



# TFCA – 2026

*People Problems:*

*“What we have here is  
a failure to  
communicate.”*



# Facilitator

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# Learning From You

- **Background:**
  - Legal, but risk management
  - Emergency services and Athletics
  - **Training** – all employees and Officer Development
  - **Facilitating conversations** – conflict resolution; coaching/counseling



# Who I'm Not

- **Your Fire Department's:**
  - **Employee**
  - **Legal counsel (internal or external)**
- **No conflict of interest**
- **3<sup>rd</sup> party trainer – obligation to ask questions or raise concerns**



# Goals for Today

- **Learn from each other**
- **Why have to get here?**
- **Two roads to “Crapsville”**
  1. **EPL**
  2. **People problems**
    - **“Difficult employee”**





# What we do with our “Bulldozers”?

- **Kick the can**
- **How good at spelling out what makes them so difficult?**
  - **Sitting next to me at church**
- **BYOG**
  - **Bring Your Own Guts**





# Communicate in ESOs

- **“Difficult” or don’t “fit in”**
  - Nailing Jell-O to the wall
- **Around the dinner table**
  - Give each other grief
  - Bull-jive each other
- **Paper wars rather than difficult conversations**



# Employee Relations Problems

- “Sticker-gate”
- **3-years: During Pride month – sticker on apparatus**
- **Claim** – religious freedoms infringed upon
- **70 page internal investigation report**
- **Paper battle**
- **Never talked to each other**
- **9-days on-site facilitating discussions**



# Complex, yet simple

- **Another ESO client – 2 teammates**
- **Ready to debate (battle) and BE RIGHT**
- **Stack of negative paperwork**
- **80 hours**
- **There is a better way.**
- **Do you want to be right or get along?**
- **“I’m just tired.”**





# The Push and Pull of Managing People

- **Not easy being a leader in the fire service**
  - Managing people – like raising kids
- **Ongoing inner battle – find the balance**
- **“Don’t reinforce bad behavior.”**
- **Dad, of all people, how did you allow?**
- **“Ever heard of the phrase, give up?”**



# Mediation Lesson

- **Wrongful termination mediation**
- **7 year employee**
- **Stack of negative documentation**
- **Mediator: “Show me what non-disciplinary and non-punitive documentation you can produce to turn the employee’s performance around.”**
- **1,000 options**



# Moving Forward

- **Two people of sound mind and good faith intention can make anything better.**
- **Waymakers**
- **Champion conversations**



# Three Things

- **Ideas for how to better communicate and work together**
- **What 3 things you need from me (primarily soft skills)**
- **What “3 things” you can’t have**
- **2-way communication**
- **Non-disciplinary documentation**



# Communications for Human Relations Challenges

- 1. Understand each other better**
- 2. Don't follow the Golden Rule**
  - Treat people the way they want to be treated.**



# Question

**What programs and processes have you implemented, or continued, that you find to be the most beneficial in **strengthening communications?****



# Pieces of the Puzzle

- Commendations
- Training
  - For all
  - Officer Development
- Non-disciplinary coaching and counseling



# More Puzzle Pieces

- **In-person meetings with Officers**
- **Visit the stations**
  - **Don't always point out fault, even when find fault.**
- **1-on-1 meeting with Fire Chief annually**
  - **Unapproachable?**



# Communications Ideas

- **Town hall – Q&A format**
- **Why Wednesdays**
- **Culture Wednesdays – UT**
- **Employee engagement surveys**
- **Annual performance evaluations**
- **360 degree evaluations**
- **Disciplinary documentation**



# Fire Service Parallels in Leadership & Communication





# Coach Saban – Need More Like Him?





# Coach Saban

- **Fire service – job in training to put under pressure**
- **Mental toughness defined**
- **Windows in Florida home**
- **What is their breaking point?**
- **MF – How is that working for you?**
- **Saban – don't look at him or address him**



# Coach Brent Venable

- **Some players have an honesty problem.**
  - **They can't handle the truth.**
- **Give a sh\*t factor**
- **Not everyone can play for me.**
- **“Get back guy”**
  - **Emotions in check**



# Two Concepts

- 1. Is the Coach coachable?**
- 2. There aren't bad players, there are just bad coaches.**



# 5% causes 95% of problems?

- **Who is your 5%**
- **Employees are going to vent**
- **Constructive or destructive?**
- **How much damage to morale and culture can the 5% cause?**



# “Difficult” Employees

- **Often wrong, but never in doubt**
  - **2 year Coach & 28 year Coach**
  - **Condescending (talk down)**
- **Sh\*t stirrer**
  - **Problem maker, not a problem solver**
  - **No constructive ideas**
  - **Common denominator**
  - **Undermine and gossip**



# Other Common Challenges

- **Emotional volcano** – emotions get the best of him/her
- **Mailman**
  - Mailing it in; or retired on the job
- **The Deflector**
  - Take no personal responsibility



# Essential Job Functions

- Is **gratitude** an essential job function?
- **Why not?**
- **Attitude of gratitude**
- **Capital murder on-the-job?**



# Communication with the 5%?

- **Negative documentation is NOT the answer**
- **Non-punitive or disciplinary coaching & counseling**
- **Movie – The Godfather**
- **Frequency and ongoing**



# The Great Communicator

- What makes someone a great communicator?
- Inspire
- Motivate
- Build trust
- **Listening** may be the most important quality.



# When Issues Go Sideways

- **Interrupt before you finish**
- **Finish and then they tell you how wrong you are**



# Oprah

- **\$3.2 Billion**
- **#1 lesson learned**
  - **What we all share**
  - **Everyone wants to be heard**



# If don't feel heard, what is the result?

- **Don't care**
- **Don't value or respect your perspectives**
  - **Aretha or Rodney Dangerfield**
- **Their way is the only way**
- **When silent – they will fill the void**



# Good Listeners

- **What is required to be a good listener?**
- **Humility**
- **Document**
- **Ask for ideas to improve**
- **Follow up**
- **Ongoing conversation**



# Goal for Communications

- 1. What are you really wanting to say, but you're too afraid to say it?**
- 2. What are you really wanting to ask, but you're too afraid to ask it?**

**Now we are communicating!**



# Presenter

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