

# Aspen Fire Department Workplace Assessment Report July 11, 2022





# **Table of Contents**

3
3
3
3
6
6
6
6
7
g
10
12
14
16
17
20



# Introduction

Legal Counsel for Aspen Fire Department ["Aspen FD"] engaged Investigations Law Group to conduct an in-depth Culture Evaluation of the workplace. The Culture Evaluation was conducted between March 9 and April 5, 2022. The Assessment consisted of a Culture Survey, targeted and voluntary interviews.

# Methodology

The Survey

The survey was designed to provide a repeatable evaluation of the work environment at ASPEN FD, allowing leadership the opportunity to conduct future surveys using all or parts of the original survey to track progress.

The survey was open between March 9 and March 23, 2022. Multiple communications were sent out to encourage participation both before the survey launched and while the survey was open.

Alchemer was the tool used to conduct the confidential survey.

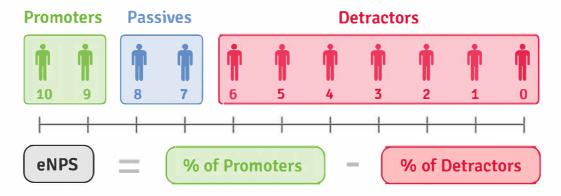
Survey Components:

#### 1. Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS)

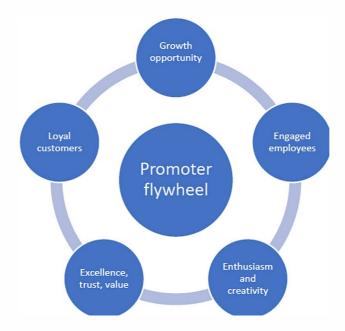
The first section of the Evaluation consists of the eNPS and the employees' reason for providing the score that they did.

The eNPS is used to gauge employee engagement and loyalty. By asking the question, "On a scale of 0-10, how likely are you to recommend this organization as a great place to work to family and friends," employers are given a sense of their employee sentiment. It is a useful and simple tool to measure employee engagement over time. Some experts recommend organizations look only at their score and work to improve it over time, verses comparing their score to other organizations. While research varies on the topic, average eNPS in the United States ranges from (-10) - +30 (see scoring below), with anything above 30 considered great. In almost every case, the eNPS is lower than a company's customer NPS, as employees hold the organization to a higher standard than do customers.





Focusing on improving the eNPS overtime greatly benefits organizations, as employee engagement has been directly linked to customer loyalty. According to the Net Promoter System\*, engaged employees approach work with more energy and creativity, resulting in an excellent product or service, which breeds customer loyalty. this is considered the Promoter Flywheel:



#### 2. Rating Scale Questions

The next section of the survey is made up of 39 rating scale statements in 7 different categories (see Appendix 1). Employees were asked to rate each question on a 1-5 scale:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree



The questions were divided in 7 different categories, to provide the company an opportunity to focus on areas needing the most attention. The categories are:

- Work Life
- Leadership
- Communication
- Relationships
- Work Environment
- Safety
- COVID

To score the individual questions, we weighted the total number of answers at each score, totaled the number and divided it by the number of participants. This gives an average score for the question. Categories were calculated in the same fashion. See example below:

Score	# Participants	Weight	Total	Average for the question
1	7	1	7	
2	3	2	6	
3	25	3	75	
4	15	4	60	
5	8	5	40	
Total	58		188	58 participants / 188 score = 3.08

#### 3. Questions about workplace conduct

Survey participants were asked if they had witnessed or experienced harassment, discrimination, or inappropriate behavior while working at ASPEN FD. If they had, the timeframe of the incident(s) and if they reported the incident or not and gathered additional information surrounding the reporting process.

- Discrimination based on religion
- Discrimination based on gender
- Discrimination based on age
- Sexual Harassment
- Bullying / Hazing

#### 4. Open ended questions

The survey concluded with open ended questions to allow participants to provide general feedback about ASPEN FD, the culture, what can be done to improve the work environment.

