

# Initiative

## 4

All firefighters must be empowered to stop unsafe practices.

### Executive Summary

Firefighter Life Safety Initiative #4, "***All Firefighter's must be empowered to stop unsafe practices,***" appears to be an extremely controversial statement. But, in reality, it means nothing more (or nothing less) than allowing the members of your organization to SPEAK UP with regard to personal and organizational safety; without negative consequences for doing so (within a prescribed context), and without decentralizing the authority of the formal leader. The resources needed for all fire service organizations to institute Initiative #4, regardless of type or size, are already at our disposal, and the best part is that they are free. All that is required is to have the courage to help ourselves and SPEAK UP!

### Introduction

Utilizing the tried and true KEEP IT SIMPLE principle as one of the most effective ways to implement policy in the fire service, this initiative white paper will

pioneer a new mantra for the fire service: SPEAK UP! Starting very early on in life, we are told by our parents and teachers, “If you have something to say, you have to SPEAK UP!” This simplistic concept has stood the test of time—from our founding fathers inciting the flames of the American Revolution, to the inspiring call to action for human decency and civil rights by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the Mall in Washington, DC. If something is *that* important, such as the lives of our fellow firefighters, we have an inherent right and responsibility to SPEAK UP! In April 2004, the National Fallen Firefighter’s Foundation (NFFF) introduced the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives in its publication, *Firefighter Life Safety Summit Initial Report*. It states in part, “The Summit produced a set of initiatives that may well be regarded as *radical* today...some of the policies that were identified are likely to cause *discomfort and controversy*.”

Initiative #4: “**All firefighters must be empowered to stop unsafe practices**” epitomizes those apprehensions. Are these pessimistic predictions justified, or are they simply another unintentional example of a dangerous mind-set that has come to accept the absurd spiral of 100-plus firefighter deaths per year? What *is radical* is our inability or unwillingness to *institutionally change* our behaviors despite the overwhelming statistical evidence which proves that we have the capability to drastically reduce firefighter deaths and injuries right now! Our *discomfort* should come from our failure to institute these necessary changes, not from the solutions. The *controversy* should stem from our inaction, not from the Summit participants pro-action in creating these initiatives.

## The Problem

The problem, as it relates specifically to Life Safety Initiative #4, is succinctly captured by noted author and lecturer Gordon Graham, “A lot of these very sad (firefighter) deaths come from *unsafe practices that people knew about, or should have known about, and didn’t do anything about*” (personal communications, December 8, 2006). From this, and dozens of well documented similar observations, the obvious question becomes: why? Why was nothing done to alter the outcome before the tragedy occurred? Why did no one SPEAK UP! The surface answer to the ‘why’ question is most often connected to a human failing; that is, an act of omission or commission at one or several points in an incident. The deeper and more meaningful question to ask is, how? *How* did the culture, policies, and practices of the organization contribute to an individual or individuals’ action or inaction? And ultimately; *how* do we prevent these same factors from converging and conspiring in the future? *How* do we as an industry develop the appropriate organizational environment to allow ALL of our members to SPEAK UP!

**Recommendation #1:** *Take formative action within your department,( i.e. develop policies and procedures, mission and vision statements, training programs, and personal practices) that encourage an institutional safety culture, one which encourages ALL members to SPEAK UP! to stop unsafe practices.*

The express purpose of Initiative #4 is simple—prevention. There is no other industry in the world that understands the importance of prevention on the critical outcome of life safety than the fire service. We embrace the concept wholeheartedly with regard to the civilian population, yet we ignore, or minimize the principle when it comes to our own safety. Tradition is often the scapegoat for this inflexibility. We revere and lament tradition simultaneously when it comes to the discussion of ‘changing the culture’; yet tradition is a concept and not a fact—it can be shaped and reshaped to represent the present and future as well as the past. Do we have the courage to be safe? The time and place for *institutional cultural change* is now, and this generation of fire service stewards has the opportunity and responsibility to meet that challenge, while maintaining the noblest elements of our cherished tradition.

