

Accountability

In the last 3 years I have been promoted to company officer after serving 17 years as a career firefighter. As close to the right front seat as I was, I didn't have much of an understanding of the leadership style that came from the person without the wheel in his hands.

The sub conscious agreement between us blue shirts and our boss is easy to understand. We the blue shirts will make you the company officer, look good by being a professional at this job. You will take all the abuse from the chief officers, us, and if need be the public so as to be sure we all go home at the end of our shift. Sounds easy right? Not so fast rookie lieutenant!

After a short study of NIOSH reports, my conclusion for the need of sound company leadership is clear. The common thread in these reports is centered on these several points. Lack of a sound understanding of fire behavior and fire ground variables. Lack of a proper size-up that includes an interior condition. Understanding of the fire effects on lightweight construction. Lack of existing standard operating procedures (SOPs), Lack of use of an Incident Command System, and lack of sufficient training. Who is responsible for these omissions in our craft? Well in my company, that guy is ME! This fact brings me to my subject matter; Accountability.

We all share some responsibility in fire ground accountability. The company officer's duty of accountability begins when he first gets pinned with that badge. If the men under his command are not adequately trained in fire behavior, size up, building construction, sop's, fire ground operations and even incident command, then no amount of name tags, Velcro strips, or expensive radios will keep a company safely together. Furthermore; it is up to the shift officer to lead the group in more than just fire operations.

Most of us have studied older fire pictures and read the stories where a firefighter signals for help by throwing his helmet out of a window. How could this even begin to work? Was it just an act of desperation? Imagine the time lapse for a reaction on today's fire ground, or the overall dis-connect because we didn't get a "mayday" over the radio. Not to mention the firefighter in question would not

be able to throw his helmet to the blue card holder in the van parked down the block “commanding” (I digress). This form of face to face interaction worked because of the level of accountability that was common in those days of limited technology. Without radios the crews stayed within reach of each other. With far reaching hard hitting nozzles (see smoothbore) we attacked from a “safe location” and pushed in as the waters “Air tract” drew air into the affected area and lifted and pushed out the smoke and gasses. Building construction features also helped our distressed firefighter at the window, like compartmentalized floor plans, solid doors, higher ceilings and of course all the “legacy” furnishings. But in my opinion, there was something else. The mindset of our grandfathers fighting fires was different too. That is hard to qualify but if you factor in what they were doing with what they had to do it with, it brings me to the conclusion that the crews were well disciplined to work as a group. Not only to work the task to completion but to then remain together throughout the duration of the incident. Teamwork was likely the first fire service buzzword.

Self-discipline is the key to accountability. We all must be accountable to the team. How many times have you witnessed a crew member “wondering” after overhaul starts, or not checking in right as their specific task has been completed? We need to recapture that cohesion of a proud unit. Back in the day of a fire helmet hitting the ground, the reaction may have been straight forward. It was easily understood where that company was assigned, what they were to be doing, and what they would likely need for assistance. Real accountability is when everyone accepts their personal responsibility for their position, assignment and their crew.

The algorithm we should follow is: get an assignment, get it done, and report back to your officer for another assignment. Incident command has always been based on the *chain* of command. Follow that model and the rest of the fire scene shapes up nicely. Do this while relying on each other instead of technology such as blinking LED’s, bells, whistles and alert tones.

So how do we get our culture back? Well the simple answer is that this also lands on the company officers shoulders. You must be calm, level headed, fair in your

treatment of everyone in the firehouse, and never delegate accountability! Responsibility, and authority should be carried out on your orders but the results of all of those are yours alone. If your men didn't get something right then take it upon yourself to re train your firefighters, and reassess your process as a teacher, coach and leader. Once the men see that you gladly accept the duty of accountability, the act of taking pride in your group will come naturally.

Start small by cleaning the station. Not like we always do, but like IT IS your home! Get the shift involved with the maintenance of the trucks and equipment. Ask the men for suggestions on types and locations of the equipment that would make their job more efficient. Have the most senior men offer their reasons for "why we do that." You may find some traditions lingering. Of course on shift training is a must, and it must be relevant and realistic as possible. Lastly, you must make the effort to stay socially involved with your crew. In many suburban fire departments, the crew can live many miles even a county away from each other. If we are not personally invested in each other, than we can never be accountable to each other. Pick a couple days a year and get as many as possible together outside of the FD.

Accountability is a personal thing, not a personnel thing. Make it so in and out of the station and the fire ground will be a safer and more efficient operation.