#### 5. Demographic questions

Participants were asked to provide information about their position, age, race, ethnicity, gender, and tenure. To not dissuade participation, employees were not required to provide this information.



#### Interviews

The Culture Evaluation included eleven (11) targeted interviews with leadership and individual contributors and three (3) voluntary interviews. The interviews did not replicate the information collected in the survey, rather, participants were asked more specific questions about their experiences as an employee.

Interviews were confidential. The information collected helped frame the following report, recommendations that were made to Client, and provided important context for identified themes.

# The Report

The following report is broken into the following components:

- Executive Summary:
- Detailed Survey information by Section.
- Complete list of survey questions and scores

#### **Executive Summary**

Participation Rate and Demographics

71% of the employees participated in the survey (46 out of 65 active employees/volunteers at the time of the survey). This is a great turnout, as typically only 30%-40% of employees participate in engagement surveys (Survey Monkey).



The demographics of survey participants follows. Please note that participants were provided the opportunity to not provide this information if they were concerned about confidentiality, or for any other reason. Many of the participants elected *not* to provide their demographics, which made it difficult to analyze data on any given demographic category.

#### Volunteer or Career:

- 62% Volunteer
- 38% Career

#### Role:

- 62% Firefighter
- 13% Officer
- 7% Admin
- 4% Probationary Member



- Support 2%
- 7% Prefer not to answer

#### Shift

- 44% Volunteer shifts vary
- 19% C
- 12% A
- 5% B
- 19% Prefer not to answer

#### Age

- 4% <25
- 9% 26-30
- 26% 31-40
- 26% 41-50
- 17% >50
- 17% Prefer not to answer

#### Gender

- 74% Male
- 13% Female
- 2% Non-binary
- 11% Prefer not to answer

#### Ethnic or Racial Background

- 2% Asian American
- 2% African American
- 82% White
- 4% Other Hispanic
- 2% Multi-racial
- 7% Other

#### Length of Service

- 9% <1 years
- 26% 1-4 years
- 20% 5-9 years
- 39% 10+ years
- 7% Prefer not to answer



#### **Summary of Findings**



Overall, the survey found that participants are generally happy at ASPEN FD, with 67% of participants expressing they are satisfied or very satisfied with their job and 67% indicated they are satisfied or very satisfied with their working relationships. The eNPS¹ score for ASPEN FD is -8.5, with 27.7% rating it a 9-10, 36.2% a 7-8 and 36.2% a 0-6.² The eNPS score for ASPEN FD <u>Volunteers is -34.5</u> while <u>Career eNPS is +33.3.</u>

- "We are going in the right direction"
- "I think we are moving in the right direction and have been making improvements
- "Getting better every day!"
- "Chief and Deputy Chief are taking us in a great direction"
- "Aspen Fire is improving its level of service, and building trust within the community"
- "Progressing to catch up with modern firefighting/rescue/EMS skills"

While most of the participants had not experienced (67%) or witnessed (90%) harassment, discrimination, or inappropriate workplace conduct, there are concerns about conduct in the work environment, described in the sections below. Three (3) participants stated that they experienced discrimination based on gender prior to 2020 and 1 stated it was within the two years. Nine (9) reported experiencing bullying / hazing, 6 prior to 2020 and 3 within the last 2 years. Most concerning is the lack of reporting, with only 59% (experienced) and 17% (witnessed) incidents reported. The most common reasons for not reporting include fear of retaliation not thinking it would "do any good" to do so. On a positive note, participants reported less instances of experienced conduct between 2020-present (8) and 2019-2020 (10).<sup>3</sup>

The top scoring categories in the survey were COVID (4.12), Safety (4.10) and Work Environment (3.88). Commentary about the mission and services to the community, clear focus on safety, benefits and relationships with coworkers highlighted what is working well. The top statements that contributed to these scores include:<sup>4</sup>



