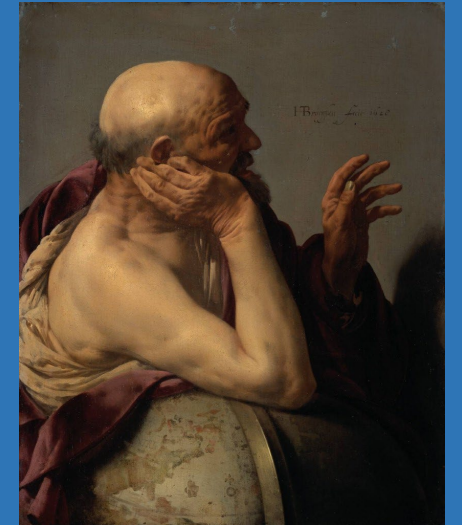


# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



Danny Kistner  
DTK Consulting, LLC

# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

This effort is dedicated to those firefighters who have lost their life or were disabled in the line of duty, are battling cancer, suicidal ideation, or some other occupational related burden resulting from exposures only firefighters understand. May we never accept a culture of preventable injury and death as inevitable, and may we never rest until the culture is equitable, inclusive, and appropriate for all firefighters. Danny Kistner, adapted from *The Fire*

*Service Culture Change Dilemma: A Liberal Studies Dissertation, SMU 2023*



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

*Danny's Doctrines for Discovery:*

- Be teachable.
- Be introspective.
- Be non-judgmental.
- Be flexible, absolutes do not exist.
- Be forever curious.



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## What is Culture?

“(Culture is) the accumulated shared learning of (a) group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems...The accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioral norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness.”

“...these elements, learned early and composing the cultural DNA, are the source of the group’s stability and cannot be changed without changing the group altogether.”

- Edgar Shein, 2017



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

What is identity? What is persona?

I define identity as the set of traits and characteristics firefighters share. Persona is an ego archetype, though often used synonymously with identity, and refers to the image firefighters project for the benefit of everyone else. The persona enjoys public recognition and social benefits from identifying with a dangerous, glamorous, and at times romantic occupation.



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## Adaptive Leadership

**Adaptive leadership**: deliberate action by a leader(s) to facilitate change in the behavior of others which cannot be simply dictated. Adaptive leadership does not rely on technical solutions but rather requires a new way of thinking.

**Adaptive leader**: any leader, formal or informal, who attempts to alter the status quo for the betterment of an organization or the fire service.

\*Adaptive leadership comes with personal risk that is not always fully understood or appreciated.\*

\*For the American Fire Service, Adaptive Leadership and Culture Change are inter-related and co-dependent



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## A Quandary for Adaptive Leadership

Culture change is difficult for any organization, perhaps amplified for public safety agencies. Behaviors and attitudes may be influenced not only by identity and organizational culture, but also by the persona archetype. According to Carl Jung, the persona archetype can be likened to a series of masks used to project a particular image to a specific audience. Public safety organizations such as the fire service have institutionalized behaviors and attitudes that are difficult to modify, partly because these behaviors and attitudes may have been successful in the past and partly because of ego. Behaviors and attitudes are defended despite adaptive attempts to influence the status quo. Challengers to the status quo may consequently be discredited, ridiculed, or even allegorically attacked. Challengers are not necessarily those with positional authority but may be any individual with a view counter to the pervasive identity and culture of the organization. To maintain personal safety, a persona may be adopted to project an image to colleagues and another to the public that is consistent with the existing culture. Behaviors inconsistent with progressive industry best practice may therefore persist. Danny Kistner, 2023





