

Guiding the Officer: The B-D-A Model

BY LEIGH H. SHAPIRO

FOR FIREFIGHTERS, education is what you know, while training is what you do. You, as the officer or even as a mentor, need to make yourself available to your crew members and others who may need guidance, leadership, and mentorship. Or, they may simply wish to talk with you.

The foundation of your position, whether formal or informal, is to teach, train, inspire, influence, and guide both individuals and crews through demonstrated action. In other words, don't just walk the walk and talk the talk. Do what you say you're going to do. Be that person you may have wished trained and inspired you or who is a positive influence on your career. I enjoyed just sitting with the officers and senior members of my department, most often around the kitchen table, and picking their brain, asking questions, and listening intently to "war stories" from years past.

As with most leadership strategies, buy-in is the key to success. If your crew doesn't buy what you're selling, then what's the point? To achieve your goals, you must know that they believe in the messenger, the message, and the purpose. And from that position, it is critical to know and understand your collective bargaining agreement (if you have one) and especially your department directives, standard operating procedures, guidelines, or whatever you call them. Without these elements, you'll find it nearly impossible to hold a position of authority and responsibility and not fully comprehend what is expected of you.

Within the realm of expectations is the tone you set with your crew or station. As the officer, you must set the right tone as early as possible. Here are the key to-do items for setting the tone:

- Get your personnel together.
- Review the department and the company policies and rules.
- Discuss expectations for conduct.

Many issues and conflicts that arise in the firehouse—and elsewhere—often stem from the officer's indifference to the legitimacy of the complaint or issue rather than a policy failure. And when you don't address issues in real time, people become disgruntled. This often leads to negative behavior or distrust, and it can foster resentment. For firefighters, it's the equivalent of swallowing poison.

The B-D-A Model Concept

Throughout my career, I've leaned on a strategy I refer to as the "before, during, and after" (B-D-A) model. I've found it useful and effective in yielding results.

The officer usually deals with personnel issues in real time. But some situations must be rectified later, such as a personnel issue that occurred while operating at an emergency incident or an event that involved your personnel when you were off duty. No matter what, to be completely effective, it helps to look at issues from this perspective: What have you done to set up the environment so issues have a minimized risk of occurrence (the "before"), what are you doing about them when they do occur (the "during"), and how have you set up the future environment so they don't reoccur (the "after")? And there you have the B-D-A model.

It's simple, measurable, and achievable. And it really works. I employed this method during my tenure as an officer because time and again, senior administration would ask the same question: "What are you doing about it?"

I got tired of hearing that question and came up with the B-D-A model. Here's an example of how it might play out:

If one of your personnel did something in the firehouse that was a violation of department policy, it's important that you have already set the tone and expectations within your operational command prior to the violation (a plan), usually by training and reviewing policies. Then, in the event of an

incident, your crew already knows that this behavior is unacceptable. (Now, no one can say they didn't know or were never told, and you've got the documentation to prove it.)

When a situation takes place, deal with it based on the rules, regulations, and policies you have in place. Don't forget to fully document the process as needed for future reference. After the incident, review your department's policies and regulations again to reinforce, retrain, and refresh your personnel. And that's your applied B-D-A model of "before," "during," and "after." Failure to address important issues will only make matters worse. By using this tried-and-true method, I apply the following steps for personnel issues on the fireground, at the firehouse, or wherever they may occur.

The B-D-A Model in Action

1. Before the incident.

What policies, planning, and training elements are already in place for addressing incidents when they occur? If there are none, or they exist but have yet to be implemented, now would be a good time to start that process. Come up with your own set of expectations, anticipated behaviors, and firm guardrails to ensure you have control as the officer. Otherwise, personnel will inevitably follow the path of least resistance and do what they want or what they think is correct, as opposed to knowing what they should be doing based on your clearly stated expectations.

