

**Developing Positive Relationships between Senior Level  
Fire Department Management and  
Elected Officials at Madison Township**

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## CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that the following statements are true:

1. This paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

2. I have affirmed the use of proper spelling and grammar in this document by using the spell and grammar check functions of a word processing software program and correcting the errors as suggested by the program.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: Clifford L. Mason

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this descriptive research was to identify the need for tools that will contribute to improved relationships between certain Madison Township Fire Department employees (Captains) and the Madison Township Board of Trustees. The problem this research project addressed is the lack of formalized training programs for fire officers and local elected officials, and potential educational opportunities to address this need.

Surveys were mailed to every fire chief and a select group of mayors and township trustees in Franklin County and the four contiguous counties in central Ohio that provide fire and emergency medical service to their respective community. Not every mayor or township trustee was surveyed; only mayors and the chairperson of each Board of Trustees whose community provides fire and emergency medical service were surveyed. The objective was to determine if educational opportunities were available to either group to learn more about their counterpart in order to understand their respective role within the community.

In an attempt to ascertain if fire chief's received any formalized training to prepare them to work effectively with elected officials, six questions relative to formal training, the use of a "liaison" for communications, the frequency of communications, the format and type of activities communicated were solicited. Additionally, each fire chief was asked if they felt they would benefit from some form of formalized training to effectively communicate with elected officials.

Likewise, a similar survey was mailed to elected officials to determine if they felt they had sufficient working knowledge of the fire service for decision-making purposes, if they were regularly included on department activities, whom they might contact when an issue arises relative to fire department operations, and if they felt they would benefit from a formal training program to help them "better understand the fire service".

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Madison Township Board of Trustees has chosen to recruit external candidates when selecting the last three fire chiefs. The fact that the Trustees have selected fire chiefs from outside the organization has created an atmosphere where the senior fire officers feel they don't have the support from the Trustees and therefore don't believe they have an opportunity for advancement within Madison Township Fire Department. This has caused some in the organization to become complacent with their duties. Some of the Captains have a lack of respect for the organization due to being passed over for promotion to Chief.

The decision to recruit candidates from outside the organization has been based on their perceptions and experiences with fire department senior management, which have demonstrated that this level of managers (Captains) are not prepared to advance to the position of fire chief within Madison Township. Even though internal candidates possess years of firefighting experience, have awareness of the community and a dedication to their career, the elected officials believe this group is not prepared to effectively manage Madison Township Fire Department administratively. Historically, Madison Township officers have failed to understand the importance of keeping the elected officials informed about activities within the fire department. They also fail to understand the importance of positive communications with community leaders (i.e. School administrators, business owners). The Captains, with decades of experience, are not prepared to effectively address community issues due to a fundamental lack of management training and leadership development particularly when it comes to dealing with elected officials. *The problem this study will investigate is: How can the relationships between*

*senior level managers and elected officials be improved?*

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify whether or not opportunities existed for chief officers and elected officials to understand the role of each other and develop educational opportunities, relationship building activities, and communication tools that will contribute to improved relationships between fire service leaders and elected officials; therefore not only improving the opportunities for advancement through the ranks for senior fire officers, but also improve the working relationship with local elected officials to ensure quality delivery of fire and EMS service to the community.

### **Research Questions**

Utilizing descriptive research, chief officers will answer the following questions:

1. Did you receive any formal training or education developed specifically to prepare you to communicate with elected officials?
2. Does your organization utilize a “liaison” as an intermediary between the governing body and the fire department?
3. How frequently do you communicate (outside of regularly scheduled meetings with your elected officials)?
4. How do you communicate with your elected officials?
5. What department activities do you communicate?
6. Do you feel additional training in effective communications with elected officials would benefit your organization?

