



Why Your Firefighters Resist Technology and How You Can Inspire Change

When introducing new technology into your agency, the more upfront work you do, the better your chances of success.

At times, the fire service can be insular. People on the outside don't always 'get us.' The mental fortitude — and the mindset it takes to do this job — sets us apart. Regular people don't see what we see; they don't experience what we experience. It's easy to feel like a different breed.

Yet for all our uniqueness, we share a lot of common traits with our fellow humans — some less desirable than others. Take change for example. No matter their education level or occupation, we've all seen people do twice as much work to avoid a change as it would take to accept it. Perhaps it reminds you of that old saying about years of tradition unimpeded by progress?

And when it comes to adopting new technology, we can be a historically stubborn lot.

The consequences of this are very real. Firefighters successfully opposing a proposed change can reduce our departments' effectiveness. It will hinder our ability to attract and keep the most talented staff — the best and brightest will move on to another department if they feel their department is stuck in the past. Firefighters refusing to use implemented tech upgrades can derail the intended improvement, hurting a fire department's capital and personnel resources. Efforts to derail tech upgrades will contribute to poison morale and increase the chances of grievances and even lawsuits filed by members against the department.



Consider, for example, replacing an antiquated staff scheduling process with a digital, interactive scheduling platform. Some departments will drop a pretty penny on a scheduling platform without having full buy-in from its leaders and rank and file. Too often, that system will go unimplemented, and individual houses or the entire department will carry on scheduling as they always have — even if it's on paper or whiteboards. In other cases, firefighters will gripe about a planned scheduling platform change so much that decision makers scrap the project before it's implemented because it is seen as more hassle than its (perceived) worth.

Resistance to change is a human ailment, and one to which firefighters have long been symptomatic; there's been plenty written about our love affair with the status quo. Resistance to technological change kicks that condition up a notch. To give your fire department's planned change its best chance to succeed — again, for example, rolling out a new staff scheduling platform — it is important to understand why individuals resist change and how to help them overcome that resistance.

As Harvard Business School professor and leadership author Rosabeth Moss Kanter writes in “Ten Reasons People Resist Change” for the Harvard Business Review: “Although leaders can't always make people feel comfortable with change, they can minimize discomfort. Diagnosing the sources of resistance is the first step toward good solutions.”

Of her top 10, the three reasons that most hit home with the fire service are loss of control, past resentments, and concerns about competence. The first refers to our desire to make our own decisions. “Our sense of self-determination is often the first thing to go when faced with a potential change coming from someone else,” Moss Kanter writes. “Smart leaders leave room for those affected by change to make choices. They invite others into the planning, giving them ownership.” Likewise, people fear not being able to master the new technology. Moss Kanter says leaders should over invest in training and mentorship; she even suggests running the old and new system simultaneously during the transitions.

Past resentments are trickier to navigate, especially in the “second family” climate of a fire department. Heavy resistance to something like a new scheduling platform may not actually be about the merit of that scheduling platform. It may be about the individual advocating that change and past resentments others harbor toward that person. “The ghosts of the past are always lying in wait to haunt us...sometimes going back many generations. Leaders should consider gestures to heal the past before sailing into the future,” Moss Kanter writes.



Staffing for mission-critical workforces, like fire and EMS personnel, can be a daunting task. Managing schedules for multiple stations and teams, maintaining overtime compliance, ensuring union and labor policies are met, deploying strike teams—it's a lot.



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“Daniella Whyte, writing for Inc., touched on many of the same areas in her piece “5 Reasons People Resist Change.” Like past resentments, she points to a lack of trust as one of her key reasons for resistance. “When people respect their leaders, it's often because the leader has built trust over a period of time,” she writes. “If trust is not built, then mistrust is the default response and mistrust often becomes evident in a resistance to change.”