2. During the incident.

First and foremost, complete the task at hand. Regardless of what else is happening, the task still demands completion to fulfill the assignment's requirements. For example, on the fireground, an issue that completely derails the current task assigned to you by the incident commander (IC) may come up. That task still requires completion because the IC expects results, not excuses.

Afterward, when things calm down and

you have both the time and the appropriate setting, initiate your investigation. Figure out what happened and, more importantly, *why* it happened. Develop a plan of corrective action and implement it. It should be closely aligned with department policy but, more importantly, directly address the situation and scenario with a focus on your needs. Ask yourself: *As the officer, what do I need to do to fix this situation?*

3. After the incident.

Document all your interaction thoroughly for future reference and (if needed) to demonstrate actions you took to correct this behavior. You can also document trends, repeat occurrences, and similar situations. Department policy must now be reiterated to anyone involved—and their crews—as a reminder that certain behaviors are expected of them. In addition, you'll want to revisit training on specific tasks. At this point, you have addressed this type of behavior that occurred **before** it happened, **during** the incident, and **after** it happened.

Handling the Issue

Although the B-D-A model lays out a template, a plan of action, and a framework for success, you may still find some people under your command who do not see the value of this strategy. Be ready to pay further attention in cases where you're dealing with a less-than-cooperative individual. Developing a plan or corrective action for someone who fits this description can be as simple as telling them to pay closer attention to details or to stop a certain behavior.

This can get very complicated, however, and may require a more comprehensive and definitive approach. After repeatedly falling flat on my face and being the one scrutinized for ineffective leadership, I developed an effective process to help achieve my goals when I faced a personnel situation that required immediate attention. Here's an overview:

1. **Ask what happened.** Also ask the individual to explain the reason for the problematic behavior or action.
2. **Dissect the response.** Did they take ownership of their actions? Are they unwilling, unknowing, or unable to perform to expectations, and why? What is the root cause of this behavior? Do they require engagement with the employee

assistance program (EAP) because of a personal issue? (If your department does not have a program, your city or town jurisdiction probably does.) Some people overlook the EAP option because an individual in personal crisis and presenting a masked cry for help may be perceived as displaying negative behavior to those not paying close enough attention to their personnel.

3. **Assess the expectations.** Did you or the department set clearly defined expectations to provide guidance and guardrails for behaviors and set expectations? If an expectation is not written down somewhere, the omission is often used as an excuse or "reason" why they did not know.
4. **Try role reversal.** Perform a role reversal exercise with the individuals. Ask them what they would do if they were in your position of leadership and you had done what they did. Often, when people see something from a different perspective, they have an easier time understanding, evaluating, and applying positive change.

When you formulate a corrective action plan, it must be simple, measurable, and achievable. Too many moving parts, tasks, or people involved will only cause complications and can end up slowing or shutting down the entire endeavor, often out of frustration. Here's an overview of factors to consider and questions to ask yourself:

- Can you measure your results?
- Did you go from point A to point B with your plan of action, and can you demonstrate sustained results?
- Is your corrective action plan achievable, or is it just based on theory, ideal but unrealistic conditions, or even an alternate reality?
- Does your plan match the learning style of the individual you are working with?

Communication: A Critical Factor

It's important for you to be aware of the many variables that can disrupt effective communication. You'll need to be able to recognize and adapt your actions and plans as needed. In my department, we have diverse personnel with roots all over the world. When I spoke with them, I was sometimes concerned about whether the message I was trying to communicate was clear. I wondered whether my speaking cadence was too fast and whether they had trouble catching

key words as they processed all they were hearing.

Does a cultural difference between myself and the individuals interfere with comprehension or create a language barrier? Or does a difference in education preclude them from understanding certain concepts? There are many nationalities and ethnicities represented within my department roster, and each may have their own accent, inflection, and pronunciation of the English language, which can be a challenge to even the most ardent listener. Best advice: Know your audience!