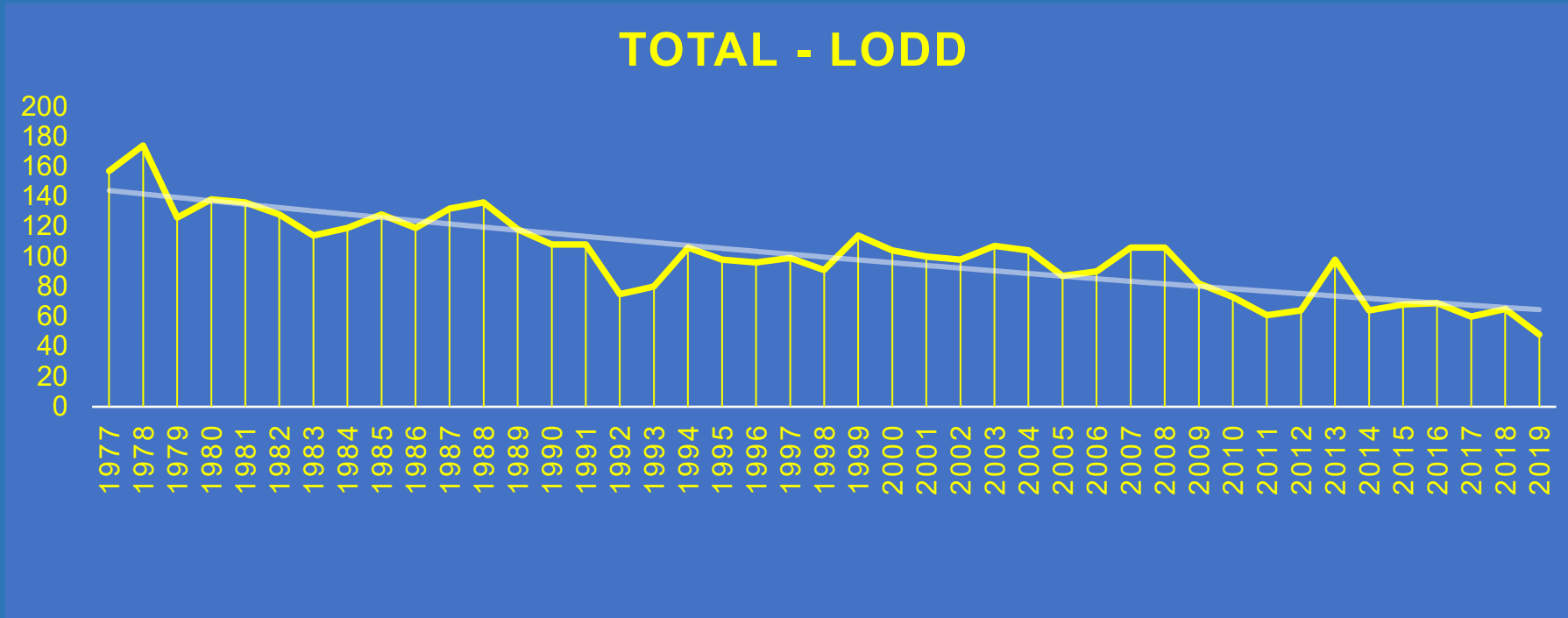
# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

Adaptive statements that were transformative:

- “I don’t want to raise our children alone!” Mary C. Kistner
- “Leadership failed my son.” Kathy Hedrick

# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

Why are we still talking about Culture Change?



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

Why are we still talking about Culture Change?

Year	Conventional Reporting	Cancer	Suicide	Covid
2019	48	350+	119	-
2020	62	400+	127	78
2021	70	80+	89	89
2022	96	348	80	80



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## Why are we still talking about Culture Change?

“...the identity of the fire service as an occupation of brave, courageous and self-sacrificing individuals is so strong that firefighters deny the magnitude of the problem or rationalize what would objectively be considered unacceptable behavior.” Dr. William Pessemier, 2018 (Littleton, CO Fire Chief, ret.)

In this context, safer practices and firefighter safety includes an array of behaviors not limited solely to the fireground. Safety and safe practices are all encompassing and, in addition to fireground safety, include:

**Psychological safety** – protecting all members from all forms of harassment and micro aggressions.

**Inclusion** – embracing cultural differences.

**Equity** – ensure the success of all members.



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## From the Headlines

“Women at Los Angeles Fire Dept. say harassment and retaliation keep them quiet about abuse” (Libby Denkman, 10-15-2021).

“New Jersey FF charged with hate crime for noose.” (retrieved 2024)

“Wrongful death suit against WV Fire Company for Fatal Accident in Ohio.” (retrieved 2024)

“Charleston FF Claims hazing prank cost him his hearing.” (retrieved 2024)



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

From the Research

- Jahnke SA, Haddock CK, Jitnarin N, Kaipust CM, Hollerbach BS, Poston WSC. (2019). The Prevalence and Health Impacts of Frequent Work Discrimination and Harassment among Women Firefighters in the US Fire Service. *Biomed Res Int*. 2019 Mar 20;2019:6740207. doi: 10.1155/2019/6740207. PMID: 31016195; PMCID: PMC6446094.
- Jahnke, S. A., Poston, W. S., Jitnarin, N., & Haddock, C. K. (2012). Health concerns of the U. S. fire service: perspectives from the firehouse. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 27(2), 111-118. doi 10.4278/ajhp.110311-QUAL-109
- Rosca, A. C., Burtaverde, V., Dan, C. I., Mateizer, A., Petrancu., C. R., Iriza, A. I., & Ene, C. A. (2021). The dark triad traits of firefighters and risk-taking at work. The mediating role of altruism, honesty, and courage. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(5983). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18115983>
- Zippia. (2023). *Fire chief demographics and statistics in the U.S.* Zippia. <https://www.zippia.com/fire-chief-jobs/demographics/>



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma defined:

Dilemma – choice between 2 less than desirable alternatives. (adapted from the Etymology Dictionary, Greek: di – ‘2’, and lemma ‘to take’)

The recurring quandary between firefighter's desire to maintain a long-established way of life, as contrasted by the necessity for change.

