

How Fire Chiefs Get in Trouble—and How to Stay Out of It

Practical lessons in leadership, judgment, accountability, and trust

By Fire Chief Jack Parow, Retired

Fire chiefs rarely get into serious trouble because they lack technical knowledge. Most understand emergency operations, staffing, apparatus, training, and community risk. Trouble more often begins when leadership judgment fails—when a chief stops communicating, ignores policy, mishandles people, blurs ethical boundaries, or assumes that good intentions will excuse poor decisions. The position carries broad authority, but it also carries constant scrutiny. Elected officials, labor organizations, employees, the media, and the public may judge the same decision from very different perspectives.

A fire chief therefore needs more than operational competence. The chief must exercise disciplined judgment, build reliable systems, document important decisions, and maintain trust before a crisis occurs. Staying out of trouble does not mean avoiding every disagreement. It means leading in a way that can withstand fair questions, public review, and organizational pressure (International Association of Fire Chiefs [IAFC], n.d.; International City/County Management Association [ICMA], 2025).

Where Trouble Begins

Failure to communicate. A chief may have a sound plan and still lose support if people learn about it late, receive conflicting explanations, or feel that decisions were made behind closed doors. Silence creates a vacuum, and rumors quickly fill it. Problems become more serious when the governing authority believes it was surprised, the union believes it was bypassed, or members believe the chief does not listen. Communication is not a single announcement; it is an ongoing leadership responsibility.

Inconsistent discipline and favoritism. Nothing damages a chief's credibility faster than the perception that rules depend on who is involved. A favored employee receives coaching while someone else receives formal discipline. A command officer's mistake is overlooked while a firefighter is held accountable for a similar action. Even when circumstances differ, unexplained differences can look unfair. Once members believe the system is selective, every later personnel decision becomes harder to defend.

Supervising a family member. A chief whose spouse, child, sibling, parent, or other relative works in the department faces heightened scrutiny even when the family member was properly hired and is fully qualified. Trouble can arise if the chief participates in hiring, promotion, preferred assignments, overtime, leave, evaluations, commendations, discipline, grievance decisions, or other matters that affect the relative's pay, status, or working conditions. The chief may believe the decision is fair, yet employees and the public may reasonably see favoritism, special access, or retaliation against those who question the arrangement. Depending on state law, local ordinance, civil-service rules, collective-bargaining agreements, or municipal policy, participation may also create a prohibited financial conflict. Massachusetts ethics guidance, for example, restricts municipal employees from participating in particular matters affecting an immediate family member's financial interest and separately warns against conduct that creates an appearance of favoritism (Massachusetts State Ethics Commission, 1986). Because requirements differ by

jurisdiction, a chief should obtain advice from the appointing authority, human resources, ethics officials, or legal counsel before acting.

Poor handling of personnel matters. Chiefs get into trouble when they act too quickly, rely on incomplete information, discuss confidential matters carelessly, or skip established procedures. Complaints involving harassment, discrimination, retaliation, safety, leave, or workplace conduct require prompt and impartial attention. The chief's role is not to decide the outcome in advance. It is to ensure the matter is reported, preserved, reviewed, and handled through the proper administrative and legal channels. Federal equal-employment guidance also makes clear that participation in a discrimination complaint process and reasonable opposition to discrimination are protected from retaliation (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2016).

Ethical blind spots. Gifts, outside employment, purchasing relationships, travel, use of department property, social-media activity, and personal relationships can all create conflicts or the appearance of conflicts. A chief may believe that no improper benefit was intended, but public leadership is judged by appearance as well as intent. If a reasonable observer might question the chief's impartiality, the issue deserves disclosure and review before action is taken. Fire-service and local-government ethics codes emphasize integrity, accountability, stewardship, and conduct that sustains public confidence (IAFC, n.d.; ICMA, 2025).

Financial and administrative shortcuts. Emergency-service leaders are accustomed to making fast decisions, but speed can become a liability in budgeting, procurement, grants, overtime, recordkeeping, and contracting. An urgent need does not automatically suspend municipal rules. Inadequate documentation, unauthorized purchases, poorly controlled credit cards, or vague grant records can create audit findings and public suspicion even when the expenditure served a legitimate purpose. For purchases under FEMA awards, local governments must follow applicable federal procurement standards and document the procurement process (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], 2026).

Political misjudgment. Fire chiefs work in a political environment whether they enjoy politics or not. The danger is becoming partisan, publicly embarrassing decision-makers, making promises without authority, or treating policy disagreement as personal disloyalty. A chief must advocate firmly for the department while respecting the roles of the mayor, manager, council, finance officials, and other department heads. Credibility grows when recommendations are factual, options are clearly presented, and elected officials are allowed to make policy choices. ICMA identifies political neutrality, integrity, transparency, stewardship of public resources, and respect for elected officials' responsibilities as foundations of professional local-government leadership (ICMA, 2025).

How Chiefs Stay Out of Trouble

Slow down high-risk decisions. Operational urgency is not the same as administrative urgency. Before acting on a sensitive personnel, financial, political, or legal matter, pause long enough to identify who should be consulted. Human resources, labor counsel, municipal counsel, finance officers, risk managers, and the appointing authority are not obstacles; they are safeguards. A short delay for competent review can prevent months of damage.

