

Creating Sustainable Leadership & a “Sticky” Environment with an EMS Organization

The Sand Lake Ambulance is a non-profit ambulance organization serving a town of 10,000 people outside of Albany, New York. It is comprised of both volunteer crews and paid paramedics. As most “hybrid” (paid & volunteer staffed) ambulance services, they were experiencing a low number of volunteers and high turnover rates leading to an unsustainable leadership structure, or a recipe for extinction. As leadership watched these issues plague their organization over the years and a “revolving door” where new people would join just as quickly as others were leaving. Several people discounted what was happening as “volunteers are a dying breed” and “people are just too busy these days”, Sand Lake Ambulance leaders set out to prove them wrong and get to the root of these issues.

Looking for expert advice, the leadership reached out to Lisa Giruzzi, a speaker & author who is the owner of Transformational Conversations, a training and consulting firm specializing in communication and performance. Lisa used her over 25 years experience in the field of organizational change and communications to formulate an action plan that would produce results.

What the Sand Lake Ambulance & Lisa Giruzzi soon realized, is that there was a central underlying theme which was not unique to the agency but to the Emergency Services industry as a whole, it was a mix of interpersonal communication problems and lack of leadership training & development. Recruitment and retention are two sides of the same coin. Both are impacted by the culture of an organization. When an organization focuses on what’s wrong or the root causes of its failures, i.e., “why do we have a low retention rate?”, it only knows what to avoid. On the other hand, when an organization studies what they want more of or the root causes of its success, it can design a culture that naturally attracts and retains high caliber members, i.e., creating a magnetic environment.

"Virtually every issue or concern in an organization is the result of ineffective communication," said Giruzzi. "Issues such as low morale, poor productivity, high turnover, etc. are all a function of misinterpretation, lack of understanding, disempowerment, i.e., bad communication." The training programs delivered to the Sand Lake Ambulance Company focused on how to communicate effectively and work together to build an organization that works.

"The results were staggering," said Robbie MacCue, President of Sand Lake Ambulance Company. "We hoped the training would help us work together better and keep good people. The results we achieved far exceeded our expectations and created a magnetic atmosphere that people wanted to be a part of. Most organizations have a decreasing number of volunteers and our numbers continue to grow every month."

Sand Lake Ambulance doubled in size of volunteers, more than doubled the number of on call hours and **increased the number of volunteers contributing over 500 hours annually from 2 to 26**. This increase in recruitment and retention led to significant cost savings for both the ambulance company and the town they serve.