

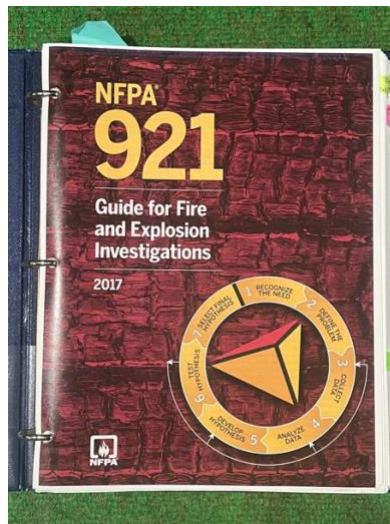
Stand By Your Decisions: That's Why You're There!

Obviously, to be effective at your duties as an officer, you must be intimately familiar with the parameters, authority, and responsibility of the job you hold, whether you are a lieutenant, captain, or chief officer of some type, or even simply a person-in-charge in a temporary or transient capacity. What exactly does that mean, and how do you apply it? What *are* the parameters of your job? What is your official function, who do you report to, who or what do you lead, and what do you do on a daily basis? Furthermore, what are your functional boundaries? How do you fit into the department in terms of your present job duties? You know your parameters when you are tasked with doing something that you know is *not* your job, right? Do you know the parameters when you are put in a situation that you're not trained for, not prepared for, and have no experience in, such as a line officer ordered to do something that an administrator would normally handle? What exactly is your authority as an officer in your present capacity, and how are the other ranks above and maybe below you different? What changes with their authority? Does it increase and become broader? Does the scope change? How about your responsibility? What exactly are you responsible for, who or what are you responsible for, and what happens when you don't meet those responsibilities? All great questions, but you should know the answers before you get that officer's badge pinned on your uniform. These questions are based on experiences I've had when someone told me, "Stay in your lane" or "That's not your job," or when I omitted something I should have done only to find out that indeed it was my job to handle. Also, if you are a career officer or in a unionized department, you should know the details of your collective bargaining agreement (CBA), also known as your contract; however, many departments do not have a CBA for a variety of reasons. Therefore, your department policies take precedent and are of equal importance. Within that, there are numerous details on what your role, responsibilities, and authority are. You'll make friends really fast the minute you violate the contract: your phone will blow up and someone will start screaming at you. You may have gone above and beyond the parameters of the contract, and your behavior brings swift scrutiny and possible discipline. So instead of always getting yourself in a jackpot with the union and administrative leadership, take the time to study the contract, and keep a copy handy for reference. Within your job description there is a narrative that spells out what exactly your duties and responsibilities are. The job posting for an officer usually has this narrative listed on it, and often will derive from the agreement between the labor union and the human resources department of your jurisdiction, or from some other internal governing body.

As the officer or person in charge of a company or crew, your primary functions are leadership and management, and by design, decisions will need to be made by you. If you believe you are not up to the task of decisive leadership, you surely will have problems in your role as the officer. It's one thing to not have

enough information to make an informed decision. What I am referring to is the human element of failure to lead and decide what is best. Our decisions need to be definitive and decisive. You can often go back and amend those decisions based on new, relevant or omitted information, but at least you have already decided to act, intervene, or basically to proceed. One tried-and-true technique employed throughout my years of service is the engagement of critical thinking through the employment of the scientific method and the skillsets required for such. I was more effective as a firefighter and leader when fully understanding what and why the situation was being presented in its form. The concept of the scientific method has been around for years, but only more recently applied to our line of work. The fire marshal world has been utilizing this method for many years, most notably as spelled out by National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 921: Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations, which states each investigation shall be conducted in a methodical order from one to seven:

1. Recognize the need for an investigation.
2. Define the problem.
3. Collect data.
4. Analyze the data.
5. Develop a hypothesis by ruling in knowledge.
6. Test the hypotheses by ruling out evidence.
7. Select the final hypothesis.

