

DEVELOPING A CODE OF ETHICS FOR THE OLD MYSTIC FIRE DEPARTMENT

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy
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ABSTRACT

In the past year, Americans and the world have watched the news reports on public officials in all areas of government including the president of the United States being accused of wrong doings. Do to these events the people's trust in public officials are eroding at alarming rates. The public has demanded greater moral and ethical standards be met by the public officials in all levels of government.

The problem is the Old Mystic Fire Department was formed in 1836 and has grown 100 fold since. The area we cover is the single most visited area in the state. The dealings we have daily with both the public and government agencies require us to maintain a high level of public trust. The department has no code of ethics in place at this time. The by laws cover some areas of conduct but very little on ethics.

The purpose of this research paper was to develop a code of ethics for the Old Mystic Fire Department. This code will give the leaders and members of our department a guide to maintain a high level of public trust and self pride.

The action method of research was used for this study. The following research questions needed to be asked to help guide this researcher to the end product:

1. Do other fire departments in the state have written codes of ethics?
2. Do fire departments in the state with out a written code of ethics plan on drafting one?
3. Should our department adopt a written code of ethics?

The procedure used was a review of many articles of literature on ethics and moral values. A survey was sent to 180 fire departments in the state to measure the current climate of other departments on ethics.

The results of the literature review and the survey were eye opening. Out of 95 departments that responded only 19 % had written codes of ethics. Out of the 77 remaining departments only 36 % were planning on developing a written code of ethics. This puts the departments in the state that either has a code in place or are looking at making one at 48%. This showed a need for Old Mystic to adopt a written code of ethics.

The recommendations are to introduce a written code of ethics to the officers and board members in Old Mystic. Go over changes they feel are needed and present the final draft to the members for approval. We will have to educate the membership on the importance of this code and make it part of the on going training program for all members. Most of all we must revisit the document at times to improve it and keep it up to date with the current trends and laws.

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of “Ethics” is not something new to us. The practice of ethics were talked about as far back in time as Aristotle 384 BC who wrote on the importance of ethics. As we sit on the edge of the new century ethics are still talked about and the main headlines all too often in the news. The public we serve are demanding accountability of the actions we take and rightfully so. We are the servants of the people and the trust they have in us must never be taken for granted when serving them.

The problem

The Old Mystic Fire Department was formed in 1836 and has grown 100 fold since. The area we cover is the single most visited area in the state. The dealings we have daily with both the public and government agencies requires us to maintain a high level of public trust. The department has no code of ethics in place at this time. The by laws cover some areas of conduct but very little on ethics.

The purpose

The purpose of this research paper was to develop a code of ethics for the Old Mystic Fire Department. This code will give the leaders and the members of our department a guide to maintain a high level of public trust and self pride.

Research method

The action method of research was used for this study. The following research questions needed to be asked to help guide this researcher to the end product.

1. Do other fire departments in the state have written codes of ethics?
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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Ethics are an important part of any organization. Too many times & all too many examples, most recently as seen with the president of the United States, ethics which are also morally based are lacking or non existing.

Ethics / morals should be the brickwork of any organization. It is well noted without a firm foundation the structure built will not last through minor incidents let alone a major disaster. The fire service must have total public trust to carry out its function and one person in that department can bring it down with a bad ethical choice.

The officers, board members and members must always be aware of the importance of making the correct decision. This decision must be based on a standard legal policy or guideline that reflects the ethical make up of the department. Many officers in fire departments are aware of the intense public scrutiny but are unsure of the direction to take to maintain an ethical outcome with out having a guide to help them.

One of the best opening lines I have seen for all public servants to read and for ever burn in there memory was; Public office is public trust. The trust of the public is essential for government to function effectively. (Stonington, 1998). This is the opening line in the Town of Stoningtons code of ethics how well written this is to explain your trust as a public agency.

The Old Mystic Fire Department is made up of mainly volunteers who can vary in age and education. The board that over sees the department is all volunteer and are the final say in

any business the department might enter. The department has eight officers of which six are volunteer. The Chief and Assistant Chief are both paid. No matter wither you are paid or volunteer the decisions you must make are the same and you must make those decisions to the best of your ability.

With the increased attention on the public sector being accountable for the decisions we make we need to look into providing the officers and members with a guide to help them navigate the some times rough seas.

The Old Mystic Fire Department has no written code of ethics and with the area growing and calls increasing we have contact with the public far more than we did in the past. The officers and members need a guide to help them and it's our job as leaders to look into doing just that. We have many documents that tell the members what we expect of them, house rules, By Laws, standard operating guidelines, uniform policy, response policy but no guide for ethics.

