

Initiative

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Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety; incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability and personal responsibility.

Executive Summary

Almost by definition, the unique nature and mission of fire departments yield unique and complex organizational cultures. Dr. Edgar H. Schein, probably the most referenced authority on the subject, defines organizational culture as “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way you perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” Schein and others have further identified three basic levels of organizational culture: behaviors, values, and, at the deepest cultural level, assumptions and beliefs.

Safety is a primary value for any fire organization. Its importance, dimensionality, and scope justify its treatment as a culture unto itself. The values that a fire department and its members ascribe to safety, their manifested safe or unsafe behaviors, and their fundamental assumptions and beliefs about safety are critical determinants in the safe outcome of emergency responses. The 1st Initiative asks us to explore the values, behaviors, and assumptions of our departments in order to bring about a higher commitment to safety.

Fire Department Safety Culture

Nationwide, the firefighter's personal protective ensemble, apparatus and equipment technology, available training and safety resources, and safety standards are at the highest, safest levels ever experienced in fire service history. However, United States Fire Administration statistics reveal a ten-year plateau of more than 100 firefighter line-of-duty deaths and approximately 10,000 serious line-of-duty injuries each year. To worsen matters, firefighters are being injured and killed at fires at rates close to those of 20 years ago. Case analyses show that most of these of these line-of-duty deaths and injuries are clearly preventable. Within the context of Everyone Goes Home and the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives, which offer a holistic, multi-dimensional approach to solving the firefighter line-of-duty death problem, no advocacy point carries more importance and potential than the need to change from within—that is, the need for fire departments and the fire service as a whole to change its safety culture.

More than 200 fire service leaders who participated in the 2004 Firefighter Life Safety Summit in Tampa, Florida, recognized this to be true. Safety culture change is at the very heart of the firefighter life safety movement, central to each of the 16 Life Safety Initiatives. Experience has shown that a prescriptive approach to firefighter safety can only take us so far in solving the line-of-duty death and injury problem. Clearly, the fire service must change its attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward safety if progress to be made. The importance of changing the safety culture cannot be overemphasized.

Recommendation # 1: *Culture is something we can influence daily by making decisions in the right direction. Try, as you move through a day in the fire service, to identify behaviors and artifacts in our world which are clearly influenced by cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. The red truck? The words we use to describe an emergency? The way we divide labor? Feelings about leadership? The stories we tell? Do you know your organization's values about safety? Once we understand the influence culture has on our values, beliefs and behaviors about safety, the easier it will be to pull apart the strands of behaviors that are supporting unsafe practices.*

Discussion

The concept of organizational culture change may not come easily to many

firefighters who are not only resistant to change but who may perceive it as an esoteric “management flavor of the month” or an attack on fire service traditions. Most challenging for those who advocate the safety culture change, however, is its unavoidable collision with the fire department’s heroic identity. For a fire service that, for 300 years, has evolved, enabled, and nurtured the belief that “acceptable” losses are a tragic but inevitable part of the job of being America’s heroes, a new safety culture will be seen, for some, as an unwelcome change. Those who understand that fundamental changes in attitudes and beliefs must occur if line-of-duty deaths (and by extension, serious line-of-duty injuries) are to be reduced must answer the questions, How (or can) the fire department create a new safety culture and still be the fire department? And, Can we be safe and courageous at the same time?

This apparent paradox becomes less severe when we consider that the vast majority of firefighter line-of-duty deaths do not occur in conditions that call directly for heroic risk-taking to save a life. Annual statistics clearly show that one-quarter of firefighter line-of-duty deaths each year occur while responding to or returning from calls in either fire department or private vehicles and about half of all firefighter line-of-duty deaths each year occur from heart attacks, most of which can be attributed to lack of fitness for the physical demands of the occupation. Eliminating the majority of our annual deaths, therefore, requires not a reconciliation of safety and mission but, rather, our willingness—and courage—to change organizational cultures that create a breeding ground for preventable tragedies.

