Sample Chapter

The Ordinary Hours

Why Your Best People Leave —
and the Small Things That Make Them Stay

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What follows is the complete first chapter of The Ordinary Hours. It begins at a whiteboard at three in the morning and ends with a number most organizations have never calculated.

Chapter 1

The Whiteboard at Three in the Morning

We were hiring plenty. We just weren't keeping them. The first time I realized we had a retention problem, it wasn't during a meeting or a budget review. It was standing in a cold apparatus bay at three in the morning, staring at a whiteboard covered in half-erased names while Jeff and I tried to figure out who could stay late so we could keep one more truck on the road.

This was Station 4—the Oak Street house, even though it hadn't been on Oak Street in twenty years. Some names outlast the buildings.

I was responsible for the whole battalion—four stations, eighty-some employees spread across the county. But Station 4 was my home house. The one I'd come up through. The one I ended up at when I couldn't sleep and drove to the station out of habit, which is how I found myself standing in the bay at three in the morning with a dry-erase marker and a problem I couldn't solve.

The building was quiet in that particular way stations get after midnight—fluorescent lights humming, coffee long since burned down to sludge. We had already called everyone we could think of. Someone had worked sixteen hours. Someone else had just finished three shifts in a row.

Another person had quit the week before.

We moved magnets around the board like we were solving a puzzle that never quite came together. Eventually someone agreed to stay. Someone always agrees. EMS runs on people saying yes when they probably should say no. The truck went back in service, and the problem was technically solved.

Jeff capped the marker and stared at the board a second longer than he needed to. "We just hired a whole class," he said. Not a complaint. Just tired.

He was right. We had graduated twelve people two months earlier. I could still picture them in the training room, eager and overwhelmed, scribbling notes about protocols and equipment. Now I tried to count how many of those names were still on the board.

I stopped at seven.

Driving home that night, the math didn't sit right. We had hired plenty of people that year. So why were we still short?

If you ask most EMS leaders what keeps them up at night, they'll say the same thing: hiring. Not enough applicants. Not enough classes. Not enough certified people coming through the pipeline. We talk about recruitment the way hospitals talk about beds or airlines talk about pilots. It sounds like a supply problem. If we could just get more bodies in the door, everything would stabilize.

For years, I believed that too. I ran academies.

Expanded classes. Built pipelines with schools and community partners. Every time we graduated another cohort, I felt the same short burst of relief.

Six months later we were short again.

Not because we hadn't hired. Because we hadn't kept them.

The departures rarely came with drama. No speeches or slammed doors. Just small administrative notes and empty lockers. A name missing from the schedule you assumed had moved to another shift. Someone mentioning that a partner had put in notice and you realizing you hadn't known they were thinking about it. A uniform turned in at the front desk. Individually none of it felt catastrophic. Collectively it never stopped.

We kept trying to solve it the only way we knew: more recruitment events, bigger classes, signing bonuses, ads promising flexible schedules and meaningful work. Each effort produced a short burst of relief followed by the same slow leak. Six months later we were back where we started, standing at the whiteboard at three in the morning, moving magnets around.

I ran into Ray a few days after that night shift. He was at the counter at Martindale's, the diner three blocks from the station where half the neighborhood ends up eventually. Ray had run County EMS for twenty-five years before he retired. Now he lived a few streets over, walked his dog past the station most mornings, and showed up at Martindale's often enough that the waitress didn't bother with a menu anymore.

I'd known him for years in the way you know people in a small community—enough to nod, enough to talk about the weather or the county budget. We'd never had a real conversation about the work. He was retired. I figured he was done thinking about it.

I sat down two stools over and ordered coffee. He glanced at me, then back at his paper.

"You look tired," he said.

"Long night."

"Short staffed?"

I laughed, but it came out flat. "Always."

He folded the paper and set it aside. "Hiring problem?"

"That's what everyone says."

"What do you say?"

I didn't answer right away. The question felt like a trap, though I couldn't say why. Finally I told him about the whiteboard, about the class we'd graduated two months earlier, about the five names already gone. He listened without interrupting, which is rarer than it should be.

When I finished, he took a sip of coffee and looked out the window for a moment. Then he asked a question I hadn't thought to ask myself.

"How many people did you hire last year?"

"Twenty-six," I said. I knew that number. We tracked it.

"How many of them are still there?"

I opened my mouth to answer and realized I didn't know. Not precisely. I could picture faces, but I couldn't count them. The number wasn't something we measured.

We tracked who came in. We didn't track who stayed.

Ray nodded like that was the answer he expected.

"That's where I'd start," he said.

I went back to the station that afternoon and pulled the files. It took longer than it should have—our records were scattered across systems, some digital, some paper, none of them designed to answer the question I was asking.

