

the **MANAGEMENT** **Pain Scale**

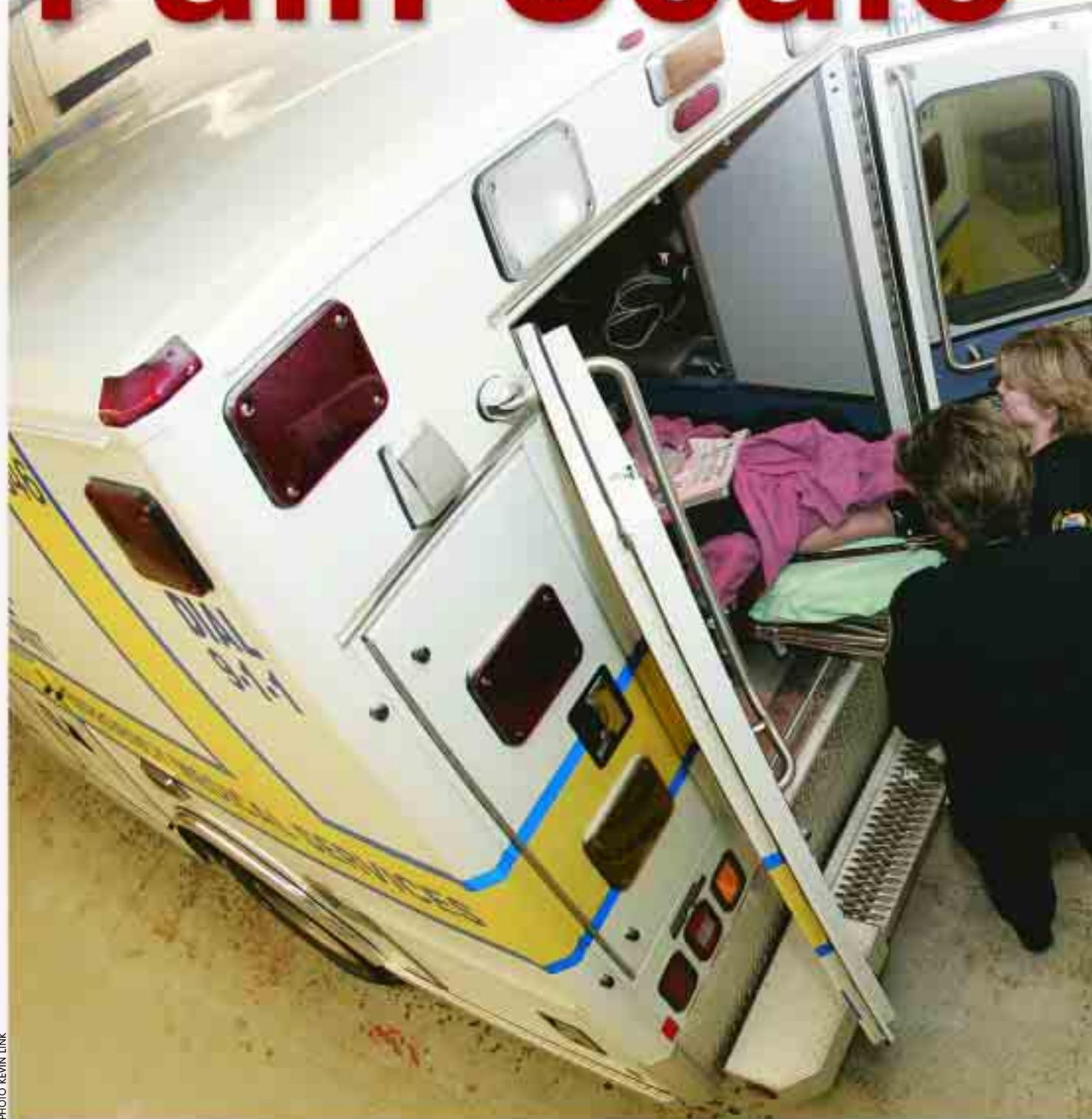


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A tool for measuring risk & resolving conflict

*There is so much good in the worst of us,
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it hardly behooves any of us
To talk about the rest of us.*

—Edward Wallis Hoch (1849–1925), *Marion Kansas Record*

By Guy H. Haskell, PhD, NREMT-P

There are few work environments more conducive to the production and dissemination of gossip and rumor than the EMS station or firehouse. Crews are thrust together for long shifts, often with significant periods of downtime. At shift change, we interact with the oncoming crew.