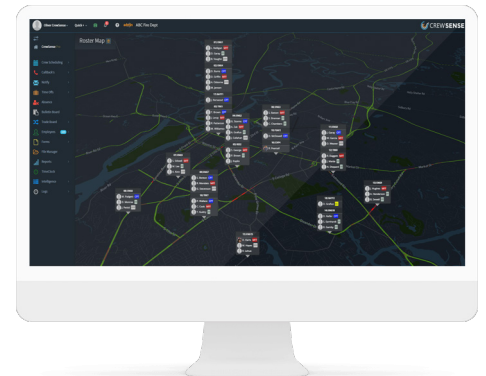
Petaluma (Calif.) Fire Department Battalion Chief Chad Costa knows this all too well. With more than 20 years working for different departments in the fire service, Chief Costa has often found himself playing the role of tech change agent. Once while a probationary firefighter, he led the department's efforts to equip all rigs with tablet computers. Needless to say, a probationary firefighter hadn't had much time to earn many of his brothers' and sisters' trust. During training, some of the older firefighters and officers slammed the tablets on the table, threatening to toss them out the window if they were installed to replace paper maps and radio traffic.

In time those officers came to accept and depend on the technology. But it reinforced a key lesson that trust and getting people involved early in the planning process is critical to smoothing the path for implementation. When he set out to upgrade a department's scheduling platform, he made sure both officers and union officials were in on the preliminary discussions. The first order of business was to map out all the policy-level details about scheduling. That, he says, guided the parameters built into the platform.

Often, resistance to change is completely irrational. We like to think of ourselves as rational beings who weigh facts and come to the best possible conclusion, but the science on how our brains work disagrees. No matter how much proof you offer up — be it a new scheduling platform, policy, or new fireground tactics — some who initially oppose the change will dismiss all arguments for it and dig their opposition heels in deeper. In fact, the more you try to sway them, the deeper those heels dig.

This, it turns out, goes as far back as the discovery of fire. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Elizabeth Kolbert wrote about it in her New Yorker piece called "Why Facts Don't Change our Minds." She examined findings by renowned cognitive scientists who say reasoning abilities did not evolve to help us pull out the truth. They say reasoning developed to help our hunter-gatherer ancestors survive small, close-knit community living by enabling cooperation. Be it in a career firehouse or a rural volunteer fire department, we are still constantly seeking ways to cooperate to make the small-group dynamic work.

“Habits of mind that seem weird or goofy or just plain dumb from an ‘intellectualist’ point of view and prove shrewd when seen from a social ‘interactionist’ perspective,” Kolbert writes. “Humans...aren’t randomly credulous. Presented with someone else’s argument, we’re quite adept at spotting the weaknesses. Almost invariably, the positions we’re blind about are our own.”



And developing our own positions comes down to the need for cooperation over the need for the most rational choice. Cognitive scientists say we rely on the perceived expertise of others and mentally adapt that sense of expertise as our own. “People believe that they know way more than they actually do. What allows us to persist in this belief is other people,” Kolbert writes. When others buy into our faulty beliefs or we into theirs, it gives that belief credibility that then multiplies throughout the group. In short, scientists have shown that our firmest convictions are not based on a deep understanding of the subject, but on the influence we have on one another.

And that creates a host of problems for the fire service. Whether it is trying to retrain long-held practices like drying turnout gear in direct sunlight, getting firefighters to remain on air during overhaul, complete mandatory online training assignments, or getting them to adopt a new scheduling technology, there are primal forces at work against those efforts. Identifying those on the department who serve as influencers and thought leaders and getting them on board with the project will go a long way toward department-wide acceptance.

While understanding and accommodating for our natural resistance to change and the irrational ways we reach conclusions about things — and getting deep and early buy-in to a new project — are critical, they are not the full story or a guarantee for success.

Award-winning author Geoffrey James, writing for Inc., had a different view on the problem when he took aim at a Wall Street Journal article telling leaders how to get reluctant employees on board with new technology. James, in his piece “Sometimes Technology is the Problem,” says that sometimes the problem is with the tech, not the person.