Follow policy—or formally change it. A chief who ignores an inconvenient policy teaches the organization that compliance is optional. If a policy is outdated, unsafe, or impractical, document the concern and revise it through the proper process. Until then, follow it consistently unless authorized legal or emergency grounds require another course. Policies should also be reviewed regularly so that written expectations match actual practice.

Document the decision, not just the outcome. Good records explain what was known, what options were considered, who was consulted, and why a course of action was selected. Documentation should be factual, timely, and professional. Avoid sarcasm, speculation, and emotional language in emails and messages. Write every official communication with the understanding that it may later be reviewed by an attorney, governing body, reporter, arbitrator, or member of the public.

Create predictable communication routines. Regular briefings with the governing authority, command staff, union leadership, and department members reduce surprises. Not every group receives the same information, but each should understand the issues that affect its responsibilities. When bad news develops, communicate early with verified facts, explain what is not yet known, and provide a time for the next update. Credibility is strengthened by accuracy and consistency, not by pretending to have every answer.

Use a fair process for people. Personnel decisions should be based on known standards, reliable facts, and comparable treatment. Before imposing discipline, confirm the chief's authority, the applicable policy or agreement, required notice, and the employee's opportunity to respond. Separate performance coaching from formal discipline, protect confidentiality, and watch for retaliation. When similar cases produce different outcomes, document the legitimate reasons for the difference.

Establish a written firewall for family employment. The safest approach is to disclose the relationship in writing and remove the chief from decisions that uniquely affect the family member. An independent official should handle the relative's direct supervision, scheduling, overtime approval, performance evaluations, discipline, promotion, grievances, and complaints whenever law or policy requires—or whenever the chief's involvement could reasonably undermine confidence. The arrangement should identify who has decision authority, how routine chain-of-command issues will be handled, and how records will be maintained. The chief should not use informal influence, private direction, or another officer as a proxy. The same published standards used for comparable employees should apply to the relative, and any unavoidable involvement should be reviewed and documented in advance. Recusal does not automatically cure every conflict, so the plan must be approved under applicable law and local policy.

Build a circle of candid advisers. Chiefs need people who will challenge them respectfully before others challenge them publicly. That circle may include a trusted command officer, another chief, an experienced municipal administrator, legal counsel, or a professional mentor. The purpose is not to avoid responsibility or seek automatic agreement. It is to test assumptions, expose blind spots, and consider how a decision will affect employees, residents, and the governing body.

When Trouble Starts

The worst response to an emerging problem is denial. When a complaint, audit concern, vote of no confidence, public controversy, or legal issue surfaces, the chief should preserve records, stop informal speculation, notify the proper authority, and obtain qualified advice. Retaliation—real or perceived—must be avoided; EEOC guidance warns that employer actions likely to discourage protected complaints or participation may constitute unlawful retaliation (EEOC, 2016). The chief should identify what can be corrected immediately without interfering with a review and what must remain unchanged while facts are gathered.

Accountability is not the same as surrender. A chief can acknowledge a mistake, correct a process, and still defend actions that were proper. The key is to respond with facts rather than anger. Public

attacks on employees, elected officials, unions, or reporters usually deepen the controversy. A measured response—supported by records and coordinated with appropriate municipal officials—protects both the individual chief and the institution.

A Chief's Trouble-Prevention Checklist

- Do I have the authority to make this decision?
- What policy, law, contract, or past practice applies?
- Have I heard the relevant facts from more than one perspective?
- Who needs to review this before I act?
- Would I make the same decision if a different employee were involved?
- Can I explain the decision clearly to the governing authority and the public?
- Have I documented the facts, options, consultation, and rationale?
- Could a personal, financial, or political relationship create an appearance problem?
- If a family member is involved, have I disclosed the relationship, recused myself where required, and ensured that an independent official handles decisions affecting the family member?
- What unintended consequences could follow?
- When and how will I communicate the decision?

Leadership That Can Withstand Scrutiny

Fire chiefs will never eliminate conflict, criticism, or political pressure. Difficult calls are part of the office. The goal is not to become so cautious that nothing gets done. The goal is to make decisions that are lawful, ethical, consistent, well-informed, and explainable. Chiefs who communicate early, follow fair processes, seek advice, maintain professional boundaries, and keep reliable records are far less likely to be surprised by preventable trouble.

The strongest protection is a reputation built over time. When employees and public officials know that the chief listens, tells the truth, applies standards fairly, and accepts responsibility, they are more likely to extend trust during a difficult moment. Authority may come with the badge and title, but durable leadership comes from judgment. That judgment—practiced consistently before trouble arrives—is what keeps a fire chief effective, credible, and in command.

References

- Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2026, August 7). [*Purchasing under a FEMA award: Complying with the federal procurement standards*](#).
- International Association of Fire Chiefs. (n.d.). [*IAFC fire service professional code of ethics*](#).
- International City/County Management Association. (2025). [*ICMA code of ethics with guidelines*](#).
- Massachusetts State Ethics Commission. (1986, December 15). [*Advisory 86-02: Nepotism*](#).
- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (2016, August 25). [*Enforcement guidance on retaliation and related issues*](#).