We have radios, pagers, cell phones and e-mail available 24 hours a day. Have you ever received a page from dispatch while working a cardiac arrest questioning your parentage and I.Q. because you asked for the house numbers to be repeated en route? With today's technology, you don't even have to wait to return to the station to get abuse.

Idle talk

Whoever gossips to you will gossip about you.

—Spanish Proverb

Gossip is a normal part of human social behavior. Despite its condemnation in the basic teachings of virtually every major world religion, it will never be eradicated from our daily interactions. It's a problem most of us can identify with, and, as we all know, excessive gossip can be devastating, to both the individual target and their organization. Most of us, at some time in our lives, have been caught in gossip's sticky web.

However, the differences between our attitudes toward gossip and our actual individual behavior are startling. Ask any of your colleagues whether they admire people who den-

igrate others behind their backs, refuse to address problems directly with those responsible or run to the boss with every minor complaint, and you'll receive a resounding and unanimous "No." But we also know that many of our colleagues almost always prefer complaining to others, particularly the boss, rather than openly confronting the source of their frustration.

As a society, we *claim* to adhere to the cowboy ethic: to admire honesty, forthrightness, initiative and self-reliance. In practice, however, we often abdicate our responsibility to address behaviors we find inappropriate or offensive. In fact, far from being cowboys, many people act more like a gaggle of cowardly kindergarten tattletales. As Will Rogers said, "The only time

people dislike gossip is when you gossip about them.”

There are many social explanations for these dynamics of group behavior. We suffer from a legal environment that requires us to be ever on the defensive. Training courses in “human resources” (a euphemism of Orwellian obfuscation) emphasize the documentation of every incident or infraction, no matter how trivial. CYA is *sine qua non*.

Hypersensitivity to the possibility of causing any employee or colleague

any offense or emotional, spiritual, physical or metaphysical disquiet has become the norm. This institutionalization of defensiveness is designed to protect people from workplace abuse. At the same time, however, it feeds a culture of blame and discontent, in which many prefer to complain about a coworker to their supervisor and expect them to correct the perceived problem rather than deal directly with that coworker.

This puts supervisors of all stripes—crew chiefs, field supervisors, shift

captains, administrative managers, chief paramedics—in a very difficult position. Both employees and employers have come to expect their supervisors to have an open-door policy, where anyone can come in and talk about anything (or anybody) at any time. No topic is to be considered too trivial to be discussed, no feeling to be discounted. This often leads to very unproductive workdays, in which a supervisor may have to accommodate a lengthy line of workers coming into their office to share perspectives on

TABLE 1: Management Pain Scale

RANK	CATEGORY
1	Personal issue: <i>No safety or policy implications</i>
2	Personal issue: <i>Possible policy implications</i>
3	Personal or professional issue: <i>Possible policy or safety implications</i>
4	Professional issue: <i>Policy or safety implications</i>
5	Professional issue: <i>Critical policy or safety implications</i>

TABLE 2: Management Pain Scale with Action Matrix

RANK	CATEGORY	ACTION TO BE TAKEN
1	Personal issue: <i>No safety or policy implications</i>	Urge parties to come to mutual resolution. Follow up if there’s no resolution by <u>agreed upon date</u> .
2	Personal issue: <i>Possible policy implications</i>	Urge parties to come to mutual resolution. Follow up if there’s no resolution by <u>agreed upon date</u> . Discuss possible policy implications. Follow up per HR policy.
3	Personal or professional issue: <i>Possible policy or safety implications</i>	Ensure no current threat to safety. If threat to safety found, upgrade severity score. Discuss issue with all parties involved. Determine proper severity score, and follow up per HR policy.
4	Professional issue: <i>Policy or safety implications</i>	Ensure no current threat to safety. If threat to safety found, upgrade severity score. Obtain statements from all parties involved. Follow up per HR policy.
5	Professional issue: <i>Critical policy or safety implications</i>	Ensure no current threat to safety. If threat to safety found, intervene immediately. Consult with superiors per institutional policy and act accordingly.