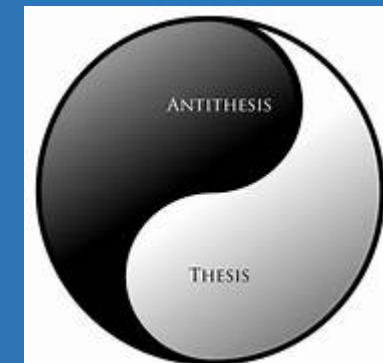
Alt. 1 – maintain status quo

Alt. 2 – exercise adaptive leadership at personal risk

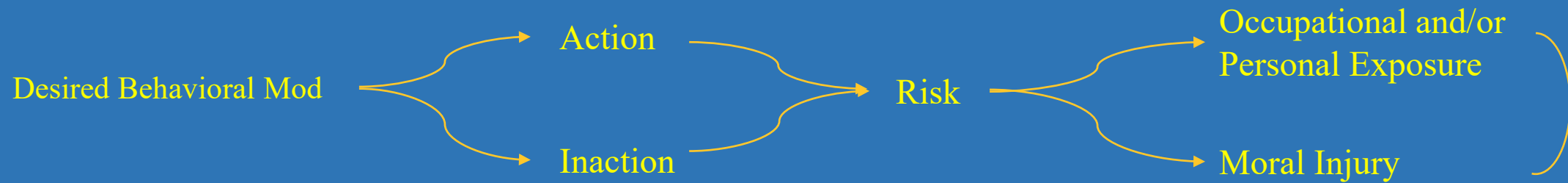
identity → ego, persona archetype



way of life = culture



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



\*Level of Risk = commensurate to the perceived threat.



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## Progress Dashboard

- Benchmark conformance to industry best practice as related to high-risk behaviors (HRB) and self-sacrificing attitudes (SSA).
- Identify correlations, if any, between demographic and experiential variables with tendencies toward HRB and SSA.
- Identify a path for future research to improve firefighter safety, health, and wellness.



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## Generally Accepted Examples of High-Risk Behaviors (HRB)

- Failure to appropriately utilize self-contained breathing apparatus.
- Failure to appropriately assess conditions prior to vertical ventilation.
- Failure to appropriately assess conditions prior to search of abandoned or dilapidated structures.
- Failure to appropriately incorporate personal responsibility with safety, health, and survival.



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## Generally Accepted Examples of Self-Sacrificing Attitudes (SSA)

- “I will seek a more dangerous occupation if the fire service becomes safer.”
- “I take unacceptable risk.”
- “I receive satisfaction from sacrificing for others.”
- “I place the role of Firefighter over that of family and loved ones.”



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## Respondent Profile

2023 (n=496)

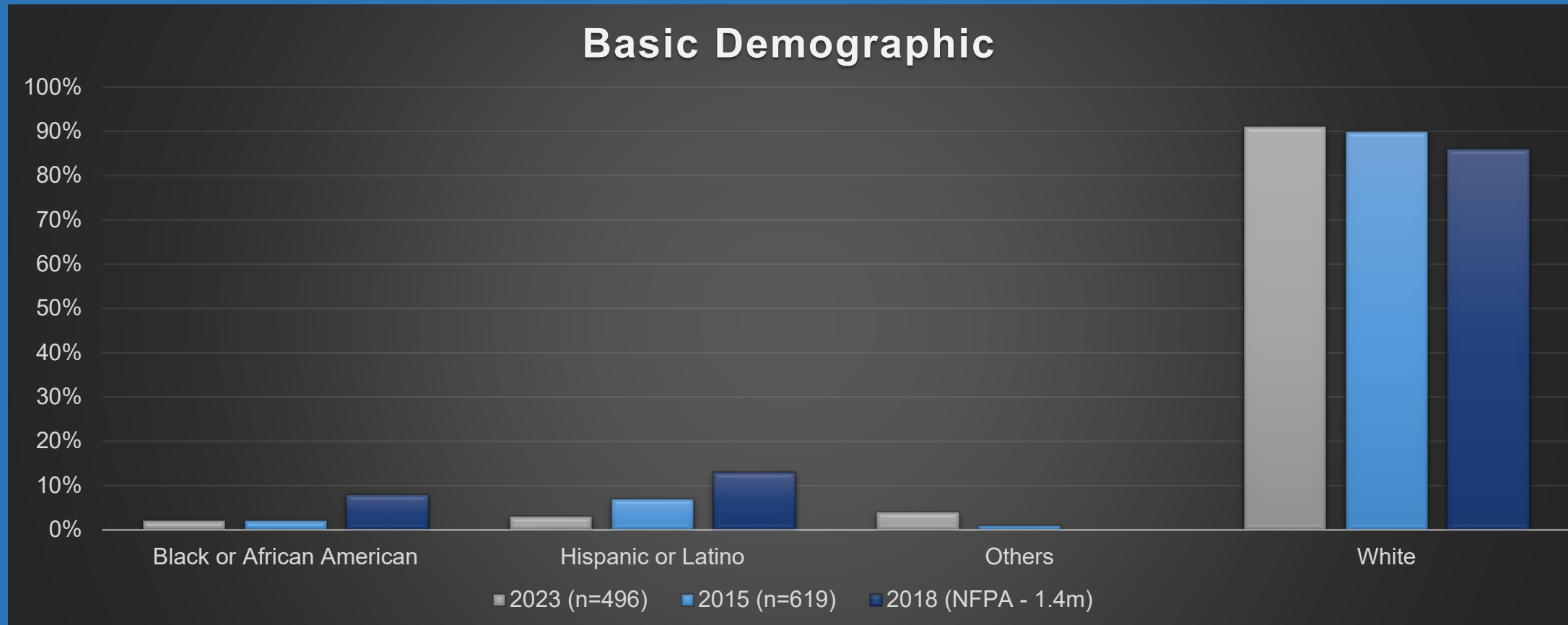
- Majority chief officer.
- Majority over 20 years of service.
- Majority from urban, suburban, and career departments.
- Significant number with advanced degrees.
- Almost exclusively identify as white male.
- Majority from FEMA Region VI.