Recommendation #2: *Practice understanding how culture influences outcomes in the typical line-of-duty death scenario. Read a handful of NIOSH Firefighter Fatality Investigation reports and try to understand the cultural forces which may have led to the LODD under discussion. Was the apparatus-related fatality a result of reckless speeding, or failure to wear seatbelts—does the use or non-use of seat belts reflect organizational values? Did the rookie die in a training accident because no one was watching her? Did the forty-two year old volunteer firefighter die of coronary heart disease because he never received an appropriate physical with stress test? To read some of these studies, go to the NIOSH website at www.cdc.gov/niosh/fire .*

Studies in behavioral science in the workplace reveal mathematical relationships among the frequencies unsafe behaviors, injuries, and deaths. Simply, the repetition of unsafe acts sets the stage for, and increases the likelihood of, a catastrophe. Conversely, almost every serious injury event is preceded by hundreds of unsafe behaviors which led to it. Unsafe behaviors usually do not have immediate negative outcomes (we “get away with it,” thereby reinforcing further unsafe behaviors) but they put the organization on the inevitable path to serious injuries and, possibly, a line-of-duty death. As such, even the most controllable firefighter line-of-duty deaths require organizational interventions at the fundamental level at which unsafe behaviors are practiced, repeated, reinforced,

and believed in—that is to say, they require an organizational safety culture change.

Recommendation # 3: *Understanding that this cycle of unsafe behavior reinforcing itself is driven underground by departments who ignore the messages of near-misses. Near-misses should be studied and understood for what they are: gifts to your organization and opportunities to make substantial changes.*

Improving safety and reducing injuries within an organization is achievable through modification of individual, day-to-day behaviors, and sustainable outcomes can be achieved as the behaviors become integrated within the attitudes/beliefs system (i.e., culture) of its members; that is a proven, observable scientific fact. Cultural uniqueness, traditions, or history do not preclude the scientific applicability of organizational culture change, for the fire department or any other organization. However, fire departments need to understand, through the advocacy of Everyone Goes Home and the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives, that organizational culture change, as a practicable concept, is real and viable, and that great benefits to individual safety and organizational well-being are possible through its practice. Organizational systems that require clear and strong safety values, articulated through policies, driven by individuals at the top of the organization; supported and operationally refined by upper managers; adopted and enforced by middle managers; and practiced by supervisors and rank-and-file members, with a flow of reciprocal responsibility and accountability built into the process, are essential to changing unsafe behaviors and creating, over time, a safety-rich organization.

With this understanding, adopting stronger safety-driven organizational values and creating organizational systems necessary to change behaviors and, over time, organizational beliefs, become a matter of choice—the choice being greater firefighter life safety and a reduction of line-of-duty deaths and injuries, or business as usual. Organizational safety culture change is, in itself, a personal and group responsibility.

Recommendation # 4: *Throughout the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives there are opportunities for both organizational and personal change. As your department moves toward adopting a safety-minded culture, use the tools offered in the 16 Initiatives as guiding documents. Initiatives # 2 (personal and organizational accountability) and # 3 (implement risk management controls) in particular offer rich opportunities to calibrate personal commitment to organizational dynamics.*

Failures in personal and leadership responsibilities, and accountability to each other, are evident in the analyses of preventable firefighter line-of-duty deaths each year. Overall, the failure to institutionalize (and practice) personal safety as the predominant organizational goal within the scope of the mission; the failure to adequately identify our values and expectations for individual safety; the failure to create systems that protect those safety values and expectations; and the failure to

make safety everyone's responsibility are what have led to a continual cycle of negative, unsafe behaviors that result in avoidable tragedies. They occur because the organizational culture permits and perpetuates them.

Recommendation # 5: *Is firefighter safety even mentioned in your department's mission statement? Is it enumerated as a core value in your guiding vision statements? Do your attitudes and beliefs, exemplified by behaviors, support the values in your mission statement. If not, there is work to be done.*

Tools/models for improving organizational safety culture exist in abundance. For decades, private industry has developed and successfully employed risk management systems and behavior-based safety management systems to improve organizational safety culture and reduce the potential for worker injuries.