Most of the time the officers and members make good ethical decisions but with the times at hand with major headlines daily in the news on ethics making the right ethical decision most of the time is no longer acceptable to the public. Without a written code of ethics that are understood by all members, they do not have the ethical parameters to utilize and execute good ethical decisions or behavior. This is the reason I have chose this topic as my final research project in the Executive Fire Officer Program.

This applied research project is being written for the Executive Leadership course as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. Values and ethics and a model of ethical managerial decision making were all part of Unit #3, " Developing Self as a Leader " in the Executive Leadership program taught by Dr. Larry Ritcey and Dr. Cal Posner in September 1998.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review was to search for articles and writings on the subject of ethics. I was also looking for information supporting the need for written ethic codes in the fire service.

Webster's English Dictionary (1997) defines ethics as:

1. The system of moral values.
2. The principle of right or good conduct.

One of the most real to life articles reviewed was by Ronny Coleman in the January issue of *Fire Chief* titled When you have to say, "I'm outta here". How true this is if you take your integrity serious while serving the public. Have you ever considered that there might be a point in your career when you have to resign in order to preserve your honor? No? Then perhaps you've never faced the ultimate test of integrity for the fire chief (Coleman, 1995) The above quote from Coleman can really make you sit back and think of your real inter self when it comes to doing the right thing. I feel this can go two ways with a chief officer being on the hot seat but more so a line officer being on the hot seat after being told to do something unethical by a chief officer.

With ethics in the minds of many top officials we need to pay close attention on the day today contacts we have. Many cities and towns are looking very close at their candidates for fire chief in the area of morals and ethics. "More and more communities are checking the moral and ethical backgrounds of candidates for chief and other executive positions within local fire departments. Fire officials can lose their jobs for infractions such as accepting a gift or awarding a bid for equipment in an inappropriate manner" (Marinucci, 1992). As we go about doing the

day to day business in our departments we need to pay close attention to what may appear to be harmless.

The Fire Chief must always maintain a work environment that projects a good ethical climate. The old saying is lead by example is very true we must live by the words we speak. “ Leaders the chiefs in many departments are responsible for establishing and maintaining a climate conducive to the department operating according to its ethical code” (Marinucci, 1992).

Maintaining a work environment that makes a member or officer feel comfortable bringing his or her mistakes up is important if this is not maintained the member will hide the mistake and never learn the right way. The members must know up front what is expected of them as far as conduct and ethics are concerned. “ Department leaders also must create an environment that makes it possible for department members to bring their mistakes out in the open instead of trying to hide them” (Marinucci, 1992). The department can not expect the members and officers to maintain a high level of ethical behavior if they have no guidelines to go by. “ Having a written policy helps to create this atmosphere and makes members aware of the kinds of behaviors expected of them in specific situations, the repercussions that can occur when they do not meet expectations, and the manner in which the department will handle infractions “ (Marinucci, 1992).

One of the best contacts I made in the literature review was the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities. The director sent me a large package with many articles enclosed involving ethics. One of the articles had the following in it “ The public expects honesty and integrity to characterize its servants, and many municipalities in Connecticut have attempted to ensure that such is the case by enacting relevant legislation. The purpose of a code of ethics is to guide and

educate municipal employees and the public by establishing standards of conduct for all persons in the public service.” (Hill, 1991).

The need for the public to trust its public servants is very important but many workers feel personally offended by a code of ethics. “ The proposing of a code of ethics is greeted with disdain by some municipal officials, who view such a code as a reflection on their personal integrity (Hill, 1991). The adoption of a code of ethics should make the people feel good that they have a guide to refer to in times of doubt. The public official who is ethical in his or her way of doing their job should welcome a code of ethics. A code of ethics is to guide a person to be honorable and in turn make the agency they work for credible to the public. “ Ethics laws tend to trivialize ethics. Ethics is about right and wrong and how an honorable person should behave “ (Josephson & Lurvey 1998).

The honor of the office or position needs to be number one in your work. A Code of ethics should be used as a reminder and a role model to maintain this high level of honor. “ Standards of conduct and codes of ethics should evoke commitment to maintaining high ethical standards, not simply to avoid sanctions or criticism, but because it is the right thing to do (Josephson & Lurvey, 1998).

