

## **Pride and Ownership: The Love for the Job      Part 3**

### **THE COMPANY OFFICER**

**By Rick Lasky**

For years it's been said that when you take an honest look at how it all works and how it all really gets done, the following is more than obvious. First, our most important asset is our firefighters. Second, our battalion chiefs or shift commanders are the coaches. Third, it is the company officer, that lieutenant, sergeant, captain or whatever you call them, that gets things done and sets the tempo for the shift. As a chief officer you know that if you want to get things done you have to get to the company officer. This is definitely true and obvious when everything is going good, but (and I know there's always a but...) it is also true and accurate when things are not going good. It all comes down to leadership and the company officer's ability to lead his or her troops in a good direction. But that also means taking on responsibility. Responsibility for yourself and your actions and for those you are going to lead.

The fire service has always been an extremely proud profession. But over the past so many years, we've seen this begin to slip, and in some cases begin erode. Today we hear some of our officers and firefighters saying things like, "why don't these guys care? They don't care about how the firehouse looks. They don't care about their uniforms. They don't take care of the rig. And they don't care about the job." And often they say, "There's nothing you can do about it. It's that damn generation X or Y. You know, the dot COM firefighters." You hear them blame their parents. And that's partially true. But isn't time that we sit them down and tell them how it is in our world. I guess my question is, where did all of the mentors go? Where are the company officers? Where are the guys that have all of the information and experience that's needed to teach the new firefighters how to be a firefighter? How to survive both in and out of the firehouse. The stuff they need to know, should know, and have to know. Aren't we a little responsible? You're out there. Guys, you need to share the wealth. Share your

knowledge. You used to do it. We need to get these guys with the experience to give before they leave, because once they leave, they're gone. And all of that experience and knowledge is gone with them. Once they walk out the door, it's gone forever. Don't let those guys waste everything that they worked for and sacrificed for. Sit them down with the new guys and get them to give it to them. This again is the time you hear them say that "they won't listen." I know its difficult but you need to make them listen. This is our chance.

### **We use to give orders.**

We use to sit the new guy down and explain what was expected of him or her. The way we want it. The way the guys before us wanted it. I can remember being sat down on my first day on the job by my lieutenant Bill Allen while he explained why we take care of the rigs, our tools, our firehouse and more importantly, each other. He explained what was expected of me and I was sure he was going to make sure that I met those expectations. He explained what we were all about and that the public didn't owe us anything, that in fact we owed them for giving us the opportunity to work in the best profession in the world. And he said to never allow anyone to disrespect the job or each other. Pretty simple stuff when you think about it. We do have a choice in this. Tell them why this job is the best job in the world and why we do what we do. Share with them the history, both the good and the bad. Tell them where it all started. Several years ago at FDIC in Indy, I heard someone say, "What's with the old guy?" and they pointed on stage to Ben Franklin. Talk about missing history. Tell them why fire engines are red and that the color red in the fire service stands for courage and valor. Where the pike poles came from and that they were whaling hooks used in Jamestown to pull down the shacks on each side of the burning one all in an effort to keep the fire from communicating to the other structures. They were even in to exposure control back then. Where the Maltese Cross came from and what it stands for. If you don't tell them, how can you expect them to take care of them? How can you expect them to understand and

truly appreciate it all? And the list goes on. Make them listen. Remind them that it's a privilege to be a firefighter. That we owe the public a service. That it's an honor to be part of this family and how great it really is. And if they don't like it, show them the door. Because if they don't have the passion now, we'll lose for sure down the road. They'll become the 5 percenters that don't give a damn.

### **Share the history.**

If we don't share the history with them now and they don't understand or appreciate it, what's it going to be like in 20 or 30 years? All of it will be gone. Everything will be wasted. We may as well throw all the uniforms out and wear nametags that say, "Hi my name is Chip." There are people out there right now that don't have a clue where their collar insignias came from and what they stand for. Where the speaking trumpets came from. Tell them. Tell them where it all started. Go back and review the fires that occurred in our country and discuss the impact they had on the fire service as it is today. Explain to them where it all started with your department. Tell them about your department's history, who was there before you and what kind of an impact they had and where it needs to go *now*. If you don't know, find out! This is our chance. Set the tempo right from the start. Pull them into the circle now and then they can begin to appreciate how great this profession really is.