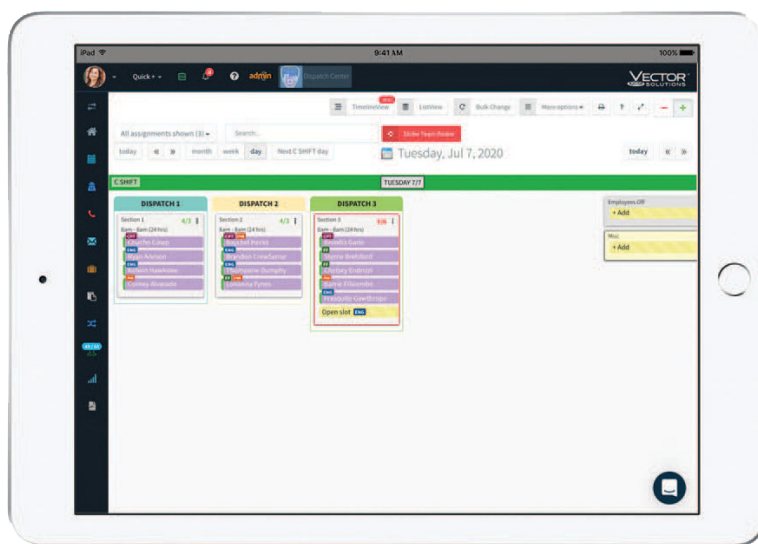
“If some are skeptical about new technology, it just might be because they have enough experience to know how crap tech can royally screw things up,” James writes.

He highlights several points where bad technology can worsen a work environment, with the workers wrongly taking the blame. If workers struggle to use a new technology platform, it is likely because the designers didn’t understand how people work. Well-designed technology is intuitive to use, James writes: “Employees who say ‘no thanks’ to crap software do their company a favor because crap software always gets crap results. Tech cheerleaders never admit it, but a lot of business software fails big time.”

Chief Costa agrees. If the technology is no good, people will not use it and will give you an “I told you so,” when it finally fails — a sort of self-fulfilling prophesy. It is critical, he says, to understand what the department needs and buy a platform that can meet those needs. “The last thing you want to do is create a program that is difficult to use; that will crush you for years to come,” Costa cautions.

The takeaway is that not all tech, such as staff scheduling platforms, are created equal. Before worrying about how to get employee buy-in, do the due diligence. Make sure the technology will do what it is supposed to do and actually improve life at the fire department. Read reviews, talk to trusted sources who are using the platforms, and negotiate trial runs before committing the department to something that may only be begrudgingly used and its full value never achieved.

Chief Costa recommends fully understanding the technology before presenting it to labor leaders and officers — there will be tough questions from both. “The key to success is to put the time in up front,” he says. Once implemented, run the new and old platforms simultaneously to allow more resistant members to get accustomed to the new platform. Ultimately, the hold outs will be won over by using the platform and experiencing its benefits — much like his salty officers were about the idea of using onboard tablet computers.



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For all the difficulty associated with introducing new technology, the risks of not doing it are often greater. For example, Chief Costa says various internal issues can be avoided with a robust scheduling platform. Questions surrounding disputed overtime pay or why one person was selected over another for overtime can be solved via the platform’s recordkeeping, he says.

One department doing things the way they’ve always been done, he says, used a box of index cards with each firefighter’s name on a card. The firefighter on the first card in the box was first up when overtime was

needed. When that firefighter worked overtime, his card was moved to the back of the box with the new first in the box the next in line for overtime. “Often, people inadvertently grabbed two cards, unintentionally moving the next up to the back,” he said. “Sometimes an unscrupulous firefighter would move his card closer to the front.”



When a system is set up correctly, he says, everyone knows the rules and the entire process is transparent to everyone. This again goes back to the importance of establishing clear policies and having key stakeholders involved in that process early on. And where overtime pay is concerned, fair and transparent policies are a way to avoid formal labor grievances and possible lawsuits, he says. “It’s foolish for any agency not to use one of these platforms.”

Chief Costa also says there is an opportunity cost to using antiquated tech, like scheduling platforms. Instead of an officer investing hours manually entering and managing schedule changes, that person can be doing other things with that time — things far more valuable to the department and the community.

In short, Chief Costa’s advice for successfully rolling out new fire department technology is much like that of leading minds in private-sector business.

Who knows, maybe we firefighters are not as unique as we think we are.



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