When dealing with ethics in your day to day business you must keep your self as the number one reason to maintain a strong ethical state of mind. You must be accountably to your self-first and for most. “ There are basically two sets of circumstances in which chief officers must face up to their own accountability. The first of these is when you are asked to perform what is essentially an outright illegal act. The second is when you are asked to do something that may be within legal purview, but is either unethical or immoral, according to your own value system “ (Coleman, 1995)

The main word and theme that keeps popping up are integrity in most of the articles reviewed during the literature review. Integrity is very important in a public official's tenure this only demands respect for him or her with the public. "The code of ethics that governs our department stresses personal integrity" (Marinucci, 1992). Being in the fire service for 23 years I have seen a major change in the attitudes of young people joining the department. Many young people are not being taught to respect others and have a high moral character this is reinforced by, "A recent study found that more than 70 percent of high school students believe it is acceptable to cheat when nonessential subjects are involved. Imagine the impact it would have on the fire service if more than 70 percent of its entry level work-force believed that they could cheat when they did not perceive something to be important" (Marinucci, 1992).

An important step in establishing an ethical culture is to assure that all individuals, especially newcomers, know about and understand the rules, and values, which should guide the members of your department. A well-planned orientation program is very important. The goal is to create a public service pride that strengthens moral resolve and the commitment to high ethical standards. This must include in service training and out side training by a recognized expert. One of the ways I found was the Municipal ethics quiz books put out by the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities. The quizzes are contained in three booklets and have different ethical dilemmas encountered by municipal officials. The answers to each problem are found on the back of the question page. (See appendix A)

A good example of different acceptable behavior is in an African country were the practice of a judge receiving a gift prior to a settlement is ethical. It is ethical in that country because the gift is for thanking the judge for the time being rendered in making the decision

(Grant and Hoover, 1994). The practice of giving gifts in the United States to a judge would be considered a bribe and therefore be unethical.

The Fire Chief should set the example to which the department will follow “ We must work to insure that our organization, or part of the organization, has a clear and written ethical code. It is essential that we provide our personnel with the basic parameters of what we believe is right and / or wrong, and what is acceptable to the organization” (Steffens, 1994). A similar tone is heard in a second article “ The foundation of any ethical public service organization is personal awareness and that executive fire administrators must recognize the need for ethical standards and clearly define the boundaries of ethical conduct within the organization. They should practice ethical principles and encourage other department personnel to do likewise. The underpinning of ethical principles are values, integrity, judgment, responsibility, actions and accountability” (Grant and Hoover, 1994). “ Holding an individual who serves in the public sector to a higher standard than others is not a new practice and can be traced back to the Greek empire “ (Steffens, 1994).

A Third article also echoed the same thoughts “ The fire chief must recognize that their behavior sets the moral tone of their department. If the firefighters observe the chief taking short cuts, they can only assume that this is the way things are done around here” (Hewitt, 1995). As chief officers we must lead the way for the troops “ We must set the example. Every officer is, to someone, a role model, mentor and leader” (Steffens, 1994).

Literature review summary

In reviewing the many articles, I have a clear understanding of why ethics were established and how they fit into the fire service. It was also clear to me that many fire service leaders agree that a written ethical document is a must to maintain a well respected and cutting

edge fire department. The ethics code in the department must be visible, lived by top management, reintroduced through ongoing training and revisited as necessary to update the document to meet the departments needs.

The implementation of the program should be done after involving department members to give a department ownership to the program. All members should be thoroughly trained on the program to insure compliance.

PROCEDURES

While attending the National Fire Academy in September of 1998, topics were researched in the Learning Resource Center under the Executive Leadership title on the database. The topic of ethics was a hot subject in the media at the time and the database showed several papers on this topic. The research method selected was the action method. Spending many hours in the Learning Resource Center looking at articles, research papers and related sources relating to ethics and codes of ethics in the fire service. The time spend in the center was very fruitful giving many sources to review and develop ideas for a written code of ethics.

Survey form

After reviewing all of the available literature, a written survey was made to gain additional information. The surveys cover letter (see appendix B) and the survey it self (see Appendix C) was used to see how many fire departments in the state of Connecticut had written codes of ethics. The survey was one page with five questions of which four was a “yes”, “no”, or “NA” response.

Population contacted

The survey was sent to 180 fire departments in the state of Connecticut. The envelopes were addressed to the chief of the department. It was decided to send the survey to all fire departments in the state to see a true cross section of the state.

Limitations noted

The survey was sent hoping that the responses would be truthful and in good faith for the betterment of the fire service. Many departments in the state are all volunteer and failed to return the survey form in what I assume was lack of time to complete the form and send it back in the self addressed stamped envelope. Out of the 180 surveys sent out 95 were returned. The 95 that were returned were filled out correctly and many had attached notes by the chiefs expressing their interest in the results.

RESULTS

After reviewing the available literature and the 95 surveys returned the original three research questions were answered.

Answers to original research questions

1. Do other fire departments in the state have written codes of ethics?

Yes out of the 95 surveys sent back 18 fire departments had a written code of ethics in place.