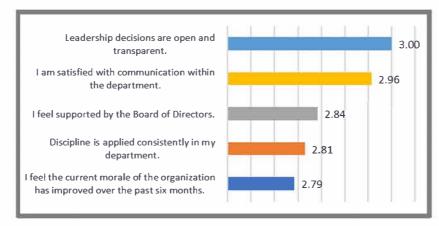
 $<sup>^{1}</sup>$  Scoring described in introduction – ranges from -100 to +100, with 10-30 as the average for employers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> We will highlight differences between voluntary and career staff in a later section.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> This could be due to COVID work at home and social distancing requirements and should be monitored now that more employees are working in the building.

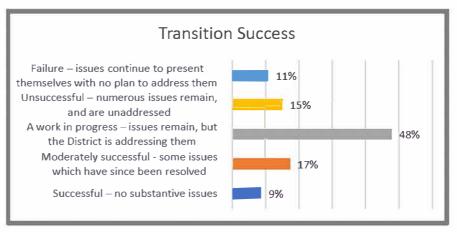
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> A list of all questions and scores can be found at the end of the report.

These areas of strength can contribute greatly to ASPEN FD's response to areas that need additional attention, the three lowest scoring categories: Work Life (3.30), Leadership (3.47) and Communication (3.57). It is important to note that although these three categories are the lowest scoring in the evaluation, the scores are above 3.0, indicating the answers are leaning positive. Overall, the lowest scoring statements in the survey were:



The themes identified in survey areas that scored lower include a division between volunteer and career staff, a need to improve communication, the need for improved efforts on team building and an overall lack of respect for each other. These areas will be explored in more detail below.

Participants were asked how they would characterize the Aspen FD's transition from all volunteer to a combination department. Most agreed (48%) that this is a work in progress, that issues still remain but the District is addressing them.



ILG analyzed the survey results of volunteers and career staff separately. Important to note is the difference in three specific areas.

# 1. How would you characterize the District's transition from volunteer to a combination department?

	Volunteer	Career
Successful – no substantive issues	4	
Moderately successful - some issues which have since been resolved	3	5
A work in progress – issues remain, but the District is addressing them	10	12
Unsuccessful – numerous issues remain, and are unaddressed	7	
Failure – issues continue to present themselves with no plan to address them	5	



## 2. What one thing is Aspen Fire doing well?

	Volunteer	Career
Improving	2	8
Training or teaching	6	1
Serving community needs / preparedness	5	2
Gathering input / trying to engage and understand staff	3	3
Spending money / buying things	3	1
Hiring paid staff	4	0
Good work culture or benefits	1	1
Nothing	1	0

#### 3. Since the transition to combination do you understand you job description?

	Volunteer	Career
Yes	9	17
No	9	0
Kind of / most of it	3	0
Feel they can't speak to this	3	0
Constantly changing	2	1
Doesn't understand, need better description / more formal policies	2	1

## 4. How do you feel communication has been the last 6 months?

a. Volunteers: 7 improved, 14 about the same, 7 worse

b. Career: 11 improved, 6 about the same

#### 5. If Aspen Fire could do one thing to improve the culture, what would it be?

	Volunteer	Career
Communicate better / address issues / engage	7	4
Fun, positivity and events / getting to know one another	4	5
Address conflict / lack of respect	2	5
Try again / return to just volunteers	3	0
Value / include volunteers	3	0
Leadership improvement or training	7	1
More education / training	1	2

