



# Fear Factor: Now You're the Volunteer Fire Chief

There is no single road to chief in the volunteer fire service. You progress through the ranks, or you step in because nobody else wanted the job. You might have one or twenty years of fire service experience. No matter how you got there, what do you do now?

[You're the Fire Chief; Now What? Guidance for New and Interim Fire Chiefs](#), published by the Volunteer and Combination Officers Section in partnership with the Executive Fire Officers Section of the IAFC, provides direction and support for a new chief's first 100 days. I have been a fire chief for almost two years and found this resource to be full of practical guidance on the immediate daily tasks—and fears—a new chief faces.

## Fears? Me?

Self-doubt is a form of fear. I had numerous firefighters and chief officers mentor me as I moved up the ranks of our volunteer department, yet once it became evident I would be the next chief, I wasn't sure I was ready. I knew I wanted to inspire trust from the community we served and, most importantly from those who would serve with me. Could I lead and inspire a team from all walks of life ranging in age from 16 to 90 years old? Would my decisions be good ones? Could I handle criticism when it inevitably came? What if I failed? Besides being new, I would also be the first female volunteer fire chief in our combination system. What impact would that have on our department and me personally?

I wish the [New Chiefs Guide](#) had been around in January 2018 when I stepped in as fire chief. As I developed my own roadmap, I found these to be the 10 Commandments to help face and defeat my doubts as a new volunteer fire chief. Combine them with your own ideas along with the advice from the [guide](#), and you will be well equipped to face the challenges of a new chief.

**I. Be kind.** A fire department takes cues from its leadership. We would all die to save one of our own, but we often exhibit behaviors behind closed doors that contradict the idea of "brotherhood" or "sisterhood." Every time you walk into the firehouse, be pleasant, show concern for others, and be ethical. Kindness does not make you a "soft" or "weak" leader. It makes you a better one.

**II. Work and play well with others.** Twenty-one years ago, Chief James P. Seavey Sr. stepped into a room of new volunteer recruits, of which I was one, and eased into what he told outsiders was his "fireside chat." (Inside the firehouse it was called something else that I cannot print!) The message of his chat was that we were a family. Just as with families, there would be conflict, but just because you might have an issue with someone, did not mean others did too. Every individual brings something different, and potentially useful, to your organization. Embrace the diversity. We are in the business of problem-solving. Diversity of thought brings more ways to solve the problem.

**III. Attend to details.** Taking care of the small stuff, such as station cleaning, shows pride in your work and concern about the end result. Showing that you care about the small things has a snowball effect and you'll see the same passion from your members about the big things.

**IV. Remember who you are.** Like it or not, you are now the face of your volunteer organization. You represent not only yourself, but also your department's name and all who have worn the same department patch. A huge responsibility comes with that. If you are going to be a viral media sensation, make sure it is for an act that promotes trust and is something your parents would be proud of!

**V. Get rid of the box.** You know the box that we're supposed to think outside of when we look for a different way to solve a problem? My outside-the-box thought is why have a box at all? Throw it out! The volunteer fire service is changing and facing challenges in recruitment and retention, funding, and in some parts of the nation, relevance. Create a vision for your department and set out to make it a reality without thinking you need to be restrained by all the traditions of the fire service.

**VI. Practice life balance.** It is very easy to be consumed by the fire service, especially as a new chief swamped by the initial operational and administrative demands. Chances are you will also feel the pull of family life, friends, one or more jobs, school, and other commitments. Find balance. I would not be the fire chief I am today without my family, experiences outside the fire service, and education. Give your life outside the firehouse the time it deserves. It will make you a better leader.

**VII. Look for help wherever it may be.** Why reinvent the wheel when another department may have devised a solution to your problem? Take that information and adapt it to your unique needs. Tap into online resources, such as the [IAFC's KnowledgeNet](#) or the [National Volunteer Fire Council](#). Develop strong relationships with other neighboring departments, as well as mentors outside your area. Take advantage of resources unrelated to the fire service and massage them to meet your needs.

**VIII. Be visible.** Administrative responsibilities can chew up your hours. Don't let it happen. Take time to be with the troops. Be front and center for trainings or special events, have dinner at the station with crews, drop in on shifts to invite conversation from all levels of your department. Volunteer personnel want to see their leaders. They want officers to be accountable to them. There is nothing more demoralizing for a volunteer company than leadership that exists mostly on paper.

**IX. Don't beat yourself up.** One of my mentors made a comment that has stayed with me regarding the leadership of his organization. Successful leaders have a short memory about their perceived failures. They do not dwell on missteps, but rather keep moving to meet the next challenge. I have adopted and simplified this approach: own your mistakes, learn from them, and move forward.

**X. Plan for your successor.** One of the first pieces of advice I received the day I was sworn in as chief was that I should start planning my exit. I initially thought this was a judgment on my leadership. Instead, it was the reminder that I need to leave the department better than it was when I took over. That means I need to promote leaders within the department, delegate responsibilities to potential leaders to give them experience, and find ways to document institutional knowledge. Given the transient nature of the volunteer service, finding a replacement is easier said than done, but keep an eye out and an open mind for opportunities.

In all that we do within the volunteer fire service, remember that volunteering means pride and is not an excuse. We should never consider ourselves "just volunteers" and our leadership should reflect that. Allow that pride to take over your fear.

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