“Safety is not negotiable. *How* we are safe is negotiable, but the fact that we are going to be safe is not!” This unequivocal position, this unwavering principle, this explicit promise, uttered by Fire Chief I. David Daniels, founding member of the International Association of Fire Chief’s (IAFC), Safety, Health and Survival section, exemplifies the ideals upon which the NFFF has confirmed the United States Fire Administration (USFA) objectives to reduce firefighter line of duty deaths by 25% in 5 years and 50% within 10 years (personal communications, December 21, 2006). This statement and the institutionalization of these ideals are not negotiable. Life safety initiative #4 is also non-negotiable; it is dynamic and complex with regard to how it will be implemented within the framework of our profession, but it must be considered a “fundamental right and responsibility of firefighters to stop unsafe procedures” (NFFF, 2004).

**Recommendation #2:** *Utilize the everyone goes home.com website for free training materials and reports, specifically the first Firefighter Life Safety Summit Initial Report (2004), which states: “The underlying principle is that an individual who recognizes an unsafe situation must take action to prevent an accident from occurring. Under this operational concept, any firefighter who believes that a situation is unsafe, or could be unsafe, has both the right and the responsibility to stop the action while an evaluation is made.”*

## Resolution

The 2004 NFFF Summit, and its resulting 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives, represents a landmark achievement in the chronicles of the American fire service. History will record this occasion on a scale with the 1966 Wingspread Conference; both of which produced decisive calls to action. In fact, Webster’s New World Dictionary defines the word *initiative* as; “the action of taking the first step or move.” Firefighters, as a group, appreciate action; we thrive on the adrenaline of overcoming seemingly overwhelming odds. So the question then becomes, “to what lengths are we willing to take action; are we willing to take that first step or move in our own department?” Initiative #4, “**All firefighters must be empowered to stop unsafe practices**” is a true test of our courage to be safe, it

is a mandate to SPEAK UP!

In reality, there is only one word in this initiative that gives us pause, and that word is empowerment. Wikipedia describes empowerment as, "...increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals or communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities" Empowerment increases the strength of the group by multiplying our capabilities, not by diminishing authority. It is that confidence which empowers individuals to SPEAK UP and overcome the confines of group dynamics.

If the initiative simply read, "All firefighter must stop unsafe practices" we would most certainly all be in agreement. In fact, it is a true statement. Personal accountability for individual actions is an immensely important element of the overriding concept of safety. Firefighters, for the most part, do not consciously set out to develop and employ unsafe practices; that would be counterintuitive. Instead, these practices are learned behaviors; we are conditioned to ignore or accept certain behaviors. Gordon Graham (2006) reveals, "At point of hire, people are highly motivated and highly charged to do good things and then what happens, they get exposed day in and day out to unsafe practices and to violations of department policy." And Chief Daniels further expounds, "These folks who come into the fire service do not come in completely horrible, we make them that way, this culture makes them the way they are" (2006).

So what is it about the concept of empowerment that so many seem to find disagreeable? The greatest fear we have of empowering others is the allusion that some how we must give something up to do so. The truth is that empowerment is not a reduction in personal influence or power; instead, if used within a prescribed framework, it is an enhancement. Fire Chief Fred Windisch, past chairman of the IAFC's, Volunteer and Combination Officer's Section (VCOS), acknowledges that, "The borders of empowerment must be predefined" but that, "The attitude of not accepting empowerment is old school thinking and shows a lack of leadership skills" (personal communications, December 7, 2006)

**Recommendation #3:** *Ensure that the institutionalization of Initiative #4 is supported by the concept of individual accountability, through officer development and leadership training which emphasizes cooperative and strong Leadership/ Followership roles.*

There is a management concept called the 'psychological contract' between an employer and an employee that bears mentioning. "Psychological contracts are implicit, involving an individual's beliefs of a reciprocal exchange between two parties pertaining to trust, loyalty and the well-being of all involved" (Ozone, 2006). This contract is considered to be implicit at the time of hire whereby both the individual and the organization agree to conduct themselves in the best interests of each others welfare. Chief Daniels (2006) asks, "Why isn't it written down that there is an expectation of safety?" The fire service has volumes upon volumes of

standards, SOPs and rules to direct our every action, many of which are ignored. One way for us to SPEAK UP would be to incorporate this commitment to safety in all of our departmental values and mission statements.

