

Observing Firefighter Performance

By BILLY SCHMIDT

PHOTO GLEN ELLMAN



Operational procedures provide firefighters with consistent and safe methods for accomplishing fireground tasks.

3 critical factors contribute to firefighter excellence

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” —Aristotle

After many years of observing firefighters at my department during training operations and on the fireground, it's apparent that some of them perform significantly better than others, especially during unforeseen, dangerous events. Firefighters at my department undergo similar initial training programs (recruit academy) and on-duty recurrent training. So what makes one firefighter perform better than another?

Statistics from the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Crew Resource Management Program reveal that approximately 50 percent of all firefighter line-of-duty deaths are attributed to some type of firefighter or crew error. Therefore, the reasons behind excellent performance versus merely acceptable performance should be a serious concern for company officers and fire departments.

It's easy to identify and report the mistakes firefighters make during training sessions. After all, firefighters are human, and all humans make mistakes. But we can do better than merely relying on post-incident reports. We can observe the attitudes and performance of those firefighters who distinguish themselves during training and fireground operations. Demonstrated excellence in a training environment is no guarantee of excellence during a true emergency. However, firefighters who display excellence during training and normal fireground operations will most likely demonstrate similar behavior during an actual emergency.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Excellent firefighters share certain attributes and attitudes that are present at all times. In my observation, excellence boils down to the following three critical success factors:

1. An intimate knowledge of and a passion for the fire service profession;
2. A professional attitude that includes understanding the job's dangers, practicing situational awareness and reacting conservatively to a challenging event; and
3. The acceptance and use of the department's operational procedures.

Let's take a closer look at each of the three.

Critical Success Factor No. 1: An intimate knowledge of and a passion for the fire service profession.

Highly successful firefighters take pride in knowing everything about their profession—much more than the minimum required training. They read articles in professional trade magazines, talk about tools and techniques with other firefighters, critique their own incidents, attend conferences or classes and, most important, review their department's operational procedures. They remain familiar with the tools and equipment carried on their apparatus and how best to use them. They accept, understand and practice the Incident Management System (IMS).

Excellent firefighters are knowledgeable about building construction and pre-fire plans. They know the different

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types of construction and how they affect safety and operational tactics on the fireground. They are students of the fire service and always seek more knowledge.

Because they are human, excellent firefighters still make mistakes. But their mistakes are fewer, less serious and more quickly discovered and corrected than those made by other firefighters.

How does an intimate knowledge of and a passion for the fire service influence the daily activities of an excellent firefighter? The answer is simple: Firefighters constantly make life and death decisions. In order to make the correct decision, they must collect and analyze the current information and compare it with past experiences and lessons learned. The excellent firefighter draws on a wider range of information, which leads to better decisions. Lacking important information, especially the understanding of basic operational and safety procedures and techniques, can result in disaster. In the fire service, knowledge is not just power; it's *safety*.

Critical Success Factor No. 2: A professional attitude that includes understanding the job's dangers, practicing situational awareness and reacting conservatively to challenging events. Professional firefighters know that the fireground is dangerous and that conditions can change rapidly, without warning. They are not complacent. They are skeptical. They are alert and are always asking themselves, "What if...?" "What will we do if we cannot contain the fire to this room?" Excellent firefighters are prepared with a backup plan should the initial plan fail.

Because they are skeptical, these excellent firefighters will sense abnormalities sooner than their peers. They will anticipate, and thus avoid, potentially hazardous events. When unexpected events do occur, they will identify and handle them more effectively than other firefighters.

A constant situational awareness is one of the most important aspects of the critical success factors. Firefighters who exhibit constant situational awareness always know their objective, how much air they have and most important, where they are with regard to some reference point in the structure. Many case studies from tragic fireground incidents cite a loss of situational awareness.

A challenging event is anything that occurs on the fireground that could potentially affect safety. This may be an equipment failure or a change in the weather; either could compromise safety. In response to challenging events, excellent firefighters take actions to preserve or enhance the current level of safety. Examples include not entering a fire building if the conditions are deteriorating too rapidly, or revising strategies because of changing weather. The first goal of any fireground operation is firefighter safety; everything else comes second. The excellent firefighter is aggressively conservative.

Critical Success Factor No. 3: The acceptance and use of the department's operational procedures. All fire departments should have a complete set of operational procedures called standard operating procedures (SOPs) or standard operating guidelines (SOGs) that provide structure for fireground operations. Some firefighters rely on operational procedures more than others; some take them for granted, and some ignore them completely. When asked why operational procedures are important, firefighters might reply, "So everyone will do things the same way." But there's much more to them than standardization.

Operational procedures provide firefighters with time-tested, consistent, safe methods of accomplishing many normal and abnormal tasks. They help firefighters avoid the surprises that might occur if there were no prescribed methods for handling the unexpected event.

Lastly, adherence to the department's operational procedures helps keep firefighters prepared and ready to react to unexpected events, which may include a low-air bottle alarm, a lost firefighter or an incident that quickly escalates in size or complexity. These challenging events can be anticipated and practiced. Department operating procedures provide firefighters with a set process for dealing with such events, and excellent firefighters embrace their use.

ARE YOU OBSERVING?

The lesson learned by observing excellent firefighters is clear. Excellent firefighters share a passion for the profession, understand the dangers of the job, are aware of their surroundings, respond conservatively to challenging events and accept and use operational procedures.

How do your firefighters measure up against these critical success factors? Do they continually study their profession and practice the responsibilities of their position? Do they take seriously the potential dangers that come with the job and prepare for them? And do they review, accept and practice the department's operational procedures in order to perform safely and effectively?

The three critical success factors can be a company officer's checklist for safe and effective fireground operations, and a long and successful fire service career. So ask yourself honestly: If someone was observing you, would *you* rate as an excellent firefighter? ☺

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