

REDUCING THE HEAT AT THE FIRE STATION KITCHEN TABLE

By Chief Sam DiGiovanna

There isn't a place more sacred in a fire station than the kitchen table. The place where we break bread with fellow firefighters, solve the department's problems, have coffee, tell the best stories and sometimes shed our biggest tears. We watch breaking news here, and armchair quarterback the efforts of neighboring agencies while they fight fire. We talk about personal and family issues as well as the personnel on the other shifts and at outlying stations.

So much happens at the kitchen table. It's also the gossip zone. And you know as well as I do: Firefighters LOVE to gossip!

We also have our fair share of conflict at the kitchen table. When you're a family, that's what happens. Conflict is inevitable. But as inevitable as it is, it is also manageable. By modifying our actions, we can turn conflict into productive dialogue. Let's call this "reducing the heat."

First, show some **humility**. Merriam-Webster defines humility as "freedom from pride or arrogance." Being humble means you behave in a modest and respectful way when others are around. If your words turn into personal insults, most people will shut down and discount whatever you are saying.

Second, **listen**. Make every effort to truly hear the other person's opinion, rather than assuming you understand their position. Too often we're just waiting for the next pause to hear ourselves speak. Listening to the other person's perspective will often cause you to reconsider yours. If your kitchen table conversations never result in a change of mind, you're probably not actually hearing the other person.

Third, avoid **binary thinking**—the trap of "us" versus "them." You know, B Shift vs. C Shift, labor vs. management. Antagonizing another person is one of the fastest ways to undermine your position and potentially come across as a person who is emotionally unsteady. Put out your outriggers and stabilize yourself.

Fourth, avoid using **dismissive words or phrases**. This manner of speaking impedes consensus. Watch [CNN](#) or [Fox News](#). The program participants will eventually make a dismissive statement about their opponent's opinion. This may be good for ratings; however, it is disrespectful, lacks civility and is a behavior no one should emulate.

Lastly, **lead with what you stand for**. If you cannot make your argument without belittling the other person or view, you may be inadequately versed on the issue or topic. Don't fall prey to intellectual laziness. Make sure you know what you're talking about!

Behaving with emotion, anger and insults reflects poorly on you and can undermine your credibility, branding you with a negative “tattoo” that stays with you for the rest of your career.

Remember the golden rule of treating others the way you want to be treated. If everyone did this, the kitchen table would be an even more sacred place!

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