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If a problem occurs on scene that could have safety implications, it's at least a *three* on the Management Pain Scale.

everybody and everything.

Supervisors then begin feeling more like playground monitors than public safety professionals. They're required to walk a fine line between being perceived as unapproachable and unavailable for legitimate access and becoming the sounding board of choice for every petty squabble or hare-brained idea.

How, then, can we develop a system for handling these complaints without seeming arbitrary, disinterested or uncaring? How can we satisfy both the people we work for and the people who work for us? How can we be both sensitive and productive, compassionate and constructive?

Wouldn't it be nice to have a method to quickly and reliably determine whether an issue requires your extended attention, needs your personal intervention or can be handled by the parties involved? Even better, what about a tool that can help employees decide for

themselves whether an issue requires you to be involved? Enter the *Management Pain Scale*.

The MPS

We're all accustomed to acronyms, mnemonics and scales. Examples we use every day include RIT, AVPU, APGAR, OPQRST, pain scales and the Glasgow Coma Scale. We ask our cardiac patients, "On a scale of one to five (or 10, depending on your system)—one being minor pain and five being the worst pain you've ever experienced—how would you rate your pain?" So why not ask the EMT, paramedic or firefighter (or secretary or training officer, for that matter) who comes to you with a complaint, "On a scale of one to five—one being a minor annoyance and five being the most serious issue you've ever had to deal with—how would you rate this problem?"

Instead of the pain management scale you're used to using, consider imple-



menting a Management Pain Scale (MPS) to solve issues (see Table 1, p. 100). Quantifying the gravity of an issue on a numerical scale—having specific characteristics and implications for each score—can provide not only a course of action and level of response, but it will also help both you and the complainant define the issue in a common language and put it in a common perspective. In other words, the first step toward solving a problem is identifying it, defining it and categorizing it. Only then can we decide what to do with it.

You can alter the scale to suit your needs: Expand it to include more categories, change category names or definitions, and add details. You could also expand the scale with a third column of recommended or required actions to take. This, of course, would have to conform to your organization's specific protocol/policy, and should be cross-referenced to the appropriate institutional manual. I have included a generic sample that includes



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The MPA gives supervisors a fair, practical tool for assessing potential problems along with employees.

an action matrix (see Table 2, p. 100).

The MPS evolved from an interactive training session, titled *Conflict in the Firehouse: Strategies for Leadership*, that I helped develop with Capt. Robert C. Krause of Toledo (Ohio) Fire and Rescue and Capt. Diana Ruiz-Krause of the Toledo (Ohio) Police Department.¹ During this training session, we noted that when scenarios were presented, we naturally asked, “OK, so on a scale of one to five, how serious is this problem?” Here are a few examples of how this new tool can be useful to you and your organization.

Thin skin

An evil man sows strife; gossip separates the best of friends. —Proverbs 16:28
Tom is in your office every shift. He’s a hard worker, but subject to frequent mood swings. If he feels slighted, which happens almost daily, he goes off on his own and pouts the rest of the day. His shift mates joke about him behind his back and even antagonize him directly to set him off.

Today, after shift change, Tom tells you, “You’ve got to talk to Bill. I can’t stand it anymore. He thinks he’s the king of the shift. Last shift, I was watching TV, and he just walked in and changed the channel! He was shift leader so then he told us all which duties to perform. I always do the trash, but he told me to do

laundry instead. I’m tired of his crap.”

You whip out your handy MPS chart, hand it to Tom, and say, “OK, Tom. Why don’t you take a look at this rating scale and score this problem for me.”

Tom takes a look at it, turns a little red, and says, “Well, I guess it’s really only a *one*.”

