remember to continually educate the public on the staffing needed to respond effectively in the community.

6. Regular Updates: Provide periodic updates to elected officials on the progress of overtime management and cost reduction efforts and how they relate to overall department performance.

Educate the Public & Our Elected Officials

The elected body must understand the effective response force needed to protect the community and the minimum staffing required to achieve that goal. Adopting service-level objectives everyone agrees on takes some of the emotion out of the cost of doing business. Given workforce shortages, turnover, a changing work ethic, increasing service demands, and the need to supply incidents with the right amount of personnel to quickly address issues, we must continually educate the public and our elected officials on the budget required to operate a fire department safely and effectively.

—John Vance

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I have been in council meetings where an elected official has ranted and raved about the high cost of overtime, but it was never a surprise because of the conversations I had with them before the meeting. It is unfortunate that you were caught off guard, and it must have been difficult to know how to respond.

I learned the hard way from this council interaction that when one elected official feels disrespected, the entire council feels disrespected.

In the interest of sharing lessons learned, let me tell you what I did as a new fire chief, which was absolutely the wrong thing to do. The city manager and a few council members didn't support the fire service and were frustrated by the high cost of overtime. I had numerous conversations with them, both privately and in public meetings, explaining the reasons behind these costs. I provided staffing standards, EMS work studies, and other relevant information to show that the issue wasn't overtime but inadequate staffing—we needed to hire more firefighters. However, they believed I was colluding with the labor union to hire more union members. As the old saying goes, "I can explain it to you, but I can't understand it for you." I made little progress and felt just as frustrated as they did.

We had a three-person staffing system at the time, and I was able to convince them that reducing it to two-person engines, as they initially wanted, was something we could not (and I would not) do. During one council meeting, a member suggested that if I was so concerned about protecting firefighter positions, I should eliminate two chief positions instead. He argued that the chiefs were far removed from emergency response and, therefore, wouldn't be missed. Without hesitation, I pointed out that there were five other city positions even farther removed from our response system that wouldn't be missed either: the council aides. (Each council member had a full-time aide, which I felt was inappropriate for a city our size.) My comment became part of the public record, and the reaction from the council members, all of them, was overwhelmingly angry. They felt I had usurped their authority and undermined their positions. Even the council members who were typically supportive of the fire department and me reacted with lengthy and explicit diatribes. (How was I to know that some of those aides were relatives of the council members?)

I learned the hard way from this council interaction that when one elected official feels disrespected, the entire council feels disrespected. It reminded me of the saying, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

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I quickly became the council's enemy. It took several months to regain the trust of those council members who had initially supported me, while those who never supported me remained unsupportive. I learned that the council members and the city manager hold the "bully pulpit," and arguing with them from that position is futile. I'm not suggesting we should simply cower or allow them to beat up our members, but becoming too defensive in the moment isn't effective either.

**When they rant & rave & you don't react emotionally,
you'll gain more support from other members.**

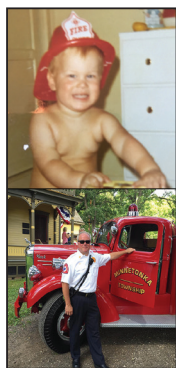
A better method is to acknowledge you've heard their opinion (without necessarily agreeing—I certainly wouldn't) and request a meeting to explain the issues of overtime and staffing more thoroughly. When they rant and rave, and you don't react emotionally, you'll gain more support from other members. Trust me, this approach works; I've used it in other departments. Ideally, they will schedule an official meeting on the record. When you do meet, bring all relevant data, including NFPA Standards, UL studies, NIOSH reports, response data, and any other information you can share. You may not change their minds, but they can't claim you didn't give them all the available information. I always brought at least one assistant chief as a witness and to assist with the presentation. It's also crucial to provide the same information to the other council members. In some jurisdictions, this is a requirement.

You mentioned that a council member's volatile reaction caught you off guard, which is understandably unsettling. No one likes those kinds of surprises, including elected officials. This is why, in my previous role as fire chief, I would begin each new budget year by outlining and forecasting our overtime budget. For the 16 years I served as chief, we informed the city manager and finance director each quarter if we were going to exceed the budget and by how much. It was then the city manager's responsibility to share this information with the council members. Keeping a record of these interactions proved invaluable as the fiscal year progressed.

In closing, my advice is to keep council members informed early, assuming they may not fully understand the work firefighters do (because they really don't). Use regional and national standards and information when communicating with them. Never lose your temper; your opinion of them is none of your business. Approach the situation like an incident commander: remain calm, professional, and respectful. Identify the critical factors, assess the risks, choose your strategy, and implement the best plan possible.

—Terry Garrison **BS**

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John Vance recently retired as a fire chief after 22 years in the front office. He is currently a battalion chief with the Chanhassen (Minn.) Fire Department; he has been a chief officer since 2002. He is a proud Blue Card lead instructor and an accredited chief officer through the Center for Public Safety Excellence. John has a bachelor's degree in fire service management from Southern Illinois University and a certificate in executive management from the University of Notre Dame. He is the host of the B Shifter podcast and wants your questions at johnvance@bshifter.com.



In 2007, Terry Garrison retired from the Phoenix Fire Department after serving more than 30 years. Working for Alan Brunacini and reaching the rank of assistant chief of operations helped shape Terry's consistent values: firefighter safety and customer service. After a quick retirement, Terry served as the fire chief of the Oceanside (Calif.) Fire Department for almost three years. He then served as the chief of the Houston Fire Department for more than five years. Terry eventually moved back to where he was raised and served as the fire chief for the Glendale (Ariz.) Fire Department for more than six years before officially retiring from government service. Including his two years in the U.S. Army, Terry has worked for the government and worn a nametag and a helmet for more than 47 years. (Thank goodness for helmets.) In addition, he has traveled throughout the world teaching Fire Command, utilizing his master's degree in education. Today, Terry and his wife, Annette, live in Phoenix. He will continue to stay connected to the fire service by working with B SHIFTER. His most important role is being the best buddy to his grandson Jack, pictured with him here.