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| West Metro Fire Protection District Strategic Planning Teams | | |
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| CULTURE OF COOPERATION CASE STUDY | | |

# The Opportunity

When a millage levy election failed to pass, West Metro Fire Rescue was faced with organizational realignment because of budget reductions that affected core services. To weather associated deployment and staffing changes, labor and management had to leverage their collaborative relationship.

# The Action

Department Info

west metro fire protection district

Population served: 300,000

total Uniformed personnel: 390

Total Civilian personnel: 40

Fire Stations: 17

ISO Class: 1

Governance structure: District

highest level of EMS service provided: ALS Transport

Annual Budget: $100.1M

Beginning with a “proof of concept” example implementing a community medicine/mobile-integrated health program, West Metro Fire Rescue has formed strategic planning teams (SPTs) around complex, strategic initiatives that require input from all levels of the organization as well as from both labor and management.

# The Outcome

West Metro Fire Rescue has aligned labor and management around a series of strategic planning teams and has committed to an open and progressive level of interaction to maintain its strategic direction as a fire service agency.

# Introduction

With the popularity and ubiquity of social media, our connectivity to the larger fire service world has extended beyond what could have been imagined even ten years ago. From accounts run by a single shift at a suburban fire station, to nationally recognized training cadres, content runs from technical specifications on new equipment to nearly live voice-over video showing working incidents. This seems to have led to broad similarities in on scene communication, size-up, to even strategy and tactics. If you and your department have a challenge that it can’t figure out, go online, enter a few searches in “#fireTwitter,” “#fireInsta,” or “#fireMeta,” and you’re likely to have more solutions than you can easily process.

But when approaching executive-level management decisions or anything related to inter-governmental complexity, from budgeting to integration of deployment changes, we tend to think that the challenges facing each of our departments are somehow greater than others, because of added layers of commitment and emotion. In some cases, we don’t know we have a problem. In others, it is all too clear.

# The Opportunity

This was the case in 2014, when West Metro Fire Rescue faced a budget shortfall caused by the failure of a millage election by 600 votes, an action that was intended to maintain the department’s service level. The levy’s failure meant demotions, the closure of some companies and cuts to programs. Chief Lombardi knew that these changes could have greater and longer lasting negative impact on morale and the trust between labor and management. He also understood that he couldn’t do it alone, and that if he tried, any changes would likely fail. In looking for a different way forward, the chief investigated various agencies nationwide that had similar strong labor/management collaborative processes.

Our “belief is that the people closest to the problem are the best to solve it. WMFR is OUR organization, and we want you to have ownership. By supporting a system that allows members to analyze and problem-solve issues we face, we will build a stronger district now and into the future.”

# The Action

What followed from this research were conversations to frame changes to the way the department approached researching and implementing strategic decisions – the creation of inclusive strategic planning teams (SPT). As this was a new concept to the department, clarity of communication was critical, and the chief and the union president, Michael Frainier, created a document that laid out the purpose and vision of its SPTs, identified the anticipated benefits, while also defining the limits of the teams (they do not replace the chain-of-command).

There is an inevitable reality check in all of this: To put personal interest aside for the benefit of an organization is easier in theory than in practice. It is to the credit of the chief and the union president that they have been able to do so. An important recognition for Chief Lombardi was that he had to give up some decision-making authority, while labor could no longer claim a lack of familiarity when it came to internal discussions, as they were now in the know.

# The Outcome

West Metro formed its SPT around an already identified need – community medicine/mobile-integrated health. This program served as both a test run as well as a demonstration that such “team” collaboration would result in success. West Metro has remained committed to using SPTs for all manner of programs and opportunities, including:

* WMFR’s five-year strategic plan
* WMFR’s standard of cover
* a communications system rework
* firefighter wellness
* communications (organizational, internal, external)
* apparatus/equipment
* benefits
* PPE/uniforms
* safety

Each team is formed around an identified strategic need. This intentionality becomes important, as it ensures that before forming a team, the department determined some level of expectation (output) and actively passes authority to the team and its leaders to provide a recommendation to the fire chief.

The formation and make-up of each SPT is similarly intentional – a member representing management, and a member selected by the union president co-chair each team. In addition, the department does not limit participation – whoever wants to show-up and contribute can do so (all meetings have a remote option, as well).

This level of inclusion depends on some key factors:

* Managing meetings is critical to keep discussion on topic and each team moving forward.
* The fire chief and labor leaders needed to work through and agree on communication from resulting output – internal SharePoint documents have been made accessible to all members, along with meeting minutes and agendas.
* More importantly, when the union president and the fire chief speak to members of the department in meetings, at fire stations, or at other events using agreed-upon talking points and explanations remains important to the credibility of both the improved relationship between labor and management, as well as the SPTs themselves.

The impetus for changing the way West Metro Fire Rescue’s leadership and the department’s firefighter’s union worked together was driven by a critical period following the failure of a millage election. Through intentional collaboration focused on the department’s strategic needs, West Metro has continued to progress as an organization while increasing its members level of participation and trust.

# Tips for Replication

* *Leaders need to check their egos at the door:* While the ultimate responsibility for the outcome of any initiative is the fire chief’s and while labor has a responsibility to advocate for its membership, the only way for such teams to work is for the fire chief and his/her leadership team and the union executive staff to agree that benefitting the department is more important than any personal return.
* *Establish “rules of engagement early”*: Each team needs to understand its responsibility and any expectations for output. Common meeting rules and “structural” similarities, such as assigning co-chairs, help to avoid confusion that may undermine momentum.
* *If possible, identify and establish funding to support the teams*:While this was not possible initially for West Metro, when teams make recommendations that require funding, departments should avoid making this a limiting factor.

# About CPSE and Metro

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[www.cpse.org](http://www.cpse.org)

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[www.nfpa.org/metro](http://www.nfpa.org/metro)

CPSE and Metro have partnered to develop this series highlighting proven practices of Metro departments accredited by CPSE’s Commission on Fire Accreditation International.