As a general rule, most of us ascend to positions of authority in the fire service from within the ranks. We all then have the capacity to empathize with those with whom we serve; precisely because we have 'been there, and done that!' Somehow though there is a *bona fide* theory that suggests that bugles equate to memory loss; we 'forget' what it was like as a back-stepper. That same 'bugletheory' suggests that ego is directly proportionate to rank; thus creating even more obstacles to open communications, or a subordinate's ability to SPEAK UP. This theory is of course, an exaggeration; but exaggerations are rooted in the truth, and we must acknowledge that truth and act on it.

Maintaining a high degree of empathy has long been recognized as a key component to successful leadership. This desirable quality also opens the gateway to another vital characteristic necessary for successful implementation of initiative #4; that of humility.

The psychological contract squarely put the onus for safety on all parties. Gordon Graham continues, "A big part of the psychological contract would be if I see unsafe practices, I'm going to do something about it. If I am confronted by someone who reports or tells me I'm doing something unsafe, then I'm going to accept that comment in the spirit with which it was attempted" (2006). Humility allows a leader, or any one member, to accept inquiry and even criticism without personalizing it; cultivating this attitude in all parties is a core issue to the success of empowerment.

The 2004 Summit report acknowledges, "To many members of the fire service, who have been indoctrinated with a traditional sense of unquestioning discipline, this could be an uncomfortable concept." Research and application of Crew Resource Management (CRM) techniques confirms however that empowering crew members to SPEAK UP increases overall situational awareness, and moreover enhances the leaders ability to make informed decisions. The IAFC's 2002 publication, *Crew Resource Management: A Positive Change for the Fire Service*, is the definitive resource for beginning the educational process necessary for institutionalizing empowerment in every department, regardless of size or type.

The groundwork for empowerment is already laid out within the CRM concept and there is absolutely no plausible reason to 'reinvent the wheel'. There are literally hundreds of references for a department to augment the basic components of CRM, i.e. Situational Awareness, Decision Making, Communications, Leadership and Followership, Workload Management, and Error Management and Standardization. To put it simply, "crew resource management explains the predictable manner in which firefighters react to stressful situations," and gives all members of the crew a new sense of consciousness about routine situations (Okroy). CRM came to the fire service through the airline industry which

began to look at accidents through the prism of human error, the failure of communication and leadership deficits.

The difficulty comes with implementing CRM or any program is that changing a culture is not simple, nor quickly done. But we have stood at the caskets of far too many fallen brothers and sisters and ached for a resolution to the pain. Whatever difficulties we must endure as an institution in transition, pale in comparison to the sacrifices that have been made on our behalf; we must SPEAK UP for those who no longer can, and listen to their cries for reform.

**Recommendation #4:** *Initiate the IAFC's Crew Resource Management (CRM) or similar program in your organization to support the foundational concepts of mutual responsibility.*

*The Courage to be Safe - So Everyone Goes Home™* training program is a parallel training initiative started by the NFFF that, like *Crew Resource Management*, supports the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives. "This program graphically underscores the need for firefighters and officers to change fundamental attitudes and behaviors in order to prevent line of duty deaths, and promotes the courage to do the right thing so that "Everyone Goes Home™" at the end of the day" These programs are free! You need only have the courage to be safe and SPEAK UP within your organization and become an advocate for safety.

**Recommendation # 5:** *Contact the Everyone Goes Home Program ([www.info.everyonegoeshome.com](http://www.info.everyonegoeshome.com)) for information on bringing the Courage to Be Safe Program to your fire department.*

## Call to Action

Pain is our greatest motivator. This is a morbid truth that is deeply ingrained within the human condition. We loathe change unless we absolutely must to survive. Many of us who are staunch advocates for these and other reforms have faced personal tragedies within and around our organizations. These tragedies all involve personal loss, and the excruciating psychological and spiritual pain that follows. When you are drowning, it is easy to look for and accept a life-preserver. These life/career changing incidents were and are, our 'call to action'. So what about the rest of you; those who have thus been spared the branding iron that is a line-of-duty-death or significant injury within your organization; how are you called to action, when your horizons are seemingly free from the same motivation as ours? How can our collective experiences motivate your department to seek and embrace the courage to be safe when everything seems to be calm and orderly?