**Research Questions cont'd.**

Utilizing descriptive research, elected officials (Township Trustees, Mayors and Fire Board members) will answer the following questions:

1. Do you feel you have sufficient knowledge of Fire Department operations for decision-making purposes?
2. Does your fire department invite you to participate in fire department activities (i.e. training fires, ride-a-longs, and department staff meetings)?
3. If you have an issue or concern with your fire department, who do you contact?
4. Do you feel your fire chief keeps you informed about fire department operations? If yes, what does your chief do that is effective? If no, what contributes to the ineffectiveness?
5. Do you feel a training course in “understanding the fire service” would be beneficial to elected officials?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Historically, fire department officers have been promoted through the ranks established within their organization. One begins their fire service career as a firefighter. In turn, the firefighter may be promoted through the ranks of Lieutenant, Captain, Assistant Chief, and Fire Chief. Traditionally, if there is a vacancy in the department a firefighter with the required qualifications may be eligible to participate in a competitive process to advance through the ranks. This is not necessarily reflective of every organization; however, this is the process found in most career fire departments.

The Madison Township Fire Department, like many fire departments across the country, has a history of tenured fire chief's. However, the three most recent fire chiefs were selected from outside the Department. These hiring decisions were made despite five battalion level officers who each have over two decades of service with the Department and were desirous of attaining the rank of fire chief. In fact, the most recent Fire Chief was hired without any consideration by the elected officials to the battalion officers. This is a direct reflection of the elected official's perception and recognition that the internal candidates lack necessary preparation of management responsibilities and are not properly prepared to lead the department within the community. Specifically, the elected officials recognized a need to improve the fire department's relations and image within the community, decrease spending, and perform overall department reorganization.

The battalion officers have served the department well in their respective roles. One of the greatest impediments to the battalion officers' advancement is the need to improve in their



ability to communicate effectively with the elected officials and other appointed leaders of the community. None of the battalion officers have had any formal training on the importance of understanding their relationship with the elected officials. The overwhelming majority of their continuing education is structured on fire ground operations; not employee management or human relations as are often required to be an effective fire chief.

There is a long history within the organization of choosing not to comply with the demands of the political climate of the community. This is not necessarily a personality issue, but a lack of understanding of how to communicate with the elected or appointed officials. The failure on the part of the battalion officers to recognize the importance of proper communications with the elected or appointed officials is a significant barrier that prevents their promotion to Fire Chief. While the fire service does an adequate job of providing basic training to individuals who desire to advance in their career, there are serious deficits in preparing fire personnel to effectively communicate with elected officials and others outside of the fire service.

There are numerous professional development courses readily available at multiple levels, i.e., local, state and national, that deal with fire suppression, company officer development, and employee supervision. There are few programs or courses, if any, that address how to understand the perspective of the local elected official. Even less time and effort are spent training fire service leaders how to successfully champion the issues of their fire department through effective communication with elected officials.

For the purpose of this paper, local elected officials are defined as an elected or appointed Township Trustee, Mayors or representative(s) to a Fire District Board.

Regardless of the size of the organization, it is important that the leader of a fire department be prepared to work closely with elected officials on such issues as the delivery of

quality fire and emergency medical services, budgeting, staffing, equipment acquisition/replacement, employee benefits, community relations, and quality improvement issues. The more the fire chief understands the role and expectations of the elected official, the better prepared they will be to compliment the agenda of the elected official. Effective communication with elected officials will in turn help the fire chief deliver the level of service desired by the elected officials and meet the objectives of the fire department within the community.

The research method chosen for this research project is the descriptive method. This study will focus on fire service leaders and elected officials of career/combination departments throughout central Ohio including Franklin, Licking, Union, Pickaway, and Delaware counties. The study will identify the opinions of senior level fire service personnel and elected officials as outlined above. Fire service leaders and elected officials will be surveyed to help determine what actions are needed to develop an effective working relationship between the fire service leaders and elected officials.

