



Study of NYC firefighters shows effective teamwork, but scars of 9/11 linger

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NEW YORK -- New York City firefighters are able to create self-managing, tightly coordinated teams that enable them to do their jobs more quickly and effectively than other work groups, a new Cornell University study shows. However, the trauma of the Sept. 11, 2001, World Trade Center terrorist attacks continues to take its toll, with more depression, anxiety and stress still experienced by those who were there when the Twin Towers fell.

In November 2002, the Smithers Institute at Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) announced that it would undertake an independent study proposed by the UFA Health and Safety office, led by Philip McArdle. To ensure the independence of the study, it was fully funded by the Smithers Institute. The study focused on the working conditions and emotional health of New York City firefighters after Sept. 11. Researchers surveyed more than 2,000 firefighters and fire officers on such workplace issues as supervision, decision making, communications, job hazards, involvement in rescue efforts following the Sept. 11 attacks, post-traumatic stress, drinking, anxiety and depression.

On April 1 Samuel B. Bacharach, the McKelvey-Grant Professor of Labor Management Relations and director of the Smithers Institute, presented the preliminary findings to the leadership of the Uniformed Firefighters Association (UFA), Uniformed Fire Officers Association (UFOA) and the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) at the Cornell Club in New York City. The meeting included Fire Commissioner Nicholas Scopetta, UFOA President Peter Gorman, UFA President Steve Cassidy and many of their key associates. The three-hour session was a focused discussion about the work of firefighters. "It was truly a cooperative labor-management environment," said Bacharach.

In a joint statement, Cassidy and Gorman said: "This study is an unprecedented examination of the work of New York firefighters by a world-class team of researchers. This examination has provided a comprehensive study about the workplace, stress of firefighters and officers in a post-9/11 world. Its significance should help guide this job for decades to come."

Overall findings were similar for both firefighters and officers.

Sixty-two percent of the survey's participants were involved in Sept. 11 rescue and support efforts. Among those surveyed, firefighters who reported seeking help for emotional problems rose by 50 percent after the attacks. And firefighters who still suffer from post-traumatic stress from those events -- evidently many do -- report higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress and an increased risk for drinking problems, according to the study's results.

A preliminary finding reported at the meeting was that firefighters and officers are able to work in

self-managing and tightly coordinated teams to be effective firefighters. Within those teams, firefighters place a strong emphasis on open communication among all members, reflecting on and learning from mistakes, taking responsibility for one's actions and enhancing the performance of the group. "This is a unique self-managing work environment, one that private sector employers aspire to but seldom achieve," said Bacharach.

The study also showed that firefighters feel they should have more input into decision making that directly affects their immediate work experience: job safety, what equipment is provided, transfers and work rules. Many firefighters say they have very little voice in professional decisions at the department level.

Firefighters reported making up to 20 runs during a typical 24-hour shift. In addition to the inherent risks associated with firefighting, they said that they faced a variety of potential hazards on the job, including exposure to dangerous chemicals, communicable diseases and unsafe traffic conditions, the study revealed.

As in many other high-risk occupations, firefighters and fire officers have a work environment that can be conducive to heavy drinking, observed Bacharach. While the majority of those who responded did not have drinking problems, approximately 17 percent were at risk of having a moderate drinking problem, while 11 percent were at risk for a severe problem.

Bacharach viewed those findings broadly: "Everyone seems to be concerned with the use of illegal drugs in the workplace, but the primary drug of choice today is still alcohol. This study confirms among firefighters what we already know about drinking in America. The issue at hand throughout this country is *alcohol*." Those who are at moderate risk may benefit from a comprehensive workplace education and intervention program, while those with severe problems may benefit from alcoholism treatment, he said.

Bacharach's research team, which has done many workplace studies assessing people's emotional health, includes these Smithers Institute associates: Hilary Zelko, senior research associate; Peter Bamberger, visiting scholar; Associate Professor William Sonnenstuhl, ILR School; and Yasamin Miller, director of the Survey Research Institute, ILR School. Professor Martin Wells, chair of Cornell's Department of Biological Statistics and Computational Biology, served as an adviser on the project.

Zelko said: "The data is complex. There is much more to tease out here, but we thought it was a good time to highlight some of our preliminary findings for the unions and the department. We will continue to analyze the data over the next few months."

"I have been a firefighter for 30 years. That's who I am," said Gorman. "This data tells it very much like it is. Our brothers and sisters have gone through a very difficult time in the last few years, and this Cornell study will surely help me focus on how to help them."

"Every participant took the time to fill out this questionnaire," noted Bacharach. "My responsibility is to them. I hope that labor and management will use our findings to work in a cooperative way to enhance the work life and well-being of firefighters. This was our way of giving something back to the firefighters," said Bacharach, who lives in downtown Manhattan.

A report on the study will be released by the Smithers Institute at ILR on Friday, April 16.

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