### **Bring back the mentors and train.**

Start a mentoring program (see Mentoring: Tapping into years of experience, *Fire Engineering* July '02). And take the time to let your firefighters know what the expectations are of them. It's a little hard to get on a guy later when you didn't give him the game plan up front. We're killing over a hundred firefighters each year and injuring tens of thousands. And all with better apparatus, better gear, and better tools. There's no new fire out there killing us. It's the same stuff that's been killing us for years. And while we're on the subject of losing firefighters. Teach them firefighter survival training. Teach them how to survive and go back home. How to get themselves out of trouble. Don't let anyone bully

you into thinking you'll hurt your guys teaching them how to survive. Train safe, but train. Ya know I can hurt myself with a sledgehammer if I tried hard enough. We train our people to work with saws that travel at 6000 revolutions a minute, that's 250 miles per hour. To work with hydraulic tools that will lift a school bus off of the ground. To crawl into burning buildings. It's a dangerous job, but when you freelance on the fireground you risk killing or injuring your firefighters *and* when you freelance on the training ground you risk doing the same thing. Train safely and as if your life depends on it, because it does! And to the guys that have the brass axes to train their people in firefighter survival techniques, keep going. Especially when they have little or no support from the administration. Keep fighting and teaching your guys how to go home when things go wrong. About the only thing you're going to do wrong is save a firefighter's life. Spend some time with them.

### **Fight for new equipment and be honest with what's killing us.**

Remember one thing. When you're crawling down that dark, hot, snotty hallway, the air pack on your back, the nozzle in your hand, and the protective clothing you're wearing, all was bought at the lowest bid. How's that make you feel? When you start to look at the reasons for these deaths and the contributing factors, the same things keep reappearing. Lack of command and control, lack of an accountability system, poor communications, not following SOPs, failure to read the building and the fire properly and a long list of reasons showing us that we need to get back to the basics. And as I mentioned before and it worth repeating, as one of my mentors said, "you want to be a good firefighter, you need to know building construction and fire behavior. You have to know how the building is going to react to the fire and how the fire is going to react to the building. You need this before the rest." On that same note, Frank Brannigan (keep in mind referring to Frank as an expert in building construction is an understatement!) has said for a long time that we often compare the "battleground" to the "fireground" which is a very true comparison. But that we differ from military strategists in the

following way. They are often successful in their battles because they study their enemy. They learn everything about them. We don't. He reminds us that our enemy is "the building" and we just don't spend enough time studying OUR enemy, the building.

### **Our leadership.**

As you continue to look, you see that our leadership or lack of leadership, often allowed for some of those things to happen. Often that problem starts back in the firehouse. If they're a bunch of mutts in the firehouse, they're gonna to be a bunch of mutts out there. There's no metamorphosis that occurs on the fireground. Those attitudes will carry right out of the firehouse and onto fireground. Another good friend of mine, FDNY Battalion Chief Don Hayde said, "Don't blame the guys in the company, blame the company officer. He's the one that allows it to happen. Go after him or her. Hold them accountable." And its true. If we can't trust them in the firehouse we sure can't trust them on the fireground. I mentioned earlier, that the company officer sets the tempo and attitude for that particular firehouse and in reality can effect or influence that of the entire shift. We can all remember the good officers we worked for just like we can probably remember the good teachers we had in school and how they impacted our lives. How they made a difference. They were there for you when you needed them, they didn't leave you in times of crisis, and they understood you. At the firehouse we referred to them as working officers. They didn't mind getting dirty once in a while, helped you with projects and were really part of your crew. They didn't hole up in their office and keep distant from the crew. They were fair and honest and didn't pull any punches. They cared enough to spend the time and effort with you and wanted to see you succeed but most of all go home at the end of the day. We're losing too many very special people each year not to care. Not to try. Bottom line is, we do have a say. We can make it happen. We can provide the foundation for that pride and stimulate the attitude that is needed. Remember, the one thing in life you have absolute control over, is your attitude. Anger, happiness,

sadness, they're all emotions. Once you give up your attitude, it's all over. It can take you years to recover.