As the organization moves forward, one objective is to provide formal training, as well as setting the proper example, of how to interact with the governing body. This does not occur in a single setting. It is important to initiate this early in the relationship and build on it regularly. For any member of the fire service who desires to move through the ranks to the Fire Chief's position, it is imperative to understand all facets of the fire service. This understanding cannot be limited to fire suppression, employee management, fire department budgeting, or department operations. In order for the Chief to be a successful leader in the department, and within the community, one must be able to effectively communicate with the elected and appointed officials and be active in the community they serve. The fire chief must anticipate what "type" elected

official he or she works for and adapt his style to accommodate that official. For example, if the elected official chooses not to read a provided agenda, the fire chief must adapt by providing the elected official with something more tangible that perhaps they can more closely relate to.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review identifies many issues reflected in the research questions. Certain literature identifies appropriate hiring practices to consider when trying to fit a person into an organization, versus fitting an organization to certain employee candidates. Collins, et al, (2006) notes that employees should be selected primarily based on their ability to work effectively with other employees and the culture of the company. Individuals are selected based on their overall fit with the company's values; Hiring practices should focus on how well the individual fits to the culture of the company and; only hire people who will work well with the rest of the employees in the company. While this research does not explicitly reflect on fire service leaders and their ability to understand elected officials, clearly it reinforces the need for fire service leaders to be a good fit within the organization; you can't be a good fit in the organization if you fail to understand what the elected officials want the organization to represent. According to Dr. Paul Otte, "...at higher levels of leadership, leaders become subordinate to the people, placing their needs ahead of their own."

Additional research supports the importance of communication among elected officials and appointed fire service leaders to effectively manage an organization. ICMA (1994) identifies the many issues that elected officials often have to deal with, especially as they relate to the fire service. The most important item discussed is that fire departments do more today

than just respond to structure fires and emergency calls for assistance. The handbook stresses the need for elected officials to openly communicate with the fire chief about issues such as employee staffing, regardless of whether the department is unionized or not. The handbook identifies the importance of the elected official understanding the policies of the fire department as they affect the organization's ability to respond to incidents within the community. The goal is to help elected officials understand why the department responds to a variety of emergencies in the manner they do. The Fire Chief must possess and apply technical, management, leadership and team skills to the highest degree possible. Churchill (2007) states that it is paramount that the fire department actively participates in the community/corporate mission, the fire department leader must understand the perspective of the elected leaders of the community and must educate the leaders on the perspectives and complexities of the fire department. He continues to say the most effective tool the fire service leader has is his ability to communicate with the elected official about the needs of the fire department.

One highlight is the importance of personal and professional credibility as a fire chief which relates directly to your credibility among elected officials. Chief Brugeman (2005) dedicates an entire chapter in this book dealing with ethics, politics, and leadership. This book, unlike the previous articles mentioned, is written from a fire chief's perspective and identifies some very important issues from that perspective. Another highlight is to understand the importance of the decisions that elected officials often make may not favor the fire department; however, we as fire chiefs have to have faith that the elected officials are making the decisions based on what they believe is in the best interest of the community. Chief Brugeman states, "Leadership, ethics, and politics are interwoven into the fabric we call government".

Retired General Gray and Dr. Paul Otte of Franklin University discuss in great detail the variety of leadership principles necessary to be effective leaders for generations to come. Furthermore the book goes into great detail about the difference in being a manager and being a leader. Managers tend to lead by control, must have power to process and need tangibles to show authority. Leaders on the other hand, lead best by developing relationships with others, especially subordinates, to accomplish a goal.

Robert L. Bailey (2002) recently retired as president, CEO and Board Chairman of State Auto Insurance Companies describes in detail a number of “silver bullets” that identify ways to become an effective leader. He further describes the many differences in being a manager vs. being a leader. Mr. Bailey’s “silver bullets” point out that leadership in management is an ongoing learning process. He discusses how management means hard work, commitment, and sacrifices.

