

From Rookie to One of the Guys

“Hey kid, you’re in MY chair!” 25 Years ago I was 10 minutes into my first day at the Fire Department and I already screwed up! One of the guys saw me nervously standing near the kitchen before the on coming shift started, and “told” me to have a seat. Sitting down as a rookie is hazardous but this was, as I now see it, a perfect set-up job! I have since used it myself. This was the first of many mistakes that have left me with certain perspectives and life lessons that I still carry around today.

As the weeks and months went by, I started to feel more at home at the station, but I always knew *where* my seat was at the table; and *when* I was allowed to use it. The current “mentoring style” wasn’t a thing in the 1990’s. I was left to my own choices and a few “old Salts” that seasoned my time with sometimes painful insults and lessons in firefighting, union politics, and mostly station living/cleaning.

I have taken the liberty of listing some of the things that meant a lot to me as a rookie. Some of the suggestions were offered by other guys that knew I was putting this idea to paper. Most of them were suggested to me as a rookie firefighter by a great shift officer who had a true interest in my development as a firefighter as well as a person. I take no credit for this except for the fact of putting it all together for your use or amusement...

- Pay attention to details. Examples: Neat folds in the hose beds, clean tools, run the small engines for at least 20 minutes, have your face-piece pre fitted, and liquid disinfectant for the toilets while actually using the scrub brush.

- Understand and accept that the veterans will wear you down, you will always screw up, and you are expected to take your corrections without retort. Own your mistakes. Don’t make excuses and don’t try to explain why you did it wrong until you are asked.

- Show up at least 20 minutes before your shift starts. Think of coffee, dishes, paper, trash can and then your truck. Do the reverse order before the end of your shift.

- Keep a positive attitude and motivation. Just keep them in check. There is a line between excited to be there and being a kiss-ass know it all.

- Never “pencil whip” your truck check. Every cabinet, every piece of equipment, every morning.

- You will be the last to sit to eat, and the first to get up and do the dishes. BTW, your seat will have no view of the TV.

- 2 ears and one mouth. Listen until asked to talk for the first few months. Choose your conversations carefully, and never start out with: “my first/other fire department does it different....”

- Unless life depends on it, don’t talk over the radio, instead stay right next to a senior firefighter whenever possible.

- Don’t offer any fire tactic or strategic solutions. You are their probate no matter how long you did the job elsewhere.

- Know your role by asking. Ask the shift officer where he expects you on a variety of calls. Later in the day ask the same thing of the senior man and see if they match.

-Learn how to cook at least 3 meals for 5-10 men. BTW, they will tell you it taste terrible as they go for seconds...

-Always volunteer for the public appearances. Fire safety talks for the kids, a station tour, or any other event where a firefighter is requested.

-Take initiative on everything from house work, vehicle checks, daily drill and anything else that needs done. If your truly at a lost for what can be done ask someone.

-Beware of the station "Sissy"! He will be easy to spot. He is usually detached from the rest of the group and usually in a bad mood. This guy has all the complaints but usually none of the answers. You will be guilty by association by spending any idle time around him. Quietly stay busy learning about the job, not the gossip around it.

-Don't suck up to the boss. Be respectful and follow orders to the letter, but don't be another rug under the Chiefs/Capt/Lt's desk.

-Work out every shift if your run volume and station allows. This job is physical and you should respect that.

-Use lunch time to study instead of sleep. You're too young to be tired at noon!

-Money is easy to carry. Put a ten or twenty in your pocket before shift. No one likes an I.O.U. for dinner. An occasional ice cream or bagels for the shift doesn't hurt either.

-Before you retire for the night, clean up the living quarters, kitchen and empty the trash. You don't want the next shift deciding your reputation the next morning.

-Don't let your first year be your best. Stay motivated by posting your 3,5,10 year goals at home. Where only you can see them and work towards them.

-Keep a journal. This is going be a great career.

- After a few weeks or months, feel free to bust balls. Just remember who you are. There is a pecking order.

In years past these things seemed to be just part of the job, but as I see it these days we need to have most things spelled out. Earn your way, do your time, and pass it on when you are the one with less/grey hair. The work is the reward so get to it!