2. Do fire departments in the state with out a written code of ethics plan on drafting one?

Out of the 77 departments that did not have a written code of ethics in place 28 planned on drafting one in the future.

3. Should our department adopt a written code of ethics?

Yes after reviewing the literature and reading the comments on the survey forms the time is right to develop a written code of ethics. With the issues facing public officials today we all need to shore up the trust we have with the people we serve. Having a written code of ethics only can increase this trust. As the opening line states in the Town of Stonington code of ethics “Public office is a public trust. The trust of the public is essential for government to function effectively”. We want to keep the Old Mystic Fire Department effective and highly respected by the people we serve.

Survey results

The results of the 95 surveys received are as follows:

1. Does your department have a written code of ethics?
Yes = 18 No = 77
2. If no, do you plan on developing one?
Yes = 28 No = 49
3. If your department does not have a written code of ethics, do you feel your members and officer’s think of ethics when making decisions?
Yes = 73 No = 4 N/A = 18
4. If you do have a written code of ethics, do you feel your members use it.
Yes = 16 No = 2 N/A = 77

5. What year did you put your written code of ethics in place if you have one?

1982, Manchester	1994, Southington	1941, Middlebury
1997, Wequetequock	1994, Farmington	1975, Canterbury
1996, Meriden	1994, East Haven	1996, Oakdale
1978, Avon	1998, City Of Groton	1980, North Canaan
1994, Norwich	1980, Middletown	1980, Poquonnock Bridge
1994, Stamford	1927, Danielson	1992, Bethel

With all the information gathered and reviewed a code of ethics was drafted for the Old Mystic Fire Department (Appendix D). This draft will be sent through the process to be adopted by the department.

DISCUSSION

The literature review showed the importance of developing a code of ethics for your fire department to maintain or regain the public trust. “ More and more communities are checking the moral and ethical backgrounds of candidates for chief and other executive positions within local fire departments” (Marinucci, 1992). The survey send out indicated that close to half 48 % of the fire departments that responded either had a written code of ethics or were looking at drafting one. The literature review pointed out the importance of the chief setting the example for the department in ethics “ Leaders the chiefs in many departments are responsible for establishing

and maintaining a climate conducive to the department operating according to its ethical code” (Marinucci, 1992).

As the survey shows even the departments without written codes of ethics feel their members think of ethics when making decisions 76 %. This shows that many departments in the state realize the importance of ethics in today’s work environment. The people we work for the public expects us to do business at a higher level than private business “Holding an individual who serves in the public sector to a higher standard than others is not a new practice and can be traced back to the Greek empire “ (Steffens, 1994).

With the headlines in the nightly news daily on the ethics issues facing the White House and members of Congress we need to make ourselves unapproachable when it comes to being accused of being unethical. “ Have you considered that there might be a point in your career when you have to resign in order to preserve your honor” (Coleman, 1995). How true this statement is we must keep up the honor and trust we have with the public at all costs.

The researcher found through the interpretation of the literature review and the survey send out that a written code of ethics is a must for the fire service. The fire service plays a large part in the public trust we are the ones called when people need help. The fire service is known as the good guys if you need any help at all go see the fire department. We need to maintain and increase this trust we enjoy with the public. After reading the surveys and the comments made by other fire chiefs in Connecticut it’s clear that ethics are important and we need to make them important as managers.

The opening statement of the Town of Stonington Code of Ethics says it all. “ Public office is public trust. The trust of the public is essential for government to function effectively” (Stonington, 1998). We are presented with an opportunity that not many people have the honor

to be presented in their lifetime. The opportunity is to serve the community in a position that can have major positive impacts on the people we serve. It's our job to do what is right and uphold the trust and honor we were so lucky to have achieved.

The organization implications for Old Mystic Fire Department will be to develop a written code of ethics. We must actively make sure the management staff serves as role models and mentors to not only your members but the public also. We must include ethics in the training programs we have in place and educate the entire membership with the concepts set forth by the ethics code. The transition must be gradual and deliberate to ensure all are well versed in the code and understand the importance of it. The most important factor in the entire process is to constantly review and update the code as needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The next step for this written code of ethics in the Old Mystic Fire Department is to introduce the document to the officers of the department. Go over changes they feel are needed and that present it to the board of directors. At this time the board and the officers can again revise any part of it as needed. The final step is to present the code to the membership at a monthly meeting, field questions and post the document for one month. At the following monthly meeting the document would be voted on to accept.

We will than educate the membership on the importance of this code and make it part of the on going training we have. All new members will have instruction on the code as part of there new member's orientation. The code will be reviewed from time to time to update it as needed.