In order for us as individuals to truly be successful in life, particularly our professional life, it is incumbent upon us to mentor to those subordinate to us to help them develop into leaders. Leadership (2006) is a dynamic book that details the importance of making others successful. If a leader wishes to leave a legacy in his or her organization, one of the most important attributes is to implement succession planning by helping to develop his/her replacement. Not necessarily to continue their method of operation, but to ensure a common thread among employees and leaders within the organization. It is imperative that fire chiefs show a commitment to elected officials (Cornell/Geivity Institute 2005). In order for fire chiefs to be successful, they must embrace cooperation, trust, and involvement with elected officials.

There are a number of desired skills sought by elected officials when advertising for fire chiefs according to multiple postings acquired from various advertisements throughout the

United States (IAFC 2007), they include, but are not limited to: enthusiastic, seasoned exceptional leadership abilities, ability to work with unions, dedication to community, senior level command with minimum of five years supervisory experience at senior-management level, visionary forward thinker, strong background in emergency preparedness, good fiscal management skills, strong leader to provide strategic leadership and management, EFO, CFOD , Bachelor's degree, Master's preferred, proven track record of delivering results.

## PROCEDURES

To answer the questions presented, the descriptive research method was utilized. The primary objective was to solicit responses from fire chiefs and elected officials who oversee fire department operations in five central Ohio counties. The counties included: Franklin, Licking, Delaware, Union, and Pickaway. All fire chiefs were surveyed, however; only elected officials of jurisdictions responsible for fire department operations were surveyed. The president of the Board of Trustees or the Mayor of a particular village or city was identified and surveyed. The survey was mailed out to each fire chief and respective elected official. The survey elicited information regarding whether or not fire chiefs are provided any formal training to assist them in working positively with their counterpart. For example, are fire chiefs receiving any training to assist them in understanding the role of the elected official, and are elected officials provided training in understanding fire department operations prior to assuming their positions of leadership? The survey to the fire chiefs focused on how often fire chiefs communicate with their elected officials and whether or not said communication is effective. The surveys mailed to elected officials was to determine whether or not elected officials have a practical understanding of what is involved in leading a fire department. The survey will help determine if elected officials are engaged in the operations or whether they rely on an appointed or other official to keep them abreast of fire department issues.

The surveys were mailed; the data was collected and analyzed by the author of this paper. Once the survey was returned and tabulated, a determination was made regarding what, if any programs or methodologies are available to assist the fire chief and the elected official to effectively carry out their role.

If it is determined that no formal training exists, the opportunity to develop such a program will commence utilizing the pre-determined need based on the survey results. The final portion of the survey will focus heavily on whether both the fire chief and the elected official believe they have sufficient information about the opposite to effectively manage and/or provide a level of service that is acceptable to their community. If the responses so dictate that there is an apparent lack of understanding between fire chiefs and elected officials, the obvious answer is then to develop a program to facilitate the mutual understanding that must occur in order to be successful in their respective positions.



### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study was limited in part due to the simple fact that there are limited research materials available to address this particular area of study. There appears to be adequate information relative to specific responsibilities of fire chiefs; fire ground tactics, hiring and disciplinary processes, budget/finance preparation, etc. However, the information readily available to assist fire chiefs in preparing themselves to work more effectively with local elected officials is not as prevalent as one would anticipate. Responsibilities of local elected officials are mandated by the Ohio Revised Code; the mandates are more parliamentary in nature and they fail to clearly identify the importance of developing positive relationships with department heads. Considering this, there are no mandates in the Ohio Revised Code that require elected officials to educate themselves either prior to or post election to understand the role of the fire chief.

## RESULTS

This research was conducted by sending a survey to local fire chiefs and elected officials within the five counties contiguous to Franklin County, Ohio. Surveys were mailed to every fire chief that manages a fire department, volunteer or career, within Franklin, Pickaway, Licking, Union and Delaware counties. Additionally, surveys were mailed to the chief elected official of the respective fire departments.