Chief Daniels predicts the fate of those organizations that cannot or will not see beyond the immediate confines of their own horizon; "Those organizations or groups... or a culture that doesn't allow people to SPEAK UP when they see something bad going on, I think they are setting themselves up for something (tragic) to happen. It's not a matter of what; it's just a matter of when" (2006). Are

you willing to roll-the-dice with your organizations future; or will you have the courage to SPEAK UP! Groups... or a culture that doesn't allow people to SPEAK UP when they see something bad going on, I think they are setting themselves up for something (tragic) to happen. It's not a matter of what; it's just a matter of when" (2006). Are you willing to roll-the-dice with your organizations future; or will you have the courage to SPEAK UP!

## Case Study

"The Worcester, Massachusetts Fire Department had been unconsciously lulled into a false sense of security, and invincibility. We did not arrogantly believe, 'It can't happen to us'; we simply didn't adequately prepare, operationally or administratively, for the possibility that a line-of duty-death *could* happen to us; certainly not a multiple LODD! Our place in the annals of the American fire service will forever be linked to the loss of six brave men, Brotherton, Lucey, Spencer, Jackson, Lyons, and McGuirk, whose nobility and sacrifice can never be fully appreciated. Their sacrifice, and that of their families, can only be made more tragic by not mustering the courage to SPEAK UP and challenge the status quo!" (*District Chief John F. Sullivan, Worcester Fire Department (2007)*).

### [Brotherton McGuirk Jackson Lyons Spencer & Lucey](#)

Every name inscribed on the solemn granite blocks of our fallen firefighter memorials, whether in Colorado Springs, CO, or Emmitsburg, MD, is a call to action. Every "near miss" posting on the National Fire Fighter Near Miss Reporting System, is a call to action. Every NIOSH Line of Duty Death report, or USFA Technical report, is a call to action. Every time we place our fire service badge over our heart, it must symbolize a call to action. The 2005 Life Safety Summit report from Indianapolis confirms, "The ability to recognize potentially unsafe situations can be developed by providing firefighters with case histories and lessons learned from investigations, accident reports and near-miss reporting." The resources to commit your department to a path of pro-action are at your disposal; you need only pick them up and utilize them.

Sustainability will be our ultimate challenge. The call to action for sustainability is embodied in the NFFF's: *Make Every Day a Training Day initiative*.

Cultural change, the ability to empower people to SPEAK UP for safety, must become an every day activity. Gordon Graham, who's simple eloquence always strikes the proper chord, says, "Rules without enforcement are just nice words; the culture has got to change. The big order though is... you can't follow policy and you can't follow initiatives if you don't know the initiatives. Make every day a training day, and every day we need to reinforce one of these initiatives, every day of our career" (2006). Chief Fred Windisch also sums it up well: "It all comes back to this education in training to where it becomes a culture in your system to teach people about safety that is when they begin to think about the safe operating

principles that are required” (2006).

## Conclusion

Mark Twain once wrote in a work entitled *Important Correspondence*, “Nobody deserves to be helped who don't try to help himself, and ‘faith without works’ is a risky doctrine.” I am, by nature, an idealist, I believe that our beloved American fire service is poised to go forward and accomplish great things with respect to these 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives. I have faith in the human spirit and our will to endure. Chief Daniels (2006) also believes that, “Over the course of time we will change the culture; we will make it there.” We have before us, the proper doctrine to guide us toward our objectives, ‘to make it there’. This doctrine contains the requisite works, i.e. Crew Resource Management, *The Courage to Be Safe™*, and Near-Miss Reporting and so on. Collectively we will summon the courage to, help ourselves and SPEAK UP!

## Recommendations

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