Effective Policy Development
for the Fire Service

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Why is good writing important?

- It forces you to think, which is why it is time-consuming. If you don't have time to write, you don't have time to think.

- Bad writing slows things down; good writing speeds them up.

- How you communicate reveals you to your audience. Good communication builds goodwill. People who write well do well.

Effective Business Writing 101

Principle No. 1 – "You Attitude"

- **"You attitude" means reader-centered messages. It means seeing and presenting information and ideas from the reader's point of view.**

- **Without "you attitude":** *We will allow you to begin working for the fire department once you have been certified physically fit by the fire department's physician.*

- **With "you attitude":** *Once the fire department's physician certifies you are physically fit, you may begin working for the fire department.*

Effective Business Writing 101

Principle No. 2 – Positive Emphasis

- **"Positive emphasis" focuses on the positive and deemphasizes the negative. The use of positive – instead of negative – words makes the information more easily understood.**

- **Without positive emphasis:** *You cannot accept gifts from anyone with whom you, as an employee of the fire protection district, deal except under the limited circumstances provided in the policy.*

- **With positive emphasis:** *You may only accept gifts under the limited circumstances provided in the fire protection district's policy on ethics.*

Effective Business Writing 101

Principle No. 3 – Active Voice

- **You can make your writing more alive and interesting by using the active voice.**

- **Passive voice:** *The lights should be turned off before the administrative offices are closed for the night.*

- **Active voice:** *Please turn off the lights before you leave the administrative offices in the evening.*

Effective Business Writing 101

Principle No. 4 – Consistent, Clear, Concrete, and Precise

- **Maintain clarity in your writing by using consistent wording. Prefer the specific to the general, definite to the vague, and concrete to the abstract.**

- **Without clarity:** *As the number of people in our population who successfully complete their paramedic certification programs becomes smaller, institutions in the fire service will experience increasing difficulties in hiring the number of employees at that level that will result in the continuing high quality of emergency medical service.*

- **With clarity:** *As paramedics become fewer, fire departments will find it more difficult to keep their staffing high enough to offer quality emergency medical service.*

Effective Business Writing 101

A few words on wordiness

- **Substitute one word for several where possible and remove redundancy** -- *"always" instead of "at all times;" "complete" instead of "completely finish"*

- **Remove redundant categories** – *"time" instead of "period of time;" "accurately" instead of "in an accurate manner"*

- **Avoid meaningless modifiers and expressions** – *words like "kind of, really, basically, definitely, practically, actually, virtually, generally, certain" and phrases like "for all intents and purposes" and "we are in receipt of"*

- **Replace unnecessarily big words with more common words** – *"use" instead of "utilization"*

Effective Business Writing 101

- **With wordiness:** *Pursuant to the recent memorandum issued August 9, 2009, due to the fact of petroleum exigencies, it is incumbent upon us all to endeavor to make maximal utilization of telephonic communication in lieu of personal visitation to facilities in the fire protection district for the obtainment of each and every occupancy's basic census data.*

- **With clarity:** *As the August 9, 2009, memo stated, please try to contact by telephone as many businesses as possible to obtain data in lieu of a personal visit to the facility.*

Effective Business Writing 101

Principle No. 5 – Visual Design and Presentation

When a message has visual impact, it attracts attention, invites readership and establishes your credibility even before it is actually read. Good visual design and presentation:

- spark immediate interest;
- organize information;
- emphasize what's important;
- improve readability; and
- increase understanding by simplifying concepts.

Effective Business Writing 101

Creating Good Page Design

- **Allow ample white space** – this includes appropriate margins, paragraph size and spacing between material.

- **Use headlines and subheadings** – use various devices such as capitalization, bolding and underscoring to present guideposts.

- **Use bulleted and numbered lists, and charts, tables and graphs, when appropriate** – these devices help the reader focus on important information by breaking out key items and allowing for comparisons.

Developing Policies and Procedures

Why develop fire service policies and procedures?

- Provide the fire department's or district's position or expectation regarding a specific issue as an employer or as a provider of emergency services.

- Insure compliance with state and federal laws.

- Maintain organization and consistency.

- Provide guidance for implementing the department's or district's expectations.

What is a policy?

- A policy states an organization's position on a subject.

- Policies are reviewed and approved by the governing board of an organization – in the case of a fire department, by the village board or city council; in the case of a fire protection district, by the board of trustees.