The survey was mailed to 70 fire chiefs and 47 responses were returned (see Figure 1). The overall rate of return of surveys by fire chiefs was sixty-seven (67%) percent. Based on the responses to the question of formalized training for fire chiefs, fifty-eight (58%) percent surveyed admit to not having any formal training to help prepare them to work effectively with local elected officials, while eight (8%) percent acknowledge some sort of formalized training with regard to communicating effectively with elected officials. Fifty-two (52%) percent of the respondents used the telephone to contact their elected officials at least weekly (see Figure 2). Only thirty (30%) percent of the fire chiefs utilized an intermediary, such as an appointed administrator or chair of a committee to interact with their elected official. The most common communication topic, forty-five (45%) centered around personnel issues. Fifty-six (56%) percent of those who responded to the survey acknowledged they would benefit from a training program to assist them in understanding the role of the elected official.

Surveys were mailed to 69 elected officials, the difference being some communities are served by a joint fire district and in this case only the “chair” of the district was surveyed. Out of the 69 elected officials surveyed, only 23% or 16 responses were received (see Figure 1). Eighty-seven (87%) percent of the elected officials felt they had enough understanding of fire department operations to work effectively with their local fire chief on fire department issues.

Elected officials who responded to the survey appear to be satisfied with the invitation from the fire chief to participate in fire department activities such as ride-alongs, training fires, staff meetings and etc. Seventy-three (73%) felt they were reasonably invited to participate in fire department activities. Over two-thirds of the elected officials, seventy-percent (70%), who responded communicated directly with their fire chief (see Figure 3) versus twenty-nine (29%) percent who communicated with another elected official regarding fire department activity. Eighty percent (80%) of the responses received from the elected officials indicate there would be a benefit in receiving additional training in understanding the role of the fire chief (see Figure 4). Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the elected officials who responded felt their fire chief did a good job of informing them of events within their organization.

## DISCUSSION

The number of responses received from the fire chief's surveyed far exceeded the number of responses received from the elected officials. Considering the similarity of the questions to fire service leaders and elected officials as they relate to the understanding of each others respective roles, the responses clearly indicate a need to develop continuing educational opportunities for both parties. If senior level fire officers desire to move through the ranks to fire chief officer's, it is incumbent upon them to learn as much about the role of the elected officials as it is to learn about fire tactics, personnel management, budgeting issues, to name a few. Likewise, for an elected official to be somewhat successful, he or she must have a working knowledge of fire department operations in order for him/her to communicate effectively and understand the object of the fire chief in delivering service to the community. It is apparent that both the fire chief and the elected officials are willing to learn more about each others role in the community. While communications, both content and frequency, among fire chiefs and elected officials appear adequate, the fact that each group may not fully understand the role of their counterpart could potentially impact the ability to provide adequate service based on each groups ideals. If either don't understand the role of the other, it is difficult to understand the level of service each other wishes to provide to the community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A program designed to educate the Madison Township fire captains on the importance of effectively communicating with elected officials will be implemented. This program will consist of requiring each captain to work closely with the fire chief on preparing the monthly fire department agenda for the Trustees' meeting. Additionally, each Captain will be required to meet on a regular basis with the Township Fiscal Officer and Township Administrator in an effort to improve the professional relationship. At least quarterly, the on-duty Captain will be required to attend either a Village of Groveport or Canal Winchester council meeting to provide those officials with an update of fire and EMS activity within their respective communities. The Madison Township Fire Department conducts regular monthly staff meetings with the Fire Chief, Assistant Chief and Captains attendance required. The Fire Chief usually prepares a written agenda and leads the meeting. Effective immediately, the agenda preparation and responsibility to chair the meetings will rotate among the Captains in order to enhance their organization and presentation skills.

On a more global level, a training course developed to assist fire service professionals in better understanding the overall responsibilities of elected officials with respect to the many facets of local government, not just fire service issues, would be beneficial. It is important to educate fire service leaders to assist in understanding that elected officials have to work closely with other departments within the municipality or township such as water and wastewater, police, street or highway maintenance and parks and recreation. All too often fire service leaders fail to recognize that other community services are provided and the elected official must dedicate attention to their needs as well.