### **Your circle of influence.**

There's something out there called your circle of influence. It's that circle around you that if used properly can influence people to do the right things. If you lead by example and "walk the talk" if you will, you can pull people into your circle of influence. Be positive, say good things, be nice to your people, and watch it grow. The fence walkers will eventually fall in and the 5 percenters will go away. It can also work the other way with a bad attitude. When that happens you have to take immediate action and eliminate the source. As much as the company officer can have that positive effect in the firehouse or on their shift, it can be that same individual that is poisoning the water. The opposite of the positive company officer and role model is the one that sits at the kitchen table and holds court, tearing anything positive to shreds and destroying morale. The problem is, they usually blame someone else for the morale problem not realizing that they are at times one of the contributing factors to the whole thing. If you're trying to figure out where you fall, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I start the rumors or stop them?
- Do I try to exhibit a positive or bad attitude?
- Do the troops hang with me because I let them get away with murder or do they hang with me because they know I care and will protect them?
- Do I serve as the errand boy for the chief or do I stand up and explain that it's for a good reason and needs to be done?
- Am I part of the problem or part of the solution?
- And probably the most important one of all. Am I their leader or their buddy? I can be both, but I need to be a leader first. I don't want them to follow me just because I'm their bud, I want them to

follow me because I'll keep them out of trouble (both on the fireground and in the firehouse), I care and will protect them and because I'm a damn good officer.

In the fire service we come up with solutions and get rid of the problems. Make it so and they end up on the outside looking in. In the words of the great Bob Uecker, "Boy it sure looks like they're having a good time in there." Start on the candidate's first day and continue to build the foundation for them.

Insist that they appreciate this job. We owe it to those that have sacrificed before us. Those that worked so hard. It's our turn to take a crack at them. Don't let the old timers come back and say, "What the hell did you do to my department?"

### **Learn to market your fire department.**

Go out and show it off. Whether you're a career or volunteer firefighter, get out of the station. Or better yet, open it up. If your neighborhood will allow it, open the overhead doors once and a while and let the neighborhood see that the station is occupied. Let the guys sit in front of the firehouse in the evening. We put park benches in front of our firehouses. I want the guys sitting out in front. Let them connect with the families in the neighborhood. Let the kids see the fire trucks. Try to make the firehouse look like a firehouse again. This one is probably going to be hard to believe, but in Lewisville we actually had a "no loitering" rule here that stated that "personnel shall not congregate, loiter or otherwise meet in the rear or front of the station." Does that sound as ridiculous and just plain goofy to anyone else as it does to me? As long as they are not doing anything wrong, what's the big deal? A neighboring training chief said that I ruined what someone else spent sixteen years working so hard for by letting the guys sit in front of the firehouse in the evenings. I don't know how you can ruin something that ridiculous. I'll be happy to explain to anyone from the public why we do it! Get the guys out reading to the kids in the schools. Go out and find ways to market your fire department. See what others are doing and how it works. Go out and brag about your department and tell people why it's

great. I walked into our Central Firehouse in Lewisville on my first day and didn't know whether to open up a checking account or buy insurance. All the desks and tables had glass on them. Who puts glass on furniture in a firehouse? Then I looked at the walls and said, "Where's all the fire stuff? Someone stole all the fire stuff off of the walls. They're all bare. We took care of that. There's "stuff" on the walls now! Often, if it looks like a firehouse, it is. There are a few that slip through, look good on the outside but pretty empty on the inside if you know what I'm saying. But we're the FIRE DEPARTMENT. Start acting like it. To those that say you have to be more like a "business" these days. You're right to an extent. You can still look like firefighters, your firehouse can still look like a firehouse, and your firefighters can still act like firefighters and *still* be professional.

### **The best job in the world.**

This is the best job in the world. If you don't like it, GET OUT! For those that don't care about this job, that don't care about their brother or sister, that don't love it, send them a message. Tell them to go down the street and work for K-Mart stocking shelves. Then they can have a job that they don't have to think about when they go home.

In closing, I'm not much of a poet, but this one fits very well and I've used it in the past many times. I got it from my friend Bill Farnum. It applies actually not just to the company officer, but also to all of us.

"I saw some men in my home town,  
I saw some men tearing a building down.  
With a heave and a ho and a mighty yell,  
I saw a beam swing and a sidewall fell.  
I asked their foreman are these men skilled,  
The kind that you'd hire if you wanted to build.

He laughed and said why no indeed,  
For common labor is all I need.  
For with common labor in a day or two,  
I can tear down what took a builder 20 years to do.  
I asked myself as I walk away,  
Which of these roles am I going to play?"

The message is, you can go out and be the best company officer you can. Study the position. Talk to those who are successful. Ask them how they make it all work. Constantly evaluate your performance and always try to improve yourself. Share your knowledge and experience. Be a brother. Love this job and be passionate about it. Share the information and continue to build this great profession of our's, **OR**, you can go out and tear it down. The choice is yours. For those that do care and truly love it. Keep working at it. Keep pushing forward. Go out and share it with somebody. Read something about this job everyday. You owe it to yourself and both of your families. If anything, do one small thing. Leave it a little bit better for the next guy.

Make a difference and stay safe.