

## Tips for newly promoted company officers Bill Gustin, Captain, Miami-Dade Fire/Rescue

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One of the most challenging and stressful times in a firefighter's career is the transition from firefighter to a newly promoted company officer. I consider myself very fortunate to have had mentors to guide me through this phase. One was my Dad, a Lieutenant and 33 year veteran of the Chicago Fire Department and the other was the Lieutenant that I worked for before I was promoted. I spent almost a year on the Lieutenant's list before I was promoted and, looking back, I'm glad that I did because, in that time, I learned so much from that man that made me a better fire officer. I was promoted to lieutenant in 1983; to captain in 1986 and have been teaching newly promoted company officers since 1987. I developed my curriculum in large part by asking dozens of respected veteran fire officers over the years two questions: First; "Knowing what you know now, what would you have done differently when you were a newly promoted company officer?"; and "If you were teaching a class of newly promoted officers, what advice would you give them?" Each year the Fire Service loses years of experience when veteran officers retire. Most are replaced by relatively young, inexperienced officers. Since 1987, it has been my passion to capture and preserve that experience and to pass it on to new officers. Following are some tips that can help reduce the stress when transitioning from firefighter to company officer:

\*This may sound harsh but if you were a crappy firefighter then you're most likely going to be a crappy officer. It is very difficult to reinvent yourself as a competent and respected fire officer if you do not have the credibility of being a good firefighter.

\*Most newly promoted company officers are placed on a relief roster and take the place of a company's regular officer when he is off sick or while he is on vacation. This can place the new officer in a vulnerable position of being in charge of people that he has never worked with and in an unfamiliar response district. Avoid these pitfalls:

1) Don't get dragged in to an ongoing problem; for example, company members have an issue with their regular officer, the firehouse or the apparatus. Ask them why they haven't taken the issue up with their regular officer and let them know that you will when he returns to duty.

2) Thoroughly inspect the apparatus and its inventory. At shift change an officer that was relieving me accused me of losing a lock box key which had been missing for months. Members were just waiting for the right guy (me) to blame.

\* When you know that you will be taking the place of company's regular officer, give that officer a call the shift before and ask him what he would like you to accomplish the following shift. For example, catch up on building or hydrant inspections.

\* Empower firefighters by reaching out for their help and most of them will rise to the level of your expectations. When I was assigned to a company in a district that I was unfamiliar with I would ask company members, most of them were older and more experienced than I was, a lot of questions about their district. For example, I "bounced" into a company in a district that had very few hydrants and its members were very proficient in drafting from swimming pools, canals and agricultural wells with specialized equipment on their apparatus; none of which I was familiar with. I arranged for some out of service time for training so the company members could teach me their drafting evolutions. At first,

they resented that the “probie” lieutenant” was making them drill but, those feelings changed when they could see that I was genuinely interested in learning from them. Each member stepped up to teach me aspects of drafting operations and I could tell that they were proud of their company’s ability to get water. Ask a company that you’re not familiar with to take you to the scene of one of their previous fires. Ask members if there were lessons learned. Ask them for a familiarization tour of their district and point out their target hazards. Show company members that you are interested in what they have to say and that you respect their knowledge and experience and you’ll have a more attentive crew.

\* Fire departments, including mine, spend thousands of dollars on “diversity” “cultural sensitivity” training. Since we all agree that we have members of different races, gender, and sexual orientation, why don’t we for once concentrate on what we have IN COMMON, that is, helping people and going home safe at the end of our shift. As a relief lieutenant, keep the company focused on the job by talking about the job. While on medical calls, never pass up the opportunity to discuss aspects of the building you’re in with company members. Ask questions, such as, how would we get a hose line to an upper floor in this building? Discuss forcible entry issues, such as roll down security gates, overhead doors and burglar bars on windows and doors.

\*Set an example; your crew is watching you. For example, when my boss, a Battalion Chief wants to talk to me I immediately stop what I’m doing and briskly walk into his office. Your crew will see how I respond to my boss is the way I want them to respond to me. Set the example by wearing your seatbelt and full PPE. Be the first one on the rig when responding to an alarm. If you treat civilians with respect and compassion, chances are your crew will do the same.

\*Realize and accept that you’re not going to change the culture or mentality of a fire company in one shift but make it clear that there are some things that you insist upon even if you’re only there for one day:

- 1) When responding to alarms you expect everyone to get on the rig and get out of the station in a timely fashion.
- 2) You will not tolerate excessive speed when responding to alarms.
- 3) Everybody wears a seat belt.
- 4) There must always be a “backer” to guide the driver/engineer when he is backing the apparatus.
- 5) Everyone must wear the appropriate PPE

\*Before leaving quarters on an alarm make sure that you and your driver-engineer are in agreement the address and route of response.

\* Before you decide to initiate, participate or tolerate a “good natured” prank or hazing ask yourself two questions: First; would this be appreciated by a woman or minority? Second; will it affect the recipient’s ability to respond and do their job? If the answer to either of those questions is yes; then it cannot happen on your watch. Remember, you’re not “one of the boys” any more and not everyone has the same sense of humor.

\*Consider that if a friend resents your promotion and the authority and responsibility that goes with it, they were probably not as good a friend as you thought they were.