Such instructional programs could be offered as educational workshops during annual conferences for the Ohio Fire Chiefs' Association, The International Fire Chiefs' Association, The Ohio Association of Professional Firefighters, and The Ohio State Firefighters.

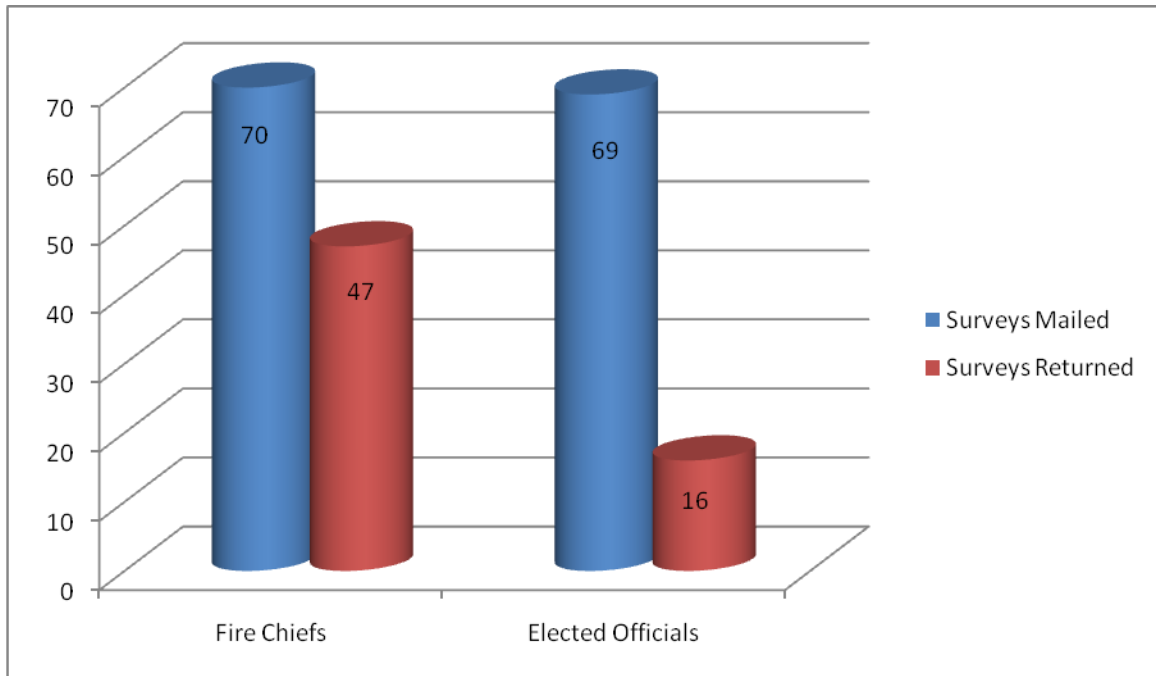
Likewise, a training course for elected officials similar to, "Feel the Heat" offered by the State Fire Marshal, should be developed and offered to all elected officials who oversee fire department operations. This program should be more structured towards the day-to-day operations of a fire department, not just fire extinguishment. An opportunity for elected officials to understand staffing needs, response assignments, and the process of writing bids for fire apparatus purchase, small equipment purchases, protective clothing, collective bargaining agreement and labor-management training could all be offered. Such courses could be offered to elected officials during annual Ohio Township Association, Ohio Municipal League and International City Manager Association annual conferences.