2014 (n=617)

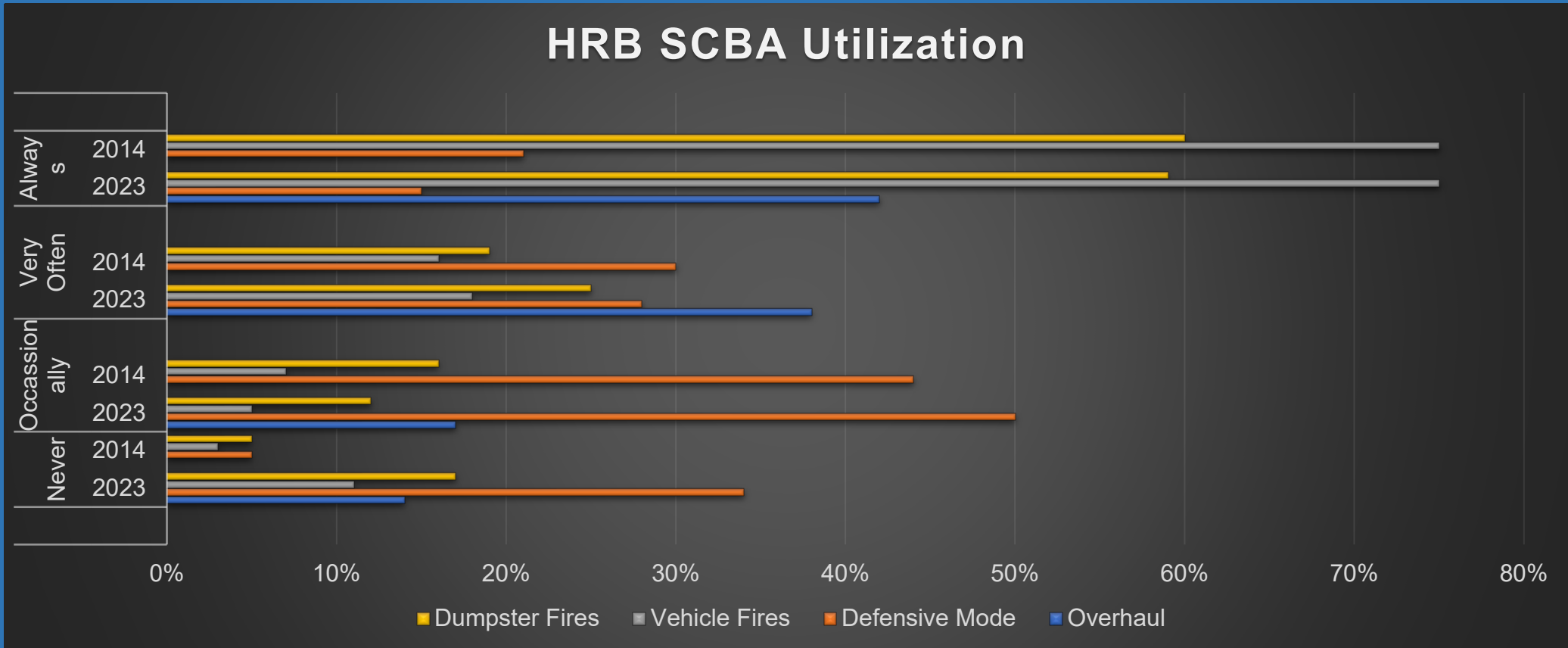
- Over ½ of respondents were company officer, driver/operator, or firefighter.
- Majority over 20 years of service.
- Majority from urban, suburban, career departments.
- Majority with some college.
- Almost exclusively identify as white male.
- Majority from FEMA Region VI.



