



Breaking Bad Habits: Recruitment and Retention of Volunteer Firefighters

We all have habits in our daily lives that we repeat with little to no thought in the process. Most of our bad habits are not even caught until someone calls attention to what we are doing, or we find out they have caused a problem for ourselves or our organizations. The volunteer fire service is no different. Our organizations have bad habits that we need to address before they cause harm.

Here are the top five habits to break in order to effectively recruit and retain volunteer firefighters:

Habit 1: Believing People Will Come

The days of thinking that volunteers will continually come to the fire station to help are long gone. We are no different than any other civic organization. Most civic organizations have experienced declines greater than 63% over the past two decades. We must change our tactics and actively recruit members to join our departments. As an organization we need to be visible, approachable, inviting and open-minded.

Challenge: In the next two months, hold a recruitment event in an environment away from the fire station.

Habit 2: Relying on People to Stay

We always thought that once we get them through training, we have volunteers for life. We now are realizing this is not the case. Some organizations are losing members at 115% the rate in which they can recruit them annually. This is something that cannot be sustained and will quickly lead to the demise of the organization.

One of the main reasons why members quit is because they do not feel appreciated. We all know time and energy are precious commodities and if we can't show our volunteers that we appreciate them and their time, they will find an organization that does. One of the best ways to combat this feeling is involving the entire family in the fire department. This requires effort and planning, but the rewards are huge in return.

Challenge: Plan a family movie night at the station with special activities for all ages or demographics.

Habit 3: Diversity Without a Plan for Inclusion

Diversity can only thrive in a welcoming, inclusive environment. Fire departments often make well-intentioned efforts to recruit more diverse members without a plan for making them feel accepted and valued once they join. Diversity is something you have, and inclusion is something you are. This can only develop with a change in attitude and department climate. Living by our mission and values, reaching out to different cultural groups in the community, and practicing inclusion and transparency as new members join are necessary for a successful department.

Challenge: Attend or volunteer at a community cultural event.

Habit 4: One-Size-Fits-All Recruitment Strategy

We tend to recruit in a one-dimensional fashion. No successful organization can recruit this way and survive for very long. Instead, we need to adapt our recruitment strategies to better suit individuals in our community and recruit those who believe in our mission and values. We also need to recognize people's unique talents and skills they could bring to the department.

Combining these individuals into a collective unit allows us to grow together. The tribal concept of networking and learning from each other provides a positive climate and allows for diverse skill sets that reflect the communities we serve.

Challenge: Perform a talent survey and find ways to utilize each member's unique skills.

Habit 5: Blame It on the Millennials

We often blame the millennial generation for changes we don't like. Many have tagged this generation as uncaring, unconnected and lazy. But in fact, the complete opposite is true. Millennials are one of the most passionate and driven generations since the baby boomers. The issues they care about vary wildly but millennials are engaged, active and have a culture of sharing knowledge like no other generation before. To recruit millennials, they need a shared purpose and the flexibility to volunteer on their time as many of them give their time and talents to multiple causes. Utilizing communication tools such as social media platforms is the best way to connect with this generation, as your information is available when they want to receive it.

Challenge: Develop a recruitment video and link to your social media accounts inviting your community to ask questions and find out more about volunteering.

A wise man once told me that to be successful in any endeavor we must have the ability to adapt, the knowledge to improvise and the drive to overcome. To break bad habits in recruiting and retaining our volunteer firefighters, we must diversify our methods and strengthen our individual bonds to be sustainable. We have many bad habits to break but starting with these five is a step in the right direction in recruiting the citizens we rely on to protect the communities that rely on us.

Colby Cagle

Council for Future Volunteer Firefighters

IFSTA/FPP Curriculum Manager, OK