\*When your company members all have a lot more seniority in the department than you, consider that they had ample opportunities to get promoted and chose not to.

\*It is easy for your crew members to call the shots when they don't have the responsibility. You, as the company officer, have the responsibility that comes with authority.

\*Be the kind of boss you would want to work for; that means leave your ego at the door. Strive to have your folks follow and obey you not out of fear of discipline but out of fear of letting you down.

\*Remember that the most common injury in the Fire Service is hurt feelings.

\*Realize that firefighters will come up with ingenious excuses and rationalizations why they do not have to take an apparatus to the shop for repairs. No one likes to switch into a spare rig but don't leave it for the on-coming shift. Similarly, anything affecting the safe operation of the apparatus must be addressed immediately.

\*Tell the truth, in many instances it's not the sin but the LIE that covers up the sin that will get you in greater trouble. Don't get caught in a lie; it can forever destroy your credibility. Similarly, say you have knowledge that a member, albeit a friend, has stolen something from a civilian or pilfered a controlled drug. **It is your duty as an officer to report it. Withholding information is lying.**

\*As firefighters we check the condition of our apparatus and equipment at the beginning of each shift. As an officer, you must also check the mental and physical condition of your people. A firefighter troubled with a family problem can be a distracted firefighter and a hazard to himself and his company members.

\* Have a "plan B" and know when to implement it. Continuously judge the effectiveness of your tactics and if the risk involved is appropriate and justifiable. Advise the incident commander at the first indication that your company is experiencing a delay or unforeseen difficulty in performing a task. Don't allow your ego or a company member's ego to keep doing something that isn't working. For example, don't ever expect a young firefighter willing to prove himself to stop his unsuccessful efforts to force a door. The building could burn down, and he will still be working on the door. It's up to the company officer to know when to try a different tool or technique.

\*Similarly, don't expect a young firefighter to tell you when he's exhausted. A fatigued firefighter is a dangerous firefighter; constantly assess the condition of your crew.

\* Encourage probationary personnel that if they see something say something. Often new personnel are timid about speaking up or assume that the officer and senior firefighters are aware of a hazardous condition, such as a downed power line.

\*When a probationary firefighter is assigned to your company make it clear that it is the responsibility of every company member to train him. In many instances, new personnel can learn more from veteran firefighters than from a new company officer.

\*Control your emotions, such as excitement or anger. You cannot control your company if you can't control yourself.

\* When responding to fires, know what companies are responding with you. Don't rely on a second due engine to lay you a supply line when it is 10 minutes away.

\*If your engineer cannot get you water, CALMLY, tell him to get back in the cab and repeat the steps to switch from road to pump.

\* Although it is difficult with short staffing, when it is possible, keep your hands off of the tools; you will be much more effective as a supervisor if you are not physically engaged in performing a task.

\*It is ALWAYS faster and safer to get off the rig and walk into a fire scene to determine where to position it then backing out of the wrong spot.

\*Be the eyes and ears of the incident commander; report on conditions that may not be seen from outside the fire building. Understand that there are two size ups that must occur at every structure fire; that is, what company officers observe inside the fire building and what the incident commander observes from the exterior. If the inside size up and outside size up is not in agreement, a red flag should go up because somebody's got it wrong and it's usually the companies operating inside the fire building. For example, they may not be aware of fire over their heads or below them.

\*Accordingly, when the IC orders your company out of a building, he does not want a justification of why you should remain, such as "we're making good headway" or "we almost got it; give us a few more minutes". Acknowledge and follow the IC's order to withdraw your company from the building, ensure that your crew understands the order and account for every member (PAR).

\* When operating in adverse conditions always remain aware of the location and distance to your escape and SCBA supply. Don't operate deep inside a big box building filled with smoke and rely on your crew's low air alarm to tell them when to get out.

\* The deeper you advance into a fire building the more your company needs a backup line; don't hesitate to call from one.

\*Your company's safety depends on your situational awareness and knowledge of fire dynamics. Are you operating in what could suddenly become a flow path? For example, your company advances a hose line through the front doorway of a town house with a 25 MPH wind impacting the rear. What will happen if the rear sliding glass door fails?

\*Your company forces a front door of a large private dwelling and advances a hose line to a ventilation controlled/ limited fire. Have you considered what will happen if the air that you allowed into the building reaches the fire in sufficient quantity for the fire to intensify before you can reach it with your hose line? Better call for a backup line to cover your escape route.

\*Before you ascend to the second floor are you certain that there is no fire on the first floor? Additionally, have you considered that a fire on an upper floor or attic could have originated in the basement and extended vertically following the plumbing or up or in the stud bays of balloon frame construction? Has a lightning strike started a fire in the attic but has also followed the electrical service to start fire in electrical panels in the basement or garage? Is fire extending floor to floor on the building's exterior via combustible rear decks, balconies or vinyl siding?

\* Finally, become a career-long student of the Fire Service. Learn building construction and fire dynamics and from LODD fires that you were lucky you didn't go to. A newly promoted company officer may feel reluctant or intimidated to lead senior veteran firefighters but those feelings will diminish with time, experience and being a student of the Fire Service