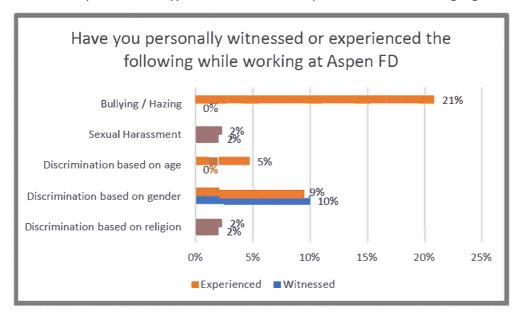
# **Detailed Survey Information**

Discrimination, Harassment, and inappropriate workplace conduct

While a majority of participants had not witnessed (90%) or experienced (67%) discrimination, harassment or inappropriate workplace conduct while working at ASPEN FD, the data suggests there are real or perceived concerns about bullying/hazing in the workplace [21% experienced] and discrimination based



on gender with 9% of participants reporting they had experienced this and 10% of participants reporting they had witnessed this conduct while working at ASPEN FD. One participant described experiencing mistreatment based on gender, including inappropriate comments made by a senior member. <sup>5</sup> Those who reported experiencing and witnessing this treatment has gone down from 2020 to present. Commentary around the type of witnessed and experienced conduct is highlighted below.



Only 59% (10) of those who this experienced treatment reported it to leadership / HR. those Of who reported the treatment they experienced. no participant was satisfied with the result. were 7 dissatisfied or very dissatisfied and 3 were neutral. the 41% (7) who did

not report what they had experienced, six (6) said they feared retaliation and four (4) said they did not report it because<sup>6</sup> it would not do any good. Of those who witnessed this behavior, 83% (5) did not report the behavior. Reasons for not reporting the behavior<sup>7</sup> included concerns that it would not do any good (4).

Page 11

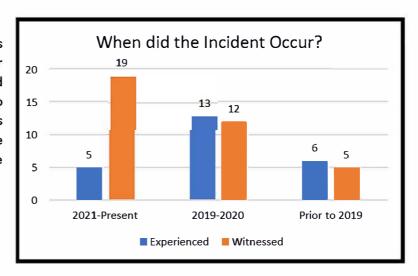
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> At the time this report was written the senior member was no longer with Aspen FD.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Participants can select multiple reasons for not reporting, thus the numbers do not equal 100%.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Participants can select multiple reasons for not reporting, thus the numbers do not equal 100%.

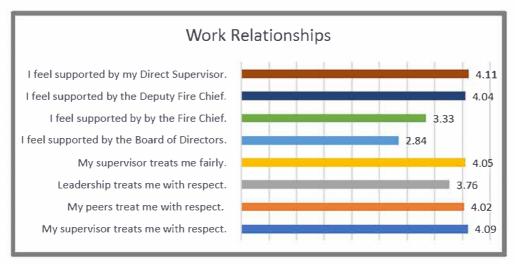


The lack of reporting highlights opportunities for Bystander Awareness training and reinforcement by management to build a respectful culture. There is also opportunity to improve the reporting system and to ensure confidentiality.



Work Relationships, Work Environment and Work Life

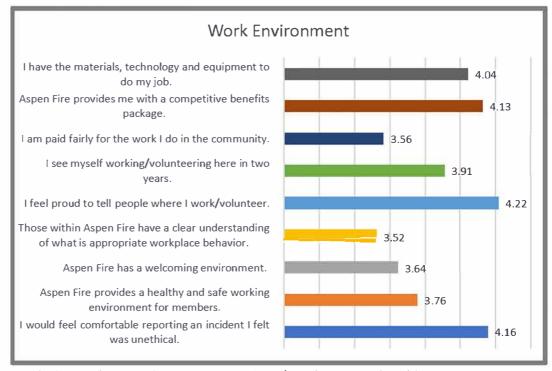
The work relationships section evaluated participant's experiences working with one another, how management addresses issues in the work environment, and whether or not people understand what acceptable workplace behavior is and the polices and training provided by ASPEN FD on these topics.



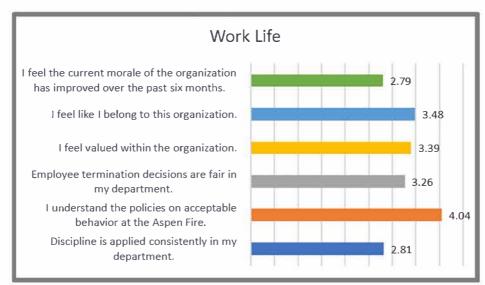
collected Data that indicated ASPEN FD has done well in the area of Work Relationships with an overall score of 3.78. The lowest scoring statement in this section related to the support of the Board of Directors. This may need to be

explored. Overall, the statistical data around Work Relationships is encouraging.

