

Video Surveillance In Fire Stations: Is It A Good Idea?

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Installation of video cameras has been proposed in the aftermath of a drug scandal at a fire station in New York. The firefighters' union is resisting the cameras. The situation raises questions about the usefulness of video surveillance in fire departments: Is it effective? Does it solve the problem? Does it violate privacy? What is the impact on morale?

In Middleton, N.Y., a former fire lieutenant was operating an illegal drug distribution ring out of the city's Central Firehouse. Reportedly two local volunteer firefighters were among the 29 defendants arrested in the case. Since the scandal came to light, the city has proposed installing surveillance cameras at the Central Firehouse, the Wallkill Street Station and the North Street Station.

The Issues Of Surveillance

“The situation highlights several issues. How effective is video surveillance in fire departments? Are cameras a waste of money and an intrusion?”

“This has nothing to do with [firefighters’] ability to do their jobs, and they should welcome the city addressing what happened, rather than fight it,” said Mayor Joseph DeStefano, as quoted in the *Middletown Times Herald-Record*. *“Middletown residents deserve transparency on this.”*

Plans are to position the cameras in the hallways and stairways, at the exterior and first floor of the buildings, and at the entrance and exit to the control room. Notably, cameras are not being installed near living quarters, bathrooms or kitchens. “Swipe-card” entrance technology is also being installed.

The situation highlights several issues. How effective is video surveillance in fire departments? Are cameras a waste of money and an intrusion? Do they put everyone under suspicion for the actions of a few?

Crime Deterrent Or Management Tool?

More broadly speaking, are video cameras a technology solution that seeks to address a wider management problem that requires a more management-driven solution?

In terms of privacy, a fire station is a public building and should not be subject to privacy concerns, especially in “public” areas such as entrances and exits, in equipment bays, storage or common areas. Signs should be installed to state that the premises are under surveillance. Living quarters and bathrooms are more private areas that should not be surveilled. In short, video surveillance is more effective as a crime deterrent than as a

management tool.



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The intent of cameras is another issue that can impact their acceptance. Are the cameras to be used for “real-time monitoring,” i.e., in a central location that is “spying” on employees to ensure they are doing their jobs? Micromanagement is never a good idea, and using technology just makes it worse. Such a scenario suggests a lack of employee trust and would likely undermine morale.

Addressing Problems And Restoring Trust

On the other hand, if the video is recorded and only reviewed in cases of theft or other misdeeds, there may be broader acceptance. In short, video surveillance is more effective as a crime deterrent than as a management tool.

An important question to ask before installing video is: What problem am I looking to address? It’s one thing to hold employees accountable, and another to make them think they are not trusted. One might think that using video to weed out a few “bad apples” makes sense, but they should also consider the negative impact



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on the good and loyal employees, who may be discouraged or feel as if their privacy has been invaded.

Installing video doesn’t seem like an extreme response in the case of a drug ring operating out of a fire house. After such an event, it’s important to restore a level of public trust in the organization. If video surveillance can help to restore that trust, it might be worth the

possible downside.

The same case might be made after a series of thefts, or if there is a question of employee safety.

In some other cases, the situation may be more of a management issue than a technical issue, and therefore might be addressed by a completely different set of tools that don't involve technology.

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