You reply, “You’re right. And, as we discussed in our last shift meeting, the parties involved should handle a *one* independently. Is that OK with you? Why don’t you sit down and talk with Bill. If you two can’t come to a mutually satisfactory solution, please come talk to me same time next shift.”

You fill out a worksheet, summarizing the discussion and solution, mark a follow-up meeting date on your calendar, and file it in your category-one file. Next week, you don’t hear from Tom, so you track him down and ask him if everything has been resolved with Bill. He says, “Yeah, we’re cool, no worries.” You note this conversation on your worksheet and put it in the back of the file. Problem solved, a record kept in case it rekindles, but no unnecessary paperwork in anyone’s official file.

Font of wisdom

No one gossips about other people’s secret virtues. —Bertrand Russell
Judy has been around since before Eve. She knows everything about every-

The first step in resolving a personnel issue is to come to a common definition of what the problem is, who it affects, its involvement of personal or professional behavior, policies & procedures, & its level of seriousness (i.e., the level of threat it poses to your organization & its mission).

thing. She's a self-proclaimed specialist on human nature. This morning she catches you at the kitchen table after shift change and shares with you the following nugget of wisdom:

"John just isn't fitting in. He acts like he's too good for us, like it's a punishment to work here. He's so arrogant, and he intimidates a lot of people. I realize he's smart, maybe too smart for his own good. He shoves his education in our faces and argues about everything. He calls it a discussion, but I think he's just showing off. And he says when he makes lieutenant, he'll do a much better job than you."

You ask Judy if John comes to work late, out of uniform, doesn't perform his duties, is incompetent at his job, abuses his patients or drives dangerously. She answers "No" to all of these questions. So you hand her the old MPS and ask her to rate her complaint. Well, she has to admit, it's a *one*. Here, again, you suggest that if she has personal issues with John, she sit down and discuss them with him. That's the last you hear of it, and you notice that relations between Judy and John gradually improve.

The famous vanishing Joe

The world is full of willing people, some willing to work, the rest willing to let them. —Robert Frost

You walk out to the apparatus floor and hear a heated argument going on between Joe, Stan and Harry. Stan and Harry are chastising Joe for always disappearing when there are station chores to be done. Stan has Joe backed up against the wall, and they're nose to nose.

After separating the warring parties, you talk to them individually in your office. You ask Stan and Harry to rate the initial issue of Joe shirking his work. Both agree that, if it were true, it would merit a *two* or *three* on the MPS. Policy requires that Joe participate equally in station duties, and not participating

would be both a personal and a professional issue.

You then tell Stan and Harry that there's a further complication. Stan has confronted Joe physically. This brings the issue up to a definite *three*, and in some organizations maybe even a *four*. You now have a common definition and starting point to deal with the problems, both personally and institutionally.

Go Speed Racer, go!

There is more to life than increasing its speed. —Mahatma Gandhi

You're a paramedic detailed to an ALS ambulance today. Your partner, Susie, is driving to the first call of the day, reported as shortness of breath. She drives the rig in a manner that makes you wish you had brought a change of underwear and an emesis basin. When you mention this to another staff member later in the day, he says, "Yeah, she always drives like that." You decide to say something to Susie. She tells you, "Hey, you're downtown now, not at your vacation station. We do 14-plus calls each shift and don't have time to diddle around."

In trying to figure out what to do, you glance at the MPS chart posted on the bulletin board on the apparatus floor. You decide it's a *four*: definitely a purely professional issue, and with definite safety implications. She hasn't hit anything yet, so you're hesitant to give it a *five*. Your department has designated a specific course of action you're required to take on all issues rated *three* and up. Now your options are clear: Report it to the shift captain or be guilty of a policy violation yourself.