**Participants** ranked statements in the Work **Environment** section a little higher (3.88). The two lowest scoring statements, "I am paid fairly for the work I do in the community" (3.56)and "Those within Aspen Fire have a clear understanding of what is appropriate workplace behavior" (3.52)highlight opportunities for improvement in this This area. is contrasted by



feedback that participants feel proud to work at Aspen FD (4.22) and are comfortable reporting harassment and discrimination (4.16).8



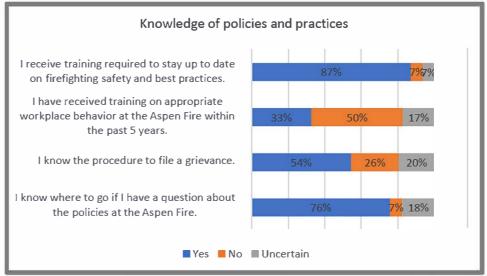
On the other hand, Work Life was the lower scoring sections of the survey with a score of 3.30. Feedback from participants indicated concerns about the current morale of the organization and consistency in discipline.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Given the previous data around lack of reporting experienced or witnessed misconduct, it will be important to explore this further with the team.



This section also sought information about the understanding of policies and practices for addressing workplace misconduct and feedback about training that has been provided on appropriate workplace

This data behavior. indicated that participants are aware of the policies and practices. However, only 33% indicated that had received training on appropriate workplace behavior in the last five years. This is another area to focus improvement on.



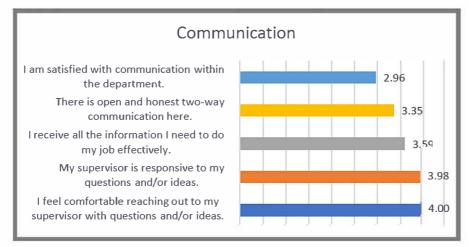
When asked what training participants would like to receive, 9 out of 26 responses stated advanced firefighter topics (Mayday, Radio-use, etc.), 6 out of 26 would like HR/Administrative training (this includes training on the handbook and other policies, budget information and general administrative firefighter duties. While 4 of 26 requested communications training and 4 of 26 suggested training for leadership.

The comments below cover all the areas highlighted in this section and included some constructive feedback for the organization:

- "Could be improved with more formal policies and an employee handbook"
- "every time I report to a shift, there seems to be some new policy, procedure"
- "Involving representation from all areas of the organization as we move forward with many projects and decisions. i.e. policy"
- "Reports of unprofessional behavior have gone unaddressed"

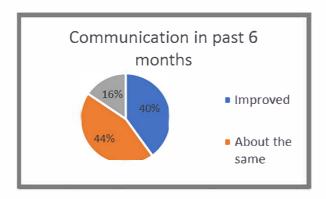
#### Communication and Leadership

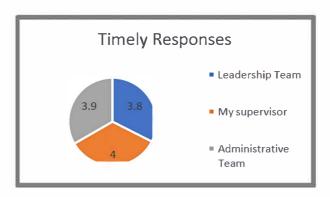
Both the Communication (3.57) and Leadership (3.47) sections offer feedback that is useful to consider when identifying opportunities to improve employee engagement at ASPEN FD. While scores above 3.0 are not considered "low" generally, given the high scores participants provided in other sections, there are some clear messages from participants that focus and attention in these areas could make the work environment even better.



Based on the data provided by participants, there is a concern with communication within the department. In every survey we conduct, communication is an area that employees constantly want more of. This is an area for leadership to focus energy and attention.