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Appendix

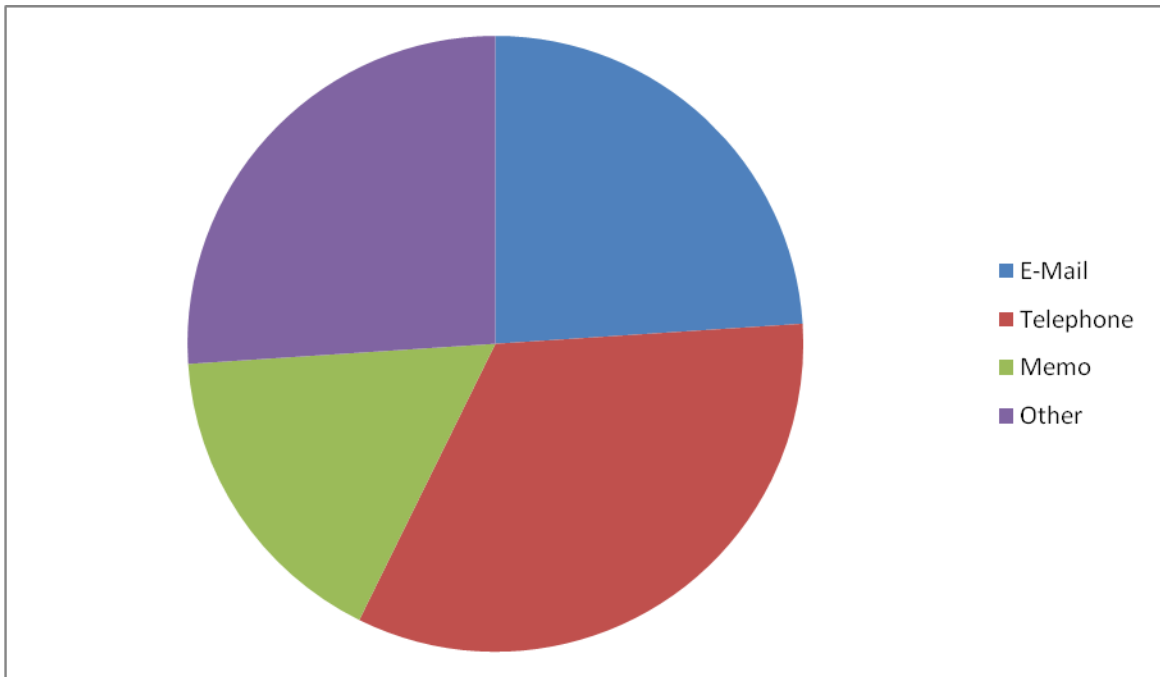
Figure 1



Response to survey.