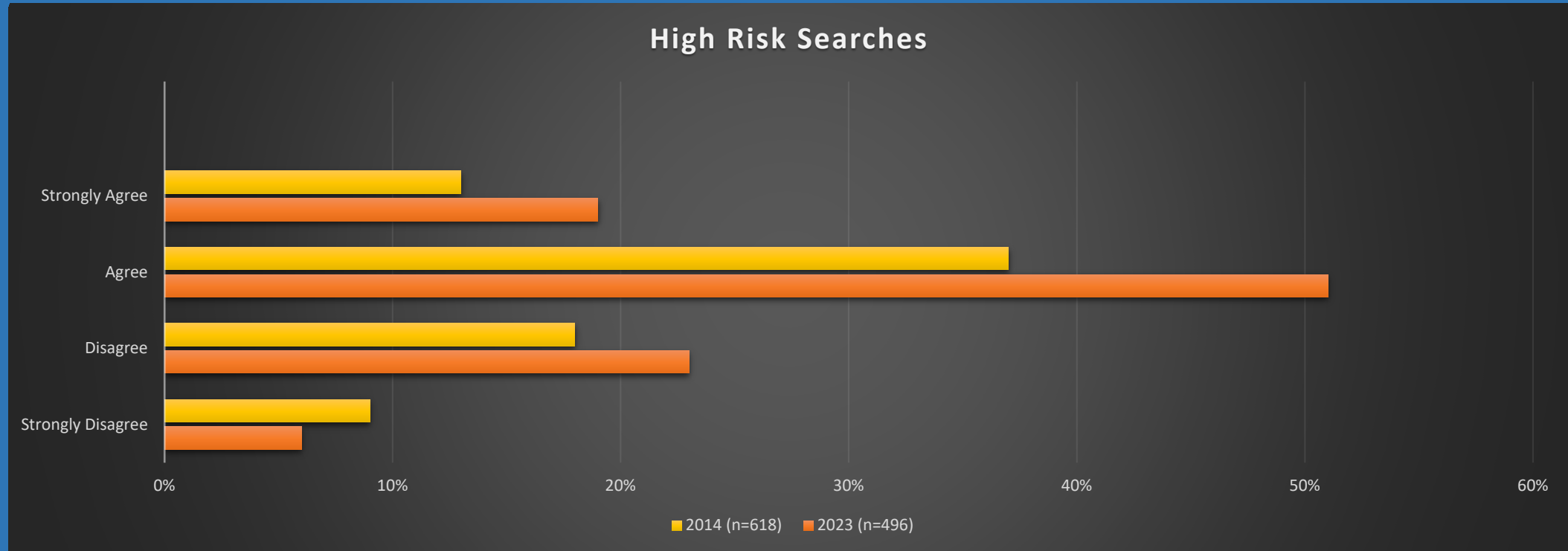
# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



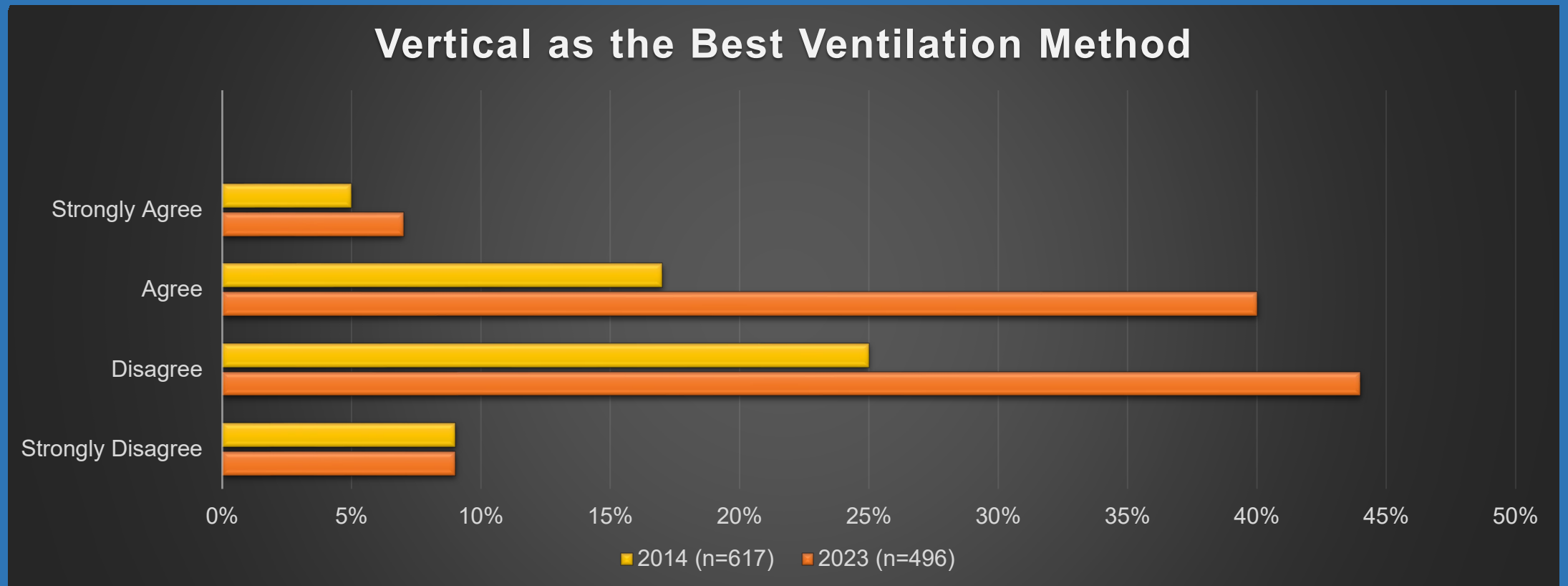
# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