Participants were asked how communication has been in the last six months and to rank the timely responses by administration on emails, calls, questions, etc. the results are below:





There seems to be a concern that leadership decisions are not transparent and open (3.00). The second lowest score was a 3.37 when participants were asked if they trusted decisions made by leadership. With

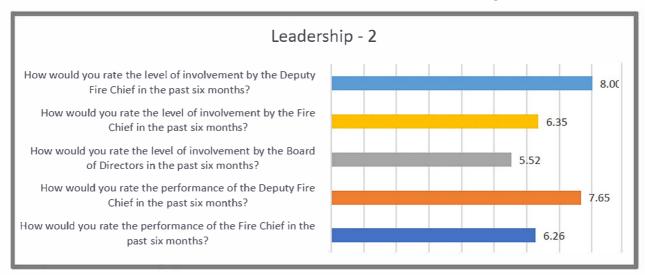
a focus on communication, these concerns can be addressed readily by the leadership team. With a strong communication strategy that includes two-way communication and Q&A forums, and assurance that information is shared readily and consistently within the department and between shifts, feelings of



trust and transparency can be enhanced.



Participants were also asked about the performance and specific involvement of members in leadership. These statements were ranked on a scale of 1 - 10 [1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest].



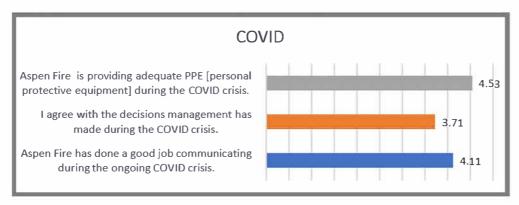
A theme in leadership centered around the Chief including concerns about his vision, his communication style, and in some cases calling for him to pass the baton on to the next in line, sample comments below:

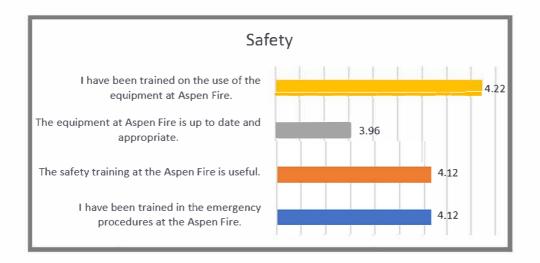
- "The Chief seems to be on his own path which does not take into consideration the success of the organization as a whole "
- "The transition has been difficult due to the Chief's lack of leadership in many ways. The decision making is unclear, uncertain, and often changing."
- "Chief puts paid members ahead of all veterans and volunteers barely exist now."
- "Replace Chief Ballentine, it's time."

Safety and COVID Response

The highest scoring area of the survey was COVID with an average score of 4.12. Safety is the second highest category at 4.10. This is reassuring given the nature of the work performed at ASPEN FD. While there were not many comments regarding COVID specifically, it was brought up by several participants that COVID and specifically social distancing has been very hard for members of the department. Generally, participants felt that ASPEN FD did a good job handling the pandemic and many of the participants acknowledged that ASPEN FD was required to follow Federal guidelines. The feelings of isolation, separation and exclusion during COVID should be improving over time with the possibility of more interaction, events and meetings is something participants are looking forward to.







#### Additional Themes and Recommendations

The open-ended comment sections allowed participants to give feedback on topics covered in a prior section and in general about what was important to them. Where appropriate, there are comments included in the detailed sections above. Where there were consistencies between the sections, we analyzed comments and identified themes that are important for management to consider as they assess their strategy to address opportunities for improvement. In each section below, there are recommendations. The themes are highlighted below with some relevant comments:

 What's working: Many participants made positive comments about what is working at ASPEN FD. Given the high scores on participants' satisfaction with their job and work environment, this reinforced what is going well.



- a. "The department is making substantial strides to provide a positive environment for both volunteer and career firefighters"
- b. "I believe the leadership is doing their best to ensure all firefighters that Aspen Fire will constantly improve in all areas and that they are there to make the workplace great for volunteers and career firefighters."
- c. "The vast majority of this organization is excited for the future and moving forward."
- d. "The amount of talent here is staggering."
- e. "Our community is very lucky to have such an incredible group of professionals."