Over the past 20 years, a relatively small number of safety-minded individuals within the fire service have recognized that, although firefighters' emergency response environments are far less predictable and controllable than working environments in private industry, such systems can be adapted for the fire service. However, in general, the fire service has yet to embrace the value and potential of systemized, holistic risk management approaches—despite that firefighters, ironically, are professional risk managers, by nature and definition—and so inherent emergency response hazards continue to fall heavily on the membership. In a very real sense, the noble qualities that set firefighters apart and for which they are held in such high regard by society—most notably, courage and self-sacrifice in the face of extreme danger—drag on the cultural acceptance of complete, progressive, institutionalized safety controls. The cultural identity of the fire department was built on life-saving sacrifices, not risk management systems. It is for this reason that the fire service, which though, in recent years, has begun to slowly adopt a cultural attitude shift in its own safety within the context of property conservation (where no civilian lives are at stake), has not, in a perceptible way, yielded to a similar premium on its own safety when the situation involves the potential saving of a life.

Recommendation # 6: *History is the stories we tell ourselves about the past. As leaders who want to foster safe departments for our firefighters, focus on telling stories that have a different ending because your firefighters made pro-safety decisions. Model safe behavior and reward safe behavior. Discuss firefighter safety in relation to the Rules of Engagement as prioritized by your organization. Construct new organizational values accordingly.*

As such, the greatest challenge for the “Everyone Goes Home” program and the success of the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives is the deeply held fire service belief that is acceptable to die in the line of duty “for the right reasons”—that there are, in fact, exceptions to Everyone Goes Home. It is understood that, given the nature of its extraordinarily dangerous occupation, its primary mission, its sheer size and complexity, and the imperfect human condition, the American fire

service, realistically, may never experience a zero annual line-of-duty death toll. However, to make exceptions to Everyone Goes Home is to mistake its quintessence and underestimate the vision it presents for the future fire service. Such thinking fails to account for

- the existence of Everyone Goes Home as a fundamental code of beliefs whose primary value is that the firefighter's life is the first priority of the organization and the individual;
- the holistic approach to firefighter line-of-duty deaths outlined in the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives, recognizing that there are numerous causative factors, both internal and external to the fire department, in LODDs;
- the belief, implied and advocated by the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives, that the fire service, fire safety community, and society in general are "owners" of firefighter line-of-duty deaths, and that, as people create or enter into choices, conditions, events, and circumstances that lead to LODDs, so people have the ability to change them—which is to say that all LODDs *are preventable*; and
- the dramatic impact that aggressive advocacy of Everyone Goes Home (as a fundamental principle *without exception*) will have on the thousands of serious injuries sustained by firefighters each year.

Conclusion

Organizational culture and the science therein, is a relatively new concept for the fire service. National fire service leadership, in its creation of the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives, recognized organizational safety culture change as critical to improving firefighter safety and reducing annual firefighter line-of-duty deaths nationwide. Local fire department leaders require education in the whys and hows of organizational culture and in the tools needed to affect its change. Furthermore, greater advocacy of culture change is needed at every fire service level.

Recommendation # 7: *Recognize and support the development of the following documents (through supplying articles and/or case studies):*

- A primer for fire department leadership about organizational culture change, including what it is, its applicability to the fire service, its importance to fire department safety, its balance/coexistence with historical fire department traditions, and outlined strategies for implementation.
- An extensive, detailed academic study for fire department leadership that connects academic theory and applied science/industry case studies with fire department needs, including the integration of risk management/safety management/behavior-based systems within the fire department culture, strategic implementation considerations and its potential impact on the

organization, fire service success stories with regard to culture change, a compendium of applicable literature on the subject, and so forth.

- Published leadership guides on how to achieve a holistic safety approach to each of the six Everyone Goes Home areas of LODD focus: structural firefighting, wildland firefighting, health & wellness, vehicle safety, prevention, and training.

Recommendation # 8: *Sponsor and host regional conferences focused solely on firefighter safety. Create peer-to-peer networks for company officers and chiefs to exchange information on what works locally. Support the creation of national standardized, live-setting/conference presentations that advocate organizational safety culture change to fire department members of all ranks, stressing interrelated responsibility and accountability factors.*

Recommendations

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