- In a local government setting, the governing board has specific statutory authority to adopt policy and in some cases, is required by law to adopt policy on a specific issue.

- Policies are adopted by a local government through an ordinance.

What is a procedure?

- A procedure provides instructions for carrying out the policy.

- When appropriate, the governing board typically gives rule-making authority specifically in the policy to the fire chief, city manager or other administrator.

- Most procedures are drafted at the same time as the policy.

- Procedures can also include forms for implementing the policy or documenting compliance with the policy.

- Procedures can be revised at any time without requiring additional authority from the governing board, as long as they are still consistent with policy.

Developing Policies and Procedures

Areas typically covered by policy in the fire service

- **Employment matters –** equal employment issues, workplace issues, job descriptions, paid and unpaid leave, benefits, expectations of conduct, employee rights, and limitations on those rights.

- **General organizational issues** – facilities, records, equipment, purchasing, relations with constituency and the media, etc.

- **Board practices --** membership, officers, powers, duties, communications, committees, meetings, and minutes.

Developing Policies and Procedures

Examples of policies required by state or federal law

- Freedom of Information Act

- Illinois Ethics Act

- School Visitation Rights Act

- Sexual Harassment (federal Civil Rights Act)

- Equal Opportunity Employer (Illinois Human Rights Act and federal Civil Rights Act)

- Military Leave

- Americans with Disabilities Act

- Family and Medical Leave Act

Characteristics of Good Policies

Good policies:

- Are written with the audience in mind ("you attitude").

- Use clear, concise, simple language.

- Explain the purpose or rationale for the policy.

- Provide a consistent and logical framework for action.

- Are readily available to the constituency – the employees, the community, the taxpayers, and the people we serve

Characteristics of Good Procedures

Good procedures:

- Are tied to policies. Making this relationship explicit helps insure understanding and compliance.

- Provide a step-by-step explanation of how to carry out a policy.

- Developed with the user in mind. Well-developed procedures benefit the user.

- Provide a sense of ownership among users. For this reason, it helps to involve users in the development of procedures, where appropriate.

Writing Style for Policy and Procedures

- Concise and precise.

- Factual and accurate.

- Include information that will not become quickly outdated, such as employee titles (instead of individual employee names).

- Acronyms are spelled out the first time; terms are defined, when necessary; and terms used are consistent.

- Simple enough to be understood and implemented by everyone.

Design and Layout of Policies and Procedures

- **Use paper and white space generously.**

- **Create a thoughtful, user-friendly presentation structure, and then be consistent throughout the policies and procedures** – the user should be able to quickly find and focus on the applicable policy and its accompanying procedure/forms.

- **Use a flexible, modular outline to make the document easy to modify and keep up to date** – when a policy or procedure is modified, you should be able to insert the modification without republishing the entire manual.

Key Components of Policies and Procedures

- Use a logical numbering system to arrange policies and procedures by topic.

- Use parallel labels and headings to introduce key points.

- Where appropriate, include a concise statement of rationale or purpose of a policy.

- Identify exactly to whom the policy or regulation applies and the consequences of non-compliance, if applicable.

- Identify who is responsible for implementing the policy or regulation, or for answering questions concerning the policy or regulation.

Key Components of Policies and Procedures

- When possible, reference related policies or procedures.

- If a related document is referenced, consider adding it the appendix of the policies or regulations (examples: NFPA standard, BOCA code provisions, investment policy, collective bargaining agreement, CPAT training guide, etc.).

- Note the specific legal reference to federal or state statutes or regulations at the bottom of the policy or regulation.

- If there is a form to implement the policy or procedure, reference it by name or number.

Implementation of Policies and Procedures

- Determine a method of dissemination of policies and procedures – consider issuing a copy to all users/employees or electronic publication (with written acknowledgement of receipt).

- Insure an official copy is available at all times to users.

- When updating policies and procedures, make sure all copies are updated.

- Consider training users/employees on specific policies and procedures, where appropriate.

- Keep track of issues that arise that may warrant future revision, and periodically review and revise.

Additional Resources

- *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

- *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser

- *The Business Writer's Handbook* by Gerald J. Alred, Charles T. Brusaw and Walter E. Oliu

- *Writing Successful Business Documents* by Sheryl Lindsell-Roberts