**Recommendation**: Leverage the ASPEN FD mission and high scores on satisfaction to bolster employee morale and engagement.

- 2. **Transition to a combination volunteer and career staff**: Throughout the survey there were comments that highlighted an opportunity bridge the gap between volunteer and career staff. This transition has been specifically difficult during COVID as the fraternization between staff was substantially decreased.
  - a. "Volunteers feel diminished and the hiring process for new career folks is curious as being a firefighter means years of proving yourself vs. just having potential."
  - b. "As career staffing increases, I have personal sense of being less relevant to the department."
  - c. "The division between career and volunteer is still very apparent."
  - d. "Work to eliminate the divide between volunteers and career."
  - e. "Feelings of resentment exist between volunteers and career."

**Recommendation**: It is possible that the transition to a combined staff was hampered because of COVID, where volunteer staff were not at the station and career staff built stronger relationships. Administration and Command staff may want to create a plan to revisit the original transition plan and focus on relationship building between volunteers and career. Simple celebrations, potluck lunches, group trainings and employee highlights and accomplishments in newsletters and leadership communication and make a big difference.

- 3. **Leadership**: Participants highlighted a dissatisfaction with leadership. It appears that inappropriate behavior has been accepted by leadership at Aspen FD in the past. There is also concern about one specific Battalion Chief. Finally, some comments centered around the opportunity for leaders to receive training to improve their leadership acumen.
  - a. "Uninspiring leadership"
  - b. "We should continue to do leadership development"
  - c. "Leadership training, from the top down"
  - d. "Issues remain, and the Chiefs don't believe they exist"
  - e. "The decision making is unclear, uncertain, and often changing."
  - f. "There is a lack of vision and direction quite often"
  - g. "ealize he is not the be all, end all in terms of dealing with the newest firefighters, and make him adhere to our policies"



- h. "He newer members" ) is an embarrassment to this department with other agencies and to our newer members"
- i. "embarrass our department by doing so many things that no other member could get away with"
- j. "I believe requires training on numerous items how to appropriately treat the newest members, how to maintain confidences, how to conduct himself appropriately"

**Recommendation**: Consider a multifaceted approach to build leadership acumen and align leadership approaches at ASPEN FD. Set standards around confidentiality, leadership values and enforce the code of conduct. A leadership training program that includes 360 evaluations, a focus on building trust, and aligning and mastering the essential skills in leadership could make a significant impact on the culture. Investigate and address poor behavior that has been called out in the survey.

- 4. **Communication**: Coupled with feedback around leadership was a theme about communication. Communication is always a challenge in any organization and with the transition to a combination staff model and COVID it has become more difficult.
  - a. "Communication always needs improving."
  - b. "Because of the lack of communication, volunteers are left out all the time."
  - c. "To improve our culture there needs to be more communication between the Deputy Chief and the BCs"
  - d. "The lack of communication to volunteers has been dismal"

**Recommendation**: Review communication plans and develop a strategy to streamline communication throughout the organization, with volunteers AND career staff and between individual shifts. Address disconnects in communication styles and set standards to improve consistency. Consider holding "town hall" or "listening" sessions to improve communication to leadership. Communicate the results of this survey and commit to addressing the top issues. Consider engaging employees/volunteers to help solve some of the issues identified, starting with communication.

#### 5. **Specific Areas of Feedback**

a. Respectful Workplace Focus: Given the type of conduct that was described in the section on inappropriate behavior ASPEN FD could benefit from a next-generation approach to building a respectful workplace. Many organizations are moving away from traditional "sexual harassment and discrimination" training and instead are leveraging DEI initiatives and other HR programs to focus on educating employees on acceptable workplace conduct, civility, bystander awareness and responsibilities, assertiveness, and accountability to ensure the work environment is comfortable and safe for everyone.

