



A healthy family culture in the fire service: tips for managers

The Netherlands Institute for Public Safety (NIPV) has conducted research to find out how managers and employees within the fire service view good non-operational leadership. Anyone interested in translating these insights into their own practical situation will find a number of relatable case studies below, as well as practical tips that will help managers get straight to work on this task.

The family culture is both a strength and a weakness

The fire service is characterised by a strong family culture, based on solidarity, trust and loyalty. Working together in challenging, high-risk situations fosters close bonds and a strong team spirit. This culture is further reinforced by the fact that firefighters spend a great deal of time together within their crew or station, for example during incidents, training evenings, fire-brigade activities and, in the case of professional firefighters, 24-hour shifts.

The family culture is one of the fire service's key strengths. People feel responsible for the work they do and for each other. This promotes ownership, initiative and resilience. In addition, unwritten rules and routines provide direction and guidance.

At the same time, this family culture can make it difficult to hold each other to account, discuss problems, implement changes and give new colleagues space. A healthy family culture requires managers who value solidarity, while also being clear about safety, expertise and professional conduct.

In-depth information, further development and reflection

If you would like to find out more about the family culture at the fire service, please read the research report (section 5.1.1) or the summary. If you are interested in reflecting on your own leadership together with your fellow managers, you can play the leadership game. Scan the QR code to go directly to the research report, summary and leadership game on nipv.nl/leiderschap.



Case study: A relaxed journey back to the station leads to a problem

After a call-out the crew is heading back to the station in relaxed mood. On the way one colleague starts climbing through the vehicle, damaging some equipment. The crew dismisses it as just a bit of fun. During the next training evening this 'bit of fun' is shared with other colleagues at the bar. The shift leader is listening in. He thinks a line has been crossed, but does not say anything immediately. One week later he discusses the incident with the crew. He explains that he has reported the matter to the cluster commander, as the damaged equipment has to be replaced. When asked how the damage had been caused, he gave an honest answer. Some members of the crew criticise the shift leader for 'airing their dirty laundry in public'. Personally, he sees his intervention as necessary to ensure the safety and professionalism of the crew.



Tips for the shift leader

- **Explain that it was more than 'just a bit of fun'**
Talk about it calmly: "I know it was meant as fun, but this crossed a line. Help me understand what happened."
- **Get the people involved to reflect on it themselves**
Question: "How will we explain this to the cluster commander?" Often people are well aware when something is not quite okay.
- **Explain the minimum standard expected within the crew**
Avoid lecturing and instead present it as the standard: there is a place for fun, but safety, equipment and professional conduct are not an afterthought.
- **Inform the line to cover yourself, but handle the matter on your own**
Keep to the facts: "This has happened, I am dealing with it like this and I wanted you to be aware of it." That way, you can avoid blowing things up into a bigger issue unnecessarily.

Case study: Not fitting in

A new member joins the crew, full of enthusiasm. However, she increasingly feels like an outsider. Within the crew everyone has known each other for years. Jokes refer to shared memories, information is shared informally and the new crew member is sometimes left out of the loop when arrangements are made. Things that feel perfectly natural for the crew are making it difficult for her to feel part of it. She gradually withdraws into her shell and the crew are getting the impression that 'she doesn't fit in with us.'



Tips for the shift leader

- **Make unwritten rules explicit**
Discuss what the crew means by 'fit in with us'. Are they talking about expertise and attitude or do existing routines and norms within the group also play a role?
- **Pay attention to little signs that a person is being excluded**
Not inviting someone, ignoring them, making jokes at their expense or only sharing information informally can have a huge impact on a person's sense of belonging.
- **Be mindful when choosing mentors (and work placement supervisors)**
Don't just opt for experience, but also, in particular, consider people who can offer support, explain things, bring people together and make adjustments with growth and self-confidence in mind.
- **Explain the standard expected within the crew**
A tightly knit crew can be proud of its own culture, but new people need to be given a fair chance to become part of that culture. It is OK to be critical, but it is not OK to exclude people.
- **Examine assumptions**
Once the impression that someone 'does not fit' has taken hold, it is difficult to shake it off. Discuss at an early stage to what extent this impression is based on concrete behaviour or whether perceptions are also playing a part.

Case study: Everyone knows except the line

At a fire station there have been concerns about one particular member of the crew for some time. Around the coffee table and in the group chat the same complaints keep cropping up about jokes that go too far and poor collaboration when responding to incidents. The shift leader initially tries to resolve the situation himself by talking to the crew member concerned. The situation escalates when one crew member ends up in a heated argument with the individual in question about what he considers to be an inappropriate joke. However, there are also some colleagues who actually found it 'funny'. The atmosphere at the station deteriorates and the crew splits into different camps. Following this development, the shift leader gets the cluster commander involved. The station is now expecting to receive support, but by this point the opportunity to make adjustments has largely passed.



Tips for the cluster commander

-  **Dig deeper on receiving initial reassurance**
If a shift leader says "it's no big deal", dig a little deeper: who is affected by it, how long has it been going on and what has been done up to now?
-  **Encourage shift leaders to share signs early**
Informing is not the same as escalating. Tell shift leaders that you want to know what is going on, to avoid any surprises later. Explain that discussing difficult situations is a strength rather than a weakness, and help the station commander to resolve situations before they get out of hand and can no longer be fixed. Think about possible solutions together.
-  **Be aware of any signs, but talk to the appropriate people within the line**
Discuss any signs that have emerged from conversations or text messages, or come from other fire stations, with the shift leader. That way, you can stay involved while ensuring the shift leader does not get bypassed.
-  **Help the shift leader prepare for the discussion**
Share your thoughts on the timing, wording, the people who should be present and the purpose of the discussion. Sometimes it will be enough to give the shift leader your backing, but on other occasions you will need to be there in person.

Publication details

These tips for leaders are based on the report 'Goed beheersmatig leiderschap bij de brandweer' ('Good non-operational leadership at the fire service') (NIPV, 2026). This report can be downloaded (in Dutch) from nipv.nl/leiderschap.