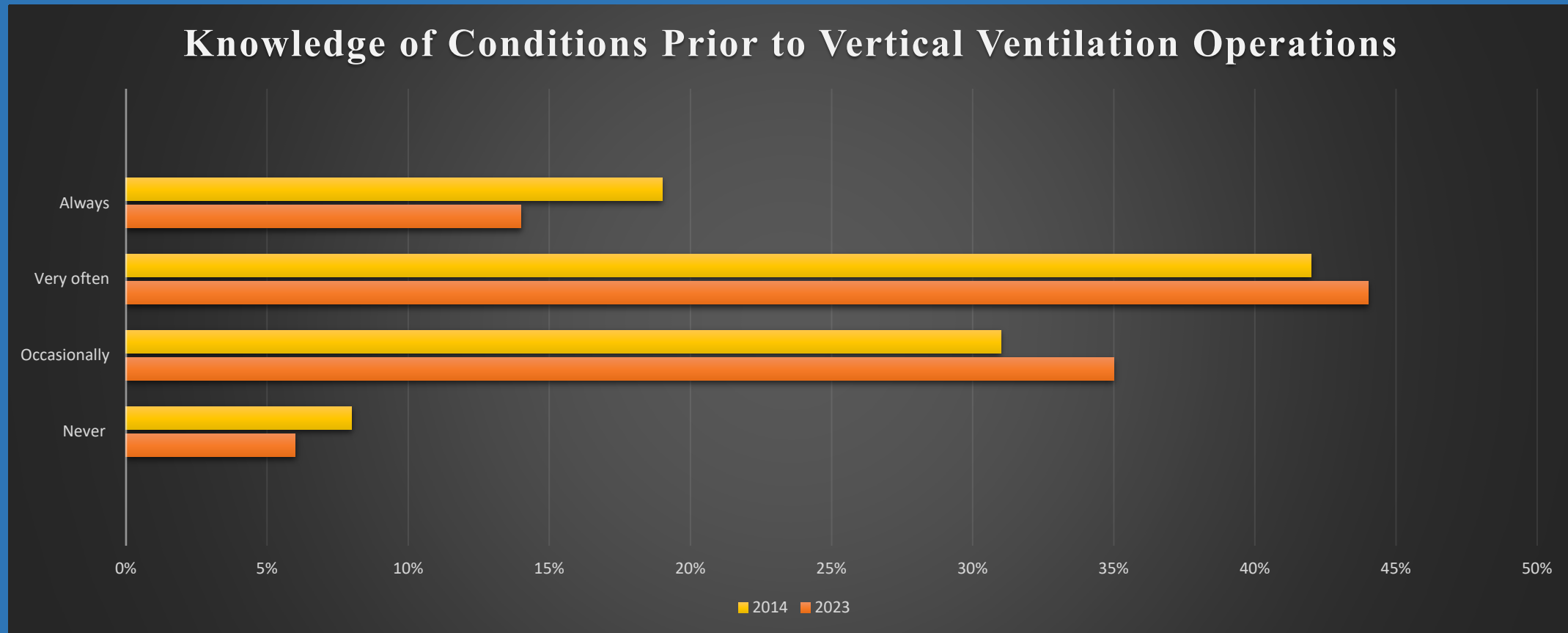


# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

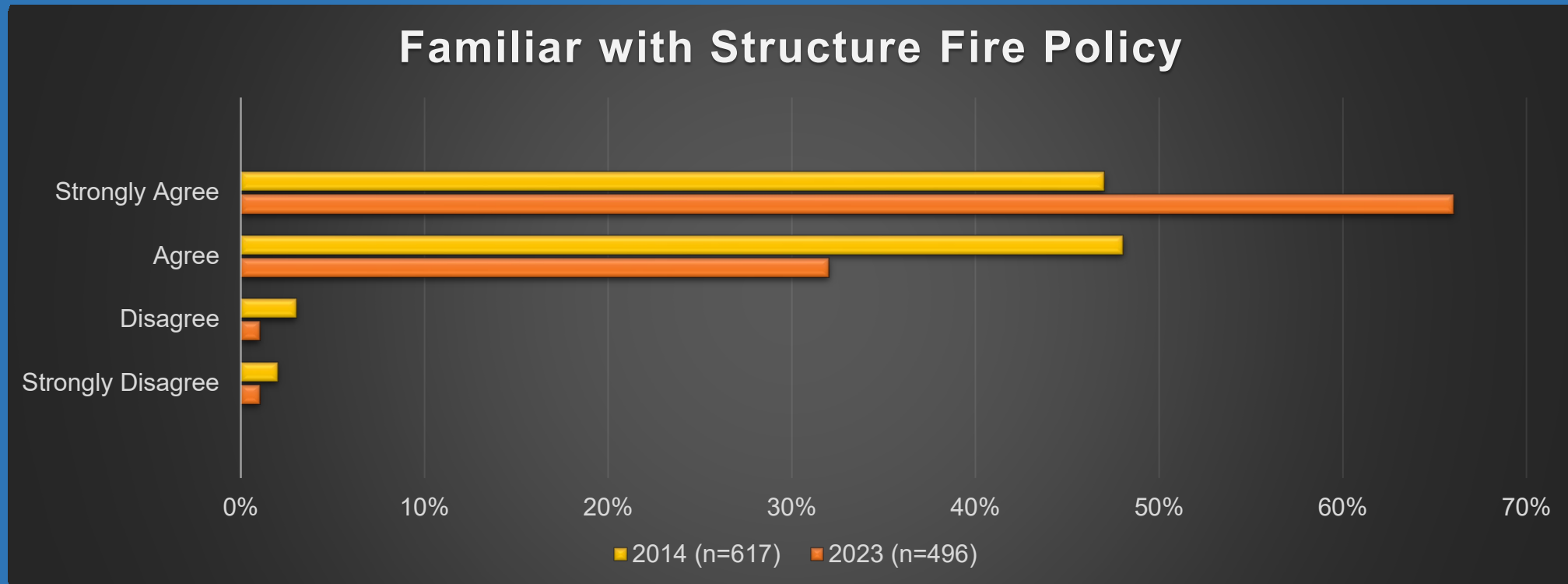