**Recommendation**: Consider adding an ethics hotline or anonymous reporting line to ensure people are comfortable reporting concerns. Address the perceived (or real)



conflict of interest by making organizational structure changes and ensuring oversight and rules of engagement when certain issues are being handled in Human Resources.

#### Survey statements and scores

Statement	Score
I feel the current morale of the organization has improved over the past six months.	2.79
Discipline is applied consistently in my department.	2.81
I feel supported by the Board of Directors.	2.84
I am satisfied with communication within the department.	2.96
Leadership decisions are open and transparent.	3.00
Employee termination decisions are fair in my department.	3.26
I feel supported by the Fire Chief.	3.33
There is open and honest two-way communication here.	3.35
I trust the decisions that Leadership makes.	3.37
I feel valued within the organization.	3.39
I feel like I belong to this organization.	3.48
Those within Aspen Fire have a clear understanding of what is appropriate workplace behavior.	3.52
I am paid fairly for the work I do in the community.	3.56
I receive all the information I need to do my job effectively.	3.59
Aspen Fire has a welcoming environment.	3.64
I can talk openly to Leadership without fear of retaliation.	3.71
I agree with the decisions management has made during the COVID crisis.	3.71
Aspen Fire provides a healthy and safe working environment for members.	3.76
Leadership treats me with respect.	3.76
Leadership would take appropriate action on reports of harassment or discrimination.	3.81
I see myself working/volunteering here in two years.	3.91
The equipment at Aspen Fire is up to date and appropriate.	3.96
My supervisor is responsive to my questions and/or ideas.	3.98
I feel comfortable reaching out to my supervisor with questions and/or ideas.	4.00
My peers treat me with respect.	4.02
I have the materials, technology and equipment to do my job.	4.04
I feel supported by the Deputy Fire Chief.	4.04
I understand the policies on acceptable behavior at the Aspen Fire.	4.04
My supervisor treats me fairly.	4.05
My supervisor treats me with respect.	4.09
Aspen Fire has done a good job communicating during the ongoing COVID crisis.	4.11
I feel supported by my Direct Supervisor.	4.11
I have been trained in the emergency procedures at the Aspen Fire.	4.12
The safety training at the Aspen Fire is useful.	4.12
Aspen Fire provides me with a competitive benefits package.	4.13
I would feel comfortable reporting an incident I felt was unethical.	4.16
I feel proud to tell people where I work/volunteer.	4.22



I have been trained on the use of the equipment at Aspen Fire.	4.22
Aspen Fire is providing adequate PPE [personal protective equipment] during the COVID crisis.	4.53

The Workplace Evaluation was conducted by Anne Rooney McCord and Jennifer Volmer of the ILG Strategic Services team.

# Anne Rooney McCord, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, PI Managing Partner and Chief Operations Officer

Anne has dedicated her career to building transformational work cultures that support human capital retention, operational excellence and drive results. She has over 20 years of Executive-level Human Resources experience in the high tech, start up and non-profit worlds and brings a people-centered vantage point to every project, for every client. Anne heads up ILG's Strategic Services driving cultural transformation and building concrete tools and mitigation strategies for the most difficult people challenges organizations face. Anne is passionate about her work for cities and towns in Colorado and is a proud native of Southern Colorado. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of Colorado at Boulder and holds certifications as a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) and SHRM Senior Certified Professional. anne@ilgdenver.com

# Jennifer Volmer, PHR, PI Chief Experience Officer

Jen's number one focus for ILG is to ensure our clients have a world class experience when working with ILG. She brings and extensive background in Human Resources Administration, Recruitment, and Marketing to differentiate the ILG experience. Prior to joining ILG, Jen worked for a Human Resources consulting firm supporting marketing and recruitment activities. A majority of her career was spent in the legal environment. Jen grew up in Colorado Springs and received a BA from West Texas A&M University, graduating cum laude. jen@ilgdenver.com