The results of the survey and literature review clearly support us in making a written code of ethics. The learning curve will be large in this program at first because we are 99% volunteer and this subject is new to many of them. The impact to the department and the community will be positive by putting this code of ethics in place. We enjoy a very high performance rating with the people we serve, and the officers of the department are well respected in the fire service in this area and this will only further show your commitment to providing exceptional service.

The development of a code of ethics can be time consuming, many months of working with many people in your department. The major point is to have ownership of the code by everyone. I highly recommend you develop a written code of ethics if you don't have one. If you do have one revisit it you may see room for improving it? The code will do you no good if you place it on a book shelf and never look at it again. You must constantly train your members new and old on the importance of ethics in today's fire service. Remember Public office is public trust if you lose the public trust you are in deep trouble!

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APPENDIX A



Municipal ethics quiz . . .

THE ISSUE

You have served as a member of the town's volunteer fire department for the past five years. You receive no compensation for your services.

You are now considering seeking public office as a town councilmember.

Must you resign from the volunteer fire department if you win the election? ■

Answer:

Dear editor:

I would not resign from the volunteer fire department if elected to the town council. Volunteers to the community — be they firemen, coaches, umpires, ambulance personnel, or numerous other activities — make important cost-saving contributions to any town.

In fact, most candidates for political office list their community activities as part of their campaign materials. In this way, if someone wishes to question the candidate's activities, he or she readily has the opportunity.

Furthermore, even if the fire company receives funds from the town for equipment, a final decision on that funding would be voted on by the full town council of which you would be a single member. Your personal knowledge of fire issues should be an asset to any related public-safety discussions by the council.

As long as there is no potential for unethical action, no candidate for public office should have to resign from serving as a volunteer in his or her community.

Sincerely,
Donald S. Francis,
First Selectman of Brooklyn



Municipal ethics quiz . . .



➤ **THE ISSUE**

You are a member of the town's public safety commission. The commission wants to buy a new car for the police chief and is in the process of obtaining price quotes from various dealers in the area on a particular type of car.

The vehicle dealership that you are employed by as a sales representative has submitted a price quote. However, you were not involved in calculating the quote or in presenting the quote to the commission.

Should you abstain from voting on the matter when it comes before the commission? ■

Readers' Answers:

Dear Editor:

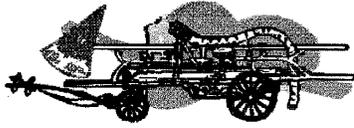
Clearly, the member of the public safety commission must abstain from voting on this matter. It is important to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest, and in this case there may be an actual conflict.

The relationship of the commission member as an employee of the car dealership should, in my opinion, disqualify him or her from any participation in this matter, including the commission's discussion.

As in all cases, the commission should consult the town's ethics ordinances. In this case, there may be a question as to whether or not the commission can do business with the dealership at all in the absence of a competitive bid.

*Sincerely,
Sandra F. Klebanoff
Deputy Mayor of West Hartford*

APPENDIX B



Old Mystic Fire Department

Reliance Fire Company No. 1

P. O. Box 477

Old Mystic, CT 06372

Station 1 (860) 536-3432 or Station 2 (860) 536-2220

October 7, 1998

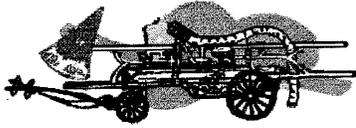
Dear Fire Chief:

I am completing my Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy this year. My research project this year is on developing a written code of ethics. Please complete the enclosed survey and return it in the stamped envelope. Please return the survey by December 20, 1998. Thank you for your help in this matter.

Sincerely,

Kenneth W. Richards Jr.
Fire Chief.

APPENDIX D



Old Mystic Fire Department

Reliance Fire Company No. 1

P.O. Box 477

Old Mystic, CT 06372

Station 1 (860) 536-3432 or Station 2 (860) 536-2220

February 22, 1999

CODE OF ETHICS DRAFT

1. Obey all Federal, State and local laws.
2. Be familiar with and obedient to the house rules, By Laws and the Standard Operating Guidelines under which the department is run.
3. Always conduct yourself in a professional manner. Be respectful and courteous to all people public and fellow members.
4. Never falsify records or make misleading or deceitful statements.
5. Do not release details of any emergency operation or investigation without express permission of the chief.
6. No officer or member will accept any gift other than what is being handed out to the general public (baseball hats, mugs Etc) from any company that is dealing with the department on a professional level.
7. Above all conduct yourself with the best interests of the Old Mystic Fire Department and the public we serve in mind at all times.