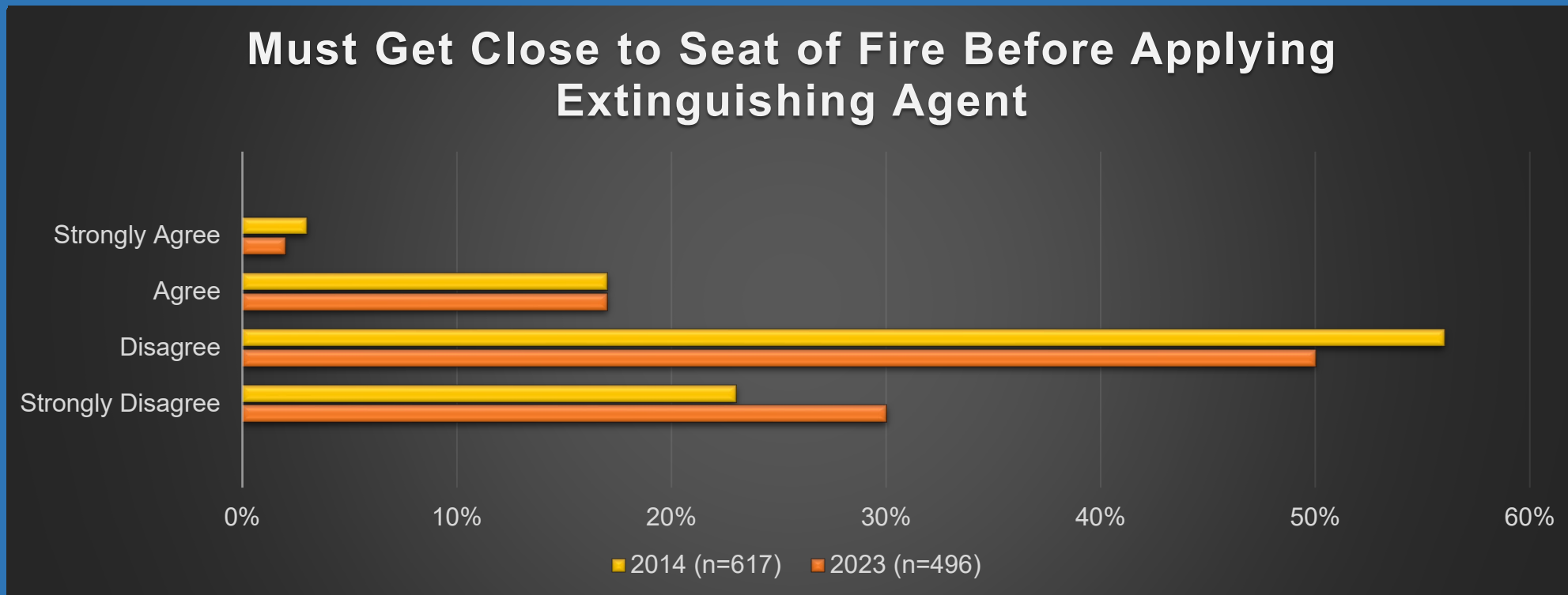
# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