Alphabet battle

When there are two conflicting versions of a story, the wise course is to believe the one in which people appear at their worst. —H. Allen Smith

You're the battalion chief at Station 11,



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When fun turns into a fight and physical blows are exchanged, the issue becomes a *five* on the MPS.

and A shift and B shift are feuding. The strife has gone from teasing to escalating practical jokes. You talked to the shift captains about the problem last week, and they've agreed to take care of it. Guess they didn't get the message across. In the latest gag, A shift squirted talcum powder in the dash vents of Squad 2 and left the blower on high before B shift took over. The crew of Squad 2 was forced to respond to a serious medical call while covered in powder. Lieutenant Jeffries from Squad 2B confronts you when you return from a chiefs' meeting. According to the MPS, how would you rate this problem? What would you do?

Care for a pop?

A man may well bring a horse to the water, but he cannot make him drink. —John Haywood

You made lieutenant two years ago. Today, you're filling in on Engine 5. You're settling back in your chair, enjoying your third cup of coffee when there's a gentle knock on your office door. Firefighter Hawkins asks if he can have a moment of your time. He looks around furtively before entering. Hawkins is a good kid, a rookie just one year out of the academy. You were one of his instructors. He appears nervous and speaks in a hushed voice. Here's what he says to you.

If folks can objectively see that an issue that has them all wound up & loaded for bear is, in actuality, a personality issue with no real professional or policy implications, they may be more likely to deal with the issue themselves.

“Last shift, the shift officer, Captain Johnson, asked me if I wanted a pop. I said, ‘Sure, Cap.’ The captain motioned me into the day room where the rest of Ladder 5’s crew was sitting in front of the big-screen TV. He poured a drink from a large, glass pitcher into a plastic cup and said, ‘Here ya go!’ It was a margarita! I asked him if it had alcohol in it, and he said, ‘Welcome to Ladder 5’s little cocktail hour. We got that new boot coming in next week replacing Jarvis, so it’s time you moved up a notch.’ Lieutenant, I’m really torn up about this. What do I do?”

Any doubts about this one?

These examples demonstrate that it’s pretty easy to agree on the rating of issues. There may be some disagreement about the exact rating numbers, but most people come close to consensus. Keep in mind that the scale doesn’t tell you what to do about a problem falling under a given rating; those determinations involve policy decisions by your individual service. Most organizations recommend that individuals resolve issues rated *one* on the MPS and recommend significant discipline for those rated *five*, with more variations for MPS ratings *two* through *four*.

What’s in a name?

Human perception requires categorization. People need to give an experience or stimulus a name in order to perceive and deal with it effectively. By naming things, we classify them, and by classifying them, we can decide how to react to them because we already have an idea of how to react to other things in the same category, either through personal experience or reference to rules and regulations.

The first step in resolving a personnel issue is to come to a common definition of what the problem is, who it affects, its involvement of personal or professional behavior, policies and procedures, and its level of seriousness

(i.e., the level of threat it poses to your organization and its mission).

Summary

The Management Pain Scale is a tool, and as such, it can be honed, calibrated and adapted to fit specific needs, circumstances and organizations. Having a simple system that provides a common language to help categorize and define personnel issues and interpersonal conflict helps eliminate the divisive griping and gossip that can poison your crews or your organization and reduce your ability to serve the public effectively.

The MPS may actually have the power to change destructive behaviors. If folks can objectively see that an issue that has them all wound up and loaded for bear is, in actuality, a personality issue with no real professional or policy implications, they may be more likely to deal with the issue themselves or realize that the problem isn’t really much of a problem at all.

Human interaction and conflict is a matter of perspective. Try the MPS. You’ll find that a common perspective will help defuse conflict and improve the atmosphere in your organization. JEMS

Guy H. Haskell, PhD, NREMT-P, is director of Emergency Medical and Safety Services Consultants, and a paramedic with Bedford (Ind.) Regional Medical Center EMS. He received his PhD from Indiana University and is the author of the EMS Pearls of Wisdom Series with Jones and Bartlett. He has taught and practiced in Ohio, Georgia and Massachusetts, and currently lives in Bloomington, Indiana, with his family and “Maggie the Spider Poodle.” He can be contacted via e-mail at ghaskell@indiana.edu.

Reference

1. International Association of Fire Fighters Human Relations Conference, Santa Monica, Calif., Jan. 27, 2004.