Explain in detail the reasons why following your direction as the officer as well as department policy are so important, especially in this problematic context. By revealing the why, you invite the individual to thoroughly understand the importance and gravity of orders and direction issued to them. No mysteries. Just thorough, comprehensive communication.

Understanding Progressive Discipline

Progressive discipline takes the following route:

1. Verbal warning.
2. Written warning.
3. Suspension.
4. Termination.

You'll apply these steps in succession for each occurrence of the same (or similar) behavior. At this juncture, you'll want to review the structure of progressive discipline and communicate where the individual falls within that structure at this time. Ensure that the individual understands progressive discipline.

It's important that you document this interaction as a counseling session. If future incidents occur, you'll probably escalate each incident up the progressive discipline ladder, with the department's administration taking the lead. Reassure the individuals that you fully support their best interest and more importantly, their success. Without such encouragement, animosity and resentment seep in. It's up to you to fully commit to your personnel. For the immediate future, follow up by keeping a watchful eye on the individual's behaviors to ensure compliance and proper conduct. Properly handling the problem

employee can be the challenge of a career for a fire officer and can create a high level of frustration (photo 1).

Breaking Down the Strategy

This strategy includes two components: the professional component and the personal component.

Professional Component

The focus of the professional component of the B-D-A model is on the progressive disciplinary process. Sometimes the squeaky wheel doesn't get the oil; instead, it gets replaced! This is basic officer procedure when dealing with personnel. This can be a game changer for those who are difficult within their respective agency or department.

Punitive discipline can negatively impact someone's paycheck, aspiration for future promotions, record, and time served on the job. Within my department, we hear stories about firefighters who were seeking to retire but had to make up their "bad time" first. In other words, to qualify for their specific pension, they needed a certain number of years worked. Being on suspension days does not equate to worked time, so any days someone served on suspension needed to be made up to fulfill the pension qualifications. Many individuals do not realize that suspension time early in their career will need to be made up at

the end of their career, thus throwing their retirement plans into a tailspin. All of this is avoidable with simple good behavior.

Personal Component

The personal cost can weigh equally heavily on an individual who falsely believes there is nothing to fear. Someone who is on suspension or, worse, terminated from the job may experience a huge family impact. Loss of pay and steady income is obvious, but what about explaining to family members that the firefighter doesn't have to go to work this week and it's not vacation time?

Firefighters often serve as role models to family members, their friends, and their community at large. In certain scenarios, the offending individuals may end up with a negative record that stays with them for the remainder of their career and, more importantly, a tarnished reputation, which ultimately affects their identity as a firefighter. In firefighting, your reputation is a commodity that needs to be protected, cultivated, and used wisely and with humility (photo 2).

Spending Time with the Crew

Although the B-D-A model of problem solving and the process of handling problematic crew members are straightforward and can be used for any environment, I found these methods appropriate,



2. At a working fire, I explain to the IC why the assigned task did not go as planned. Although my company's attack line was stretched to the front door, I expected the fire to be farther inside the structure, so I didn't flake the line out. It turns out the fire was in the foyer by the front door, so my handline turned into a pile of spaghetti blocking the building's entrance. Afterward, a solid training session and the employment of the B-D-A model remedied a reoccurrence.

functional, and reliable when working with crews, dealing with transient personnel such as overtime and detailed personnel, as well as newly transferred-in crew members. Part of the buy-in process for crew members is the officer's or mentor's availability to all individuals seeking guidance and a connection to propel their motivation forward. Spending time with crew members also presents the opportunity for the officer to learn, understand, and formulate solid communication and comprehension with each one. The greatest impact an officer can have on a crew is to spend time with them. For me, having a base plan to draw from provides the foundation I need to confidently answer the invariable, inevitable question: *What are you doing about it?* ■

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1. The IC confers with the chief's aide regarding an on-scene personnel issue. Many issues can be addressed on the spot, but sometimes they require escalation and documentation. (Photos by Pat Dooley.)