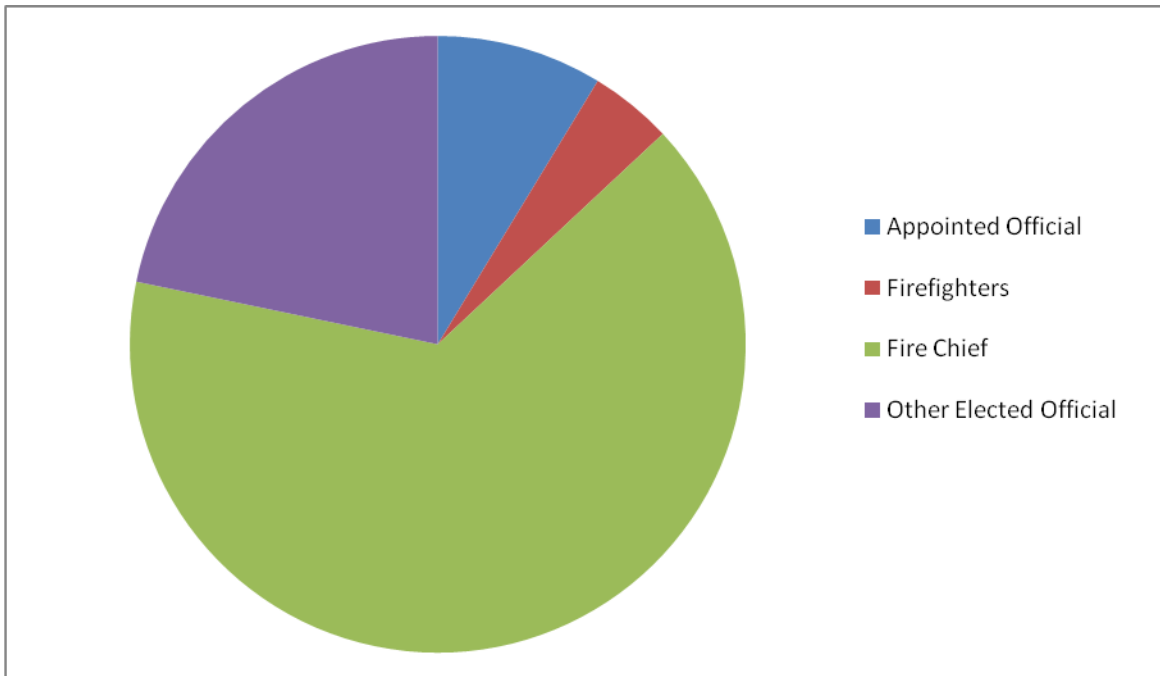


Figure 2



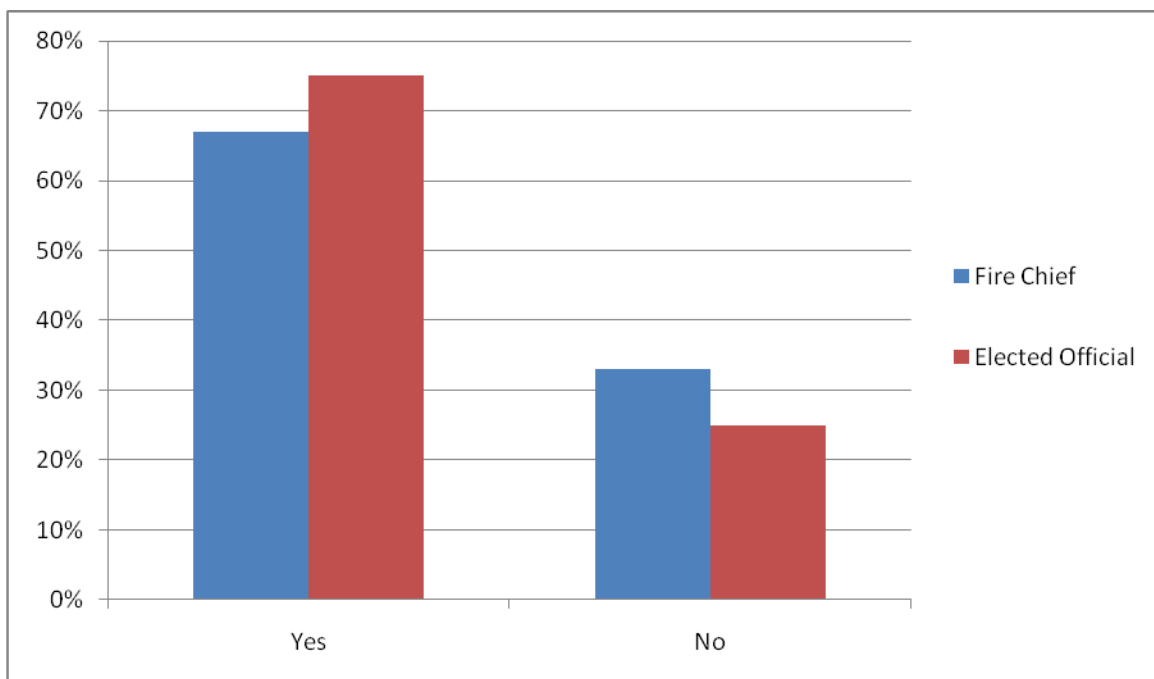
Method of Communication used by Fire Chief to communicate with Elected Official.

Figure 3



Individual Elected Official most frequently communicates with.

Figure 4



Benefit of continuing education training in communication with each other.