Twenty-six people hired. Fourteen still employed.

Twelve gone in less than a year.

I sat with that number for a while. Forty-six percent turnover. Nearly half the people we'd brought in had already walked out. We weren't building a workforce. We were running a revolving door.

I pulled the numbers for the other three stations that afternoon. Station 2 was similar. Station 6 was slightly better—they had a few senior people who seemed to hold the place together.

Station 7 stopped me cold.

The numbers were so bad I thought I'd pulled the wrong file. I hadn't. Station 7 had lost nearly every new hire it had received in the past year. The ones who didn't quit outright transferred to other stations the moment they had enough seniority to bid out. The roster was a revolving door inside a revolving door.

I called the Station 7 captain that evening. He sounded tired before I even asked the question.

"Yeah," he said. "We go through people. It's a tough house."

"Tougher than Station 4?"

A pause. "Different kind of tough."

He didn't elaborate. I didn't push. But that phrase—different kind of tough—stayed with me. Station 4 had hard calls. Station 7 had something else. I didn't understand what yet.

The problem wasn't Station 4. It was everywhere. I'd just never looked at all four houses side by side before.

The story we'd been telling ourselves—"we just can't hire enough"—suddenly looked different. We were hiring plenty. We just couldn't keep them. Every new face replaced someone who had quietly left a few months earlier. The roster churned but the headcount barely moved. We were treading water and calling it progress.

I called Ray that evening. He picked up on the third ring.

"Forty-six percent," I said.

A pause. "That's expensive."

"I haven't even calculated the cost."

"You should."

He wasn't wrong. I'd never added it up—the job postings, the background checks, the uniforms issued and never returned, the orientation hours, the overtime to cover the gaps. None of it showed up as a single line item.

It was spread across a dozen budget categories, invisible unless you went looking.

"There's something else," I said. "We have a mentorship program. Or at least we call it that. New hires shadow experienced people for a few weeks. They learn the trucks, the protocols, the documentation. By the time they're cleared, they can do the job."

"But?"

"But twelve of them still left."

Ray was quiet for a moment. "What do you think mentorship means?"

I started to answer—something about training, showing people the ropes—but I stopped. I realized I didn't have a clear definition. We used the word loosely. Shadowing was mentorship. Field training was mentorship. Riding third on a truck for a few shifts was mentorship. The word covered everything, which meant it didn't really describe anything.

"I'm not sure," I admitted.

"That's worth figuring out," Ray said. "There's a difference between teaching someone how to do the job and helping them feel like they belong in it. You can do the first one perfectly and still lose them."

I thought about the twelve who had left. Most of them had been competent. They'd cleared their field training, passed their checkoffs, written clean reports. If you evaluated them on performance, there wasn't much to fix.

And yet they were gone.

"How do I figure out which one we're actually doing?" I asked.

"Look at what happens after the training ends," Ray said. "When someone finishes their field time and they're out on their own—what's the experience like? Who checks on them? Who do they eat lunch with? Who do they ask when they're not sure about something?"

I didn't have answers to any of those questions.

"That's where it lives," Ray said. "Not in the classroom. Not in the checkoffs. In the ordinary hours when no one's formally teaching anything. That's when people decide whether they belong."

The next morning I stood in the bay at shift change and watched. Really watched, in a way I hadn't before.

The trucks were coming back, crews swapping out, the usual chaos of paperwork and restocking. I noticed which people talked to each other and which ones moved through the room like strangers. I noticed who lingered at the end of shift and who left immediately, keys already in hand. I noticed a new EMT—Sam, maybe three weeks in—hovering near the supply closet, not quite sure where to stand.

No one was being unkind to him. No one was excluding him. He just wasn't connected to anyone. He moved through the building like a guest who wasn't sure he'd been invited.

I thought about what Ray had said. That's when people decide whether they belong.

How many of the twelve who left had looked like Sam in their first months? How many of them had been technically trained and socially adrift? How many had eaten lunch alone, left the moment their shift ended, never found someone they could ask a dumb question

without feeling stupid?

We had been measuring competence. We hadn't been measuring connection.

We had been calling it mentorship. It wasn't.

That evening I sat at my kitchen table with a legal pad and tried to write down what we actually did when someone new started. Not what we said we did. What actually happened.

Day one: orientation. Paperwork, policies, a tour of the building. Day two through whenever: field training. Ride with an experienced provider, learn the trucks, run calls under supervision. Get corrected when you make mistakes.

Get signed off when you're competent.

Then what?

Then nothing, really. You were on the schedule. You worked with whoever you were assigned. Some days you had a regular partner. Some days you didn't. If you had questions, you figured out who to ask. If you struggled, you mostly struggled quietly. No one checked in unless there was a problem big enough to notice.

