

A Clash of Professional and Cultural Values

This case involves a fire department in a community in northwestern Oklahoma. The community has a population of approximately 14,000. The fire department serves an area of over 460 square miles with a total population served of 20,000 residents. The community's prime industries are oil and gas production and a pork meat processing plant. The community's pioneer families are close knit and tend to dominate community politics. Overall, the community is conservative and has strong traditional values.

A significant portion of the community is Hispanic—almost 50% according to the 2000 census. The Hispanic segment of the community has grown considerably since the mid-1990s when a large pork processing plant opened. The majority of the workforce at the plant is Hispanic immigrants. While most of the Hispanic community hold personal and cultural values that are also traditional and conservative, most of the "old timers" believe the immigrants are driving a values change in the community—a change for which they have little control or input.

The fire department was a combination department with 16 full-time staff and 40 fire and EMS volunteers. The department is also the EMS transport agency at the advanced life support (ALS) level. Most of the full-time firefighters are also paramedics. The firefighters were ethnically diverse with several female volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians (EMTs). However, in 2000 there were no full-time female firefighters.

In 1998 a new chief was hired. The new chief was the first fire chief in the history of the department to be hired from outside the community. The new chief came from a large metropolitan department known for being progressive. The chief had extensive experience in personnel management and working with elected and appointed officials, citizens, and interest groups. He was specifically hired to integrate EMS into the fire department and to build a closer relationship between the fire department and the community.

One of the goals of the new fire chief was to hire more women and Hispanic firefighters, both volunteer and full-time. By 2000, this goal was coming to fruition and numerous Hispanic firefighters and EMTs had been recruited. Also, several women had been added as volunteer firefighters and EMTs. However, no full-time women firefighters had been added. Due to the rural area and limited recruiting pool the chief was having difficulty finding qualified women who had an interest in the fire service. The female volunteers had other full-time jobs and did not have an interest in full-time firefighter positions.

During the fall of 2000, a retirement created an opening for a full-time firefighter. One of the women volunteer paramedics came forward with a genuine interest in the position. The candidate was 40 years old with grown children and a stable relationship at home with a husband who encouraged her pursuing the position. She was physically fit and able to pass the State's pension physical ability test. She was highly respected by the firefighters and EMTs. In all respects she exceeded the qualifications for the recruit firefighter position. The fire chief and EMS assistant chief encouraged her to apply for the position. She subsequently submitted her application for the full-time firefighter position.

Within a few days after the closing date for applications the fire chief was contacted by several of the wives of the full-time firefighters. The wives wanted to meet with the fire chief to discuss the application of a woman for the full-time position. The chief agreed to meet with the wives. During the meeting the wives expressed serious concern about the possibility of a female full-time firefighter. Numerous questions were asked about her qualifications, her ability to "pull their husbands out of a burning building," the possibility of extramarital affairs while on-duty, and benefit of having a female firefighter. Many of the wives were openly hostile to the chief and the prospect of a female firefighter.

A few days later the fire chief was approached by the candidate and informed that a group of wives had met with her and discouraged her from competing for the position. The wives did not openly try to intimidate her, but clearly communicated that being a full-time firefighter was not an appropriate job for a woman in that community.

As a result, the fire chief held an all-hands department meeting to explain that the candidate would continue in the hiring process and no interference would be tolerated. Oddly, support for the candidate by the full-time and volunteer firefighters was strong. Many had been helping her prepare for the physical ability test and holding practice hiring interviews. The opposition was not from the firefighters, but rather from their wives and others in the community.

The week prior to the hiring interviews and physical ability test the fire chief was asked to lunch by the mayor. The mayor was a strong supporter of the fire department and the programs implemented by the fire chief. During lunch the mayor asked many questions about the candidate's abilities and why a full-time woman firefighter was needed by the department. The mayor explained his concern about the situation and stated he had been contacted by several of the wives. He asked the fire chief to reconsider the situation, especially the impact it could have on the fire chief's reputation in the community. The mayor emphasized that it was the fire chief's decision and he, the mayor, was not trying to interfere. He was just offering some "friendly advice." Several other community leaders and the city manager shared similar concerns and offered the same advice—let this one go. All had one specific view of the situation: the job of full-time firefighter was not appropriate for a woman, especially a mother.

As a result of all the controversy the candidate chose to withdraw from the hiring process the day before the interview. The fire chief and several department officers met with her, but she would not change her mind. She felt that unity in the department and the community was more important than being a full-time firefighter. She continued to be a volunteer paramedic and provide leadership in the EMS program. Even though there were several other openings for full-time positions in the next four years, no other women applied. A clear message had been sent by the leadership of the community concerning its values and expectations.

Questions:

1. What were the values of the community towards a full-time female firefighter on the fire department?
2. What were the values of the fire department regarding a full-time female firefighter on the department?
3. How were the community's values about this issue communicated to the fire chief? In other words, how did the fire chief learn what values were held by the community?
4. What was the potential political impact to the fire chief and fire department had the candidate been hired?
5. What action, if any, could the fire chief have taken to achieve the goal of hiring a female firefighter while not suffering any negative political impact?
6. Is there a relationship between a community's values and local policymaking? Please explain.