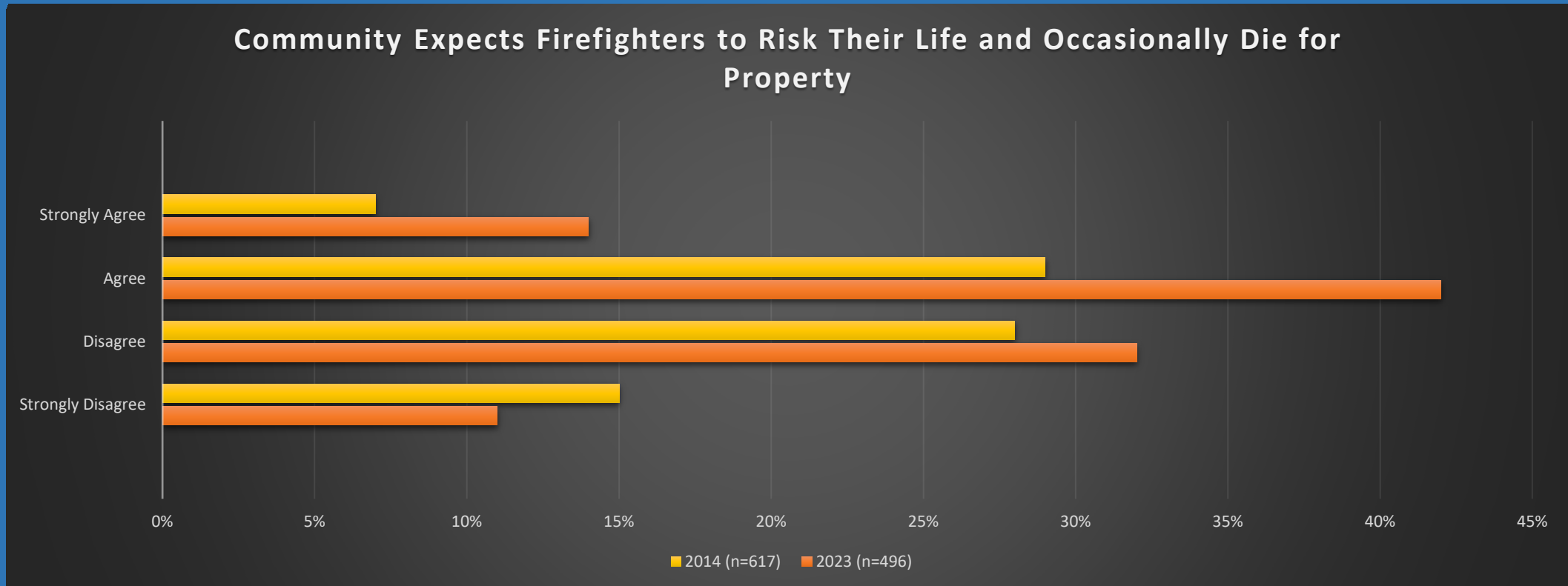
# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## Limitations and Bias

1. Participants were primarily Caucasian or white, male chief officers with over 20 years experience from urban & suburban, career fire departments. Only 61 (12%) of participants were rank of firefighter and 21 (4%) were driver/operator (engineer).
2. Distribution networks were initially among professional circles which should be well versed in HRB and SSB. The intent was for snowball methodology to randomize responses, however, that did not occur.
3. Assumptions were made that participants were truthful in their responses, though the shadow of the persona archetype suggests firefighters may defend the persona archetype commensurate with the threat. Responses may have been slanted to what the participant believed the researcher wanted.
4. By design, the qualitative interpretation used auto-phenomenology and thus an inherent bias exists. However, personal lived experiences are a valued research tool used to better understand the subject studied.



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma

## Conclusions

1. The firefighter persona archetype is likely to remain, given fire service history.
2. While the quantitative data may be useful for modeling, associations cannot be made against the nation's fire service due to the non-random nature of the participants. The data does demonstrate among the cohort sample, however, that a continued divide among specific HRB and SSB remain.
3. Culture change is necessary, however is not likely to change with significance until the demographic of the fire service becomes more inclusive. The value of such diversity and inclusion is indefinable.
4. For as much good as the fire service provides, a shadow exists that protects the resilience of the persona archetype. Firefighters may not share truthful experiences to help make meaningful change without affording protections with anonymity, and even then, it is questionable. The fire service still struggles with misogyny, bullying, harassment, and racism.



# The Fire Service Culture Change Dilemma



Danny Kistner  
Fire Chief (ret.)  
DTK Consulting, LLC  
[www.dtkistnerconsulting.com](http://www.dtkistnerconsulting.com)  
[dtkistnerconsulting@gmail.com](mailto:dtkistnerconsulting@gmail.com)  
[linkedin.com/in/daniel-t-kistner](https://linkedin.com/in/daniel-t-kistner)