I wrote down two questions:

After field training ends, who is responsible for a new hire's experience?

If someone finished our "mentorship" and still felt like a stranger, would anyone notice?

I stared at those questions for a long time. The honest answer to both was "no one."

I met Ray at Martindale's again two days later. I brought the legal pad.

"We don't have a mentorship program," I said. "We have a training program. We teach people how to do tasks. We don't help them belong."

Ray stirred his coffee. "Most places are the same. It's not malicious. It's just not designed."

"So how do you design it?"

"First you have to see what's already happening. Not what you intend to happen—what actually happens. Who do new people end up next to? Who do they trust? Who makes the room feel safer? Some of that is already there. You're just not paying attention to it."

"And then?"

"Then you stop leaving it to chance."

He pulled a napkin from the dispenser and borrowed my pen. He drew a rough diagram—circles representing people, lines connecting some of them.

"Every organization has a relational structure," he said. "Not the org chart. The actual connections. Who knows who. Who trusts who. Who a new person could go to with a real question." He tapped the diagram. "If you mapped yours, what would it look like? And where would your new hires be on it?"

I pictured Sam, standing alone by the supply closet. If I drew the map, he'd be a circle with no lines.

"Probably floating on the edge," I said.

Ray nodded. "That's the gap. You're bringing people in and hoping they find their way to the center. Some do. Most don't. They drift near the edge for a few months, never quite connect, and eventually they leave." He pushed the napkin toward me. "You can't fix it until you see it."

I went back to the station with a different kind of question. Not "who did we hire" or "who did we lose," but something harder to answer: who's actually connected to whom?

I spent a week just watching. I noticed that certain people always seemed to have someone nearby—same faces at the table, same partners on the truck, easy conversation that picked up mid-sentence. Others moved through the building alone. They weren't excluded. They just weren't included. The difference was subtle unless you were looking for it.

I started sketching the map Ray had described. Names in circles. Lines where real relationships existed. Not "works together sometimes"—actually connected. Actually talks. Actually trusts.

When I finished, the picture was uncomfortable. There were clusters of deeply connected people at the center.

And then there were the new hires, scattered around the edges with one or two lines at most. Some with none.

Sam had one connection: his field training officer, and that relationship was already fading now that training was over.

Another new EMT—hired the same week as Sam—had zero.

I looked at that map and thought about the twelve who had left. I would have bet money that most of them had looked exactly like this in their first few months. Floating.

Unconnected. Present but not belonging.

We hadn't lost them because they couldn't do the job.

We'd lost them because no one had tethered them to the place.

I called Ray that night.

"I did the map," I said. "It's bad."

"Bad how?"

"New people are disconnected. A few have one line, maybe two. Mostly to whoever trained them. Once training ends, they're on their own."

"And the ones who stayed long-term?"

I looked at the map again. The experienced providers— the ones who'd been here five years, ten years—were webbed together, multiple connections each. They had history. They had people who would notice if they weren't there.

"They're in the center," I said. "But they didn't start there. They must have found their way in eventually."

"Some did. Some got lucky. How many tried and didn't make it?"

I thought about the forty-six percent. The twelve names.

"Probably most of them."

Ray let that sit for a moment. Then he said, "Now you know what you're actually solving. Not a hiring problem. Not a training problem. A connection problem. The question is whether you can build a bridge instead of hoping people swim."

I looked at the map again. At Sam's single line, already fading.

"Where do I start?"

"With one person," Ray said. "Don't try to fix the whole system. Find one new hire who's drifting and figure out how to connect them. Learn from that. Then do it again."

I knew which name I'd start with. That night at the whiteboard, I didn't have answers. I had a list of names and a feeling I couldn't shake. So I did what Ray would have done first. I ran the math.

FROM THE STATION -- WHAT TURNOVER ACTUALLY COSTS

Turnover isn't an HR issue---it's an operational expense.

For every person who leaves, calculate:

- *Recruitment: hiring, screening, onboarding (\$2--5K)*
- *Training: academy, FTO, non-productive hours (200--400+ hours)*
- *Lost productivity: overtime, vacancies, short staffing*
- *Institutional knowledge: relationships, system familiarity, efficiency*
- *Cultural impact: morale, disengagement, ripple effects*

Add it up for your last three departures.\ That's what you spent to not keep people.

Then ask:

- *What did those departures actually cost?*
- *What would it have cost to retain even one?*

Most agencies track hires. Few track loss.

When you run the numbers, replacement often exceeds your training budget. That's not a people problem---it's a financial one.

The gap between replacement cost and retention investment is your case.

The story continues with Derek, who eats lunch alone and leaves after eight weeks. With Maria, who has gravity no one assigned. With Station 7, where seventy-one percent turnover has a name.

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