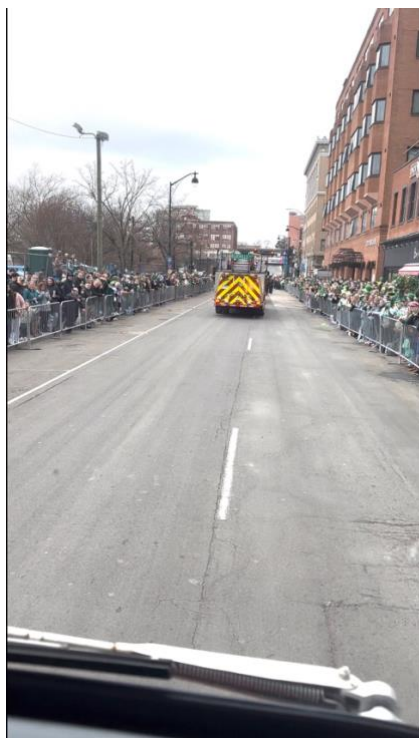


NFPA 921 The Scientific Method Photo by Author.

For firefighters, it presents clear, rational, open-minded, disciplined thinking informed by evidence, as opposed to guessing and relying on a clever yet faulty impulse: Hope is

not a tactic. It sounds like a mouthful, but instead of fumbling through a situation or scenario, applying critical thinking through the scientific method assists you in prevailing. It allows you to identify links between ideas based on importance and relevance. Then you can recognize and build an argument and identify inconsistencies and errors. It provides the ability to be consistent and systematic for you to make the justification needed for your decision process. This takes a lot of practice, especially when applied in an exigent situation. When you do decide what needs to be done, based on your knowledge, skills and ability (KSA's), you should stand behind your decision and defend it. Don't run or cower from it; you are in charge and have the authority to decide and act. Decisions should be made with sound judgment and good reason, not simply flippant or uninformed. The consequences of consistent flip-flopping and weathervaning (a metaphor for someone who is easily influenced and changes their position frequently), only leads to an erosion of credibility and a less than effective leader.

I offer two examples from experience. The first was when I was the overtime company captain in charge of our rescue unit one Saturday in March 2006, which just happened to be the day Hartford held its annual St. Patrick's Day parade. I was informed by the tour commander in the morning that my apparatus would be in the parade with our color guard along with those members marching from our department. He stated if something big came in, meaning a serious call requiring our rescue apparatus, we were to just leave the parade and respond accordingly. When the parade began around 10:00 a.m., we slipped into the marching line behind the group of firefighters that were representing our department. As we weaved our way through the downtown streets in the parade route, we noticed the unusually high number of crowds and revelers watching the parade. After a few minutes of being in the parade, our apparatus radio started blaring a call for service from dispatch reporting a building fire in the west end of the city. I looked over at my driver and told him to continue in the parade, and that we would wait for the first-due apparatus's size-up radio report to determine if we would in fact leave the parade, because often, calls for reports of a fire are erroneous or misidentified, and I did not want to totally disrupt the parade for an insignificant call. Besides, these kinds of things always happen at the wrong time, whether you're on the toilet or in the shower, just sitting down for dinner, or even in a parade. However, the first arriving company on scene reported a working fire. I looked at my driver and said that we needed to find an opening and get out of this parade immediately. Each intersection which would normally provide us with an easy escape route from the parade was clogged with people watching the parade.



The streets were heavily lined with crowds making our exiting extremely difficult. Photo by Author.

We approached at least five different intersections, and each one was unusable because it would require the people to part ways and make a hole big enough to drive the apparatus through, and then we would still have to move the wooden or metal barricades blocking the roadway into a safe position. One of the larger intersections we came upon to find our exit was blocked by a man in an electric wheelchair, and he had difficulty trying to maneuver out of our way. We were wasting time by now; I had already acknowledged to the dispatcher that we were enroute to the fire. Because the Hartford contingent was at the front of the parade and nobody else needed to move out of our way, I made the decision to proceed through the parade route at a safe speed and exit through the end of the route and then continue on with our response. So, we proceeded with our warning devices activated (lights and sirens) to continue through the route. We finally came out at the end and then proceeded to the working fire, which by now had been escalated to a second alarm. We arrived a few minutes later and performed our assigned functions. During the overhaul phase of the incident, my driver was pulling ceilings with a Hartford Plaster Hook and was splashed with hot roofing tar on his face near his eyes. He was subsequently transported to the hospital and put off the line to recover. When we arrived back at quarters, the tour commander summoned me to his office. He stated that there was a police officer directing traffic in the parade who made a complaint about what transpired with us responding. He stated the officer complained we were speeding, should not have responded, and that we should all be fired and arrested. This was the typical antagonizing friction we were used to from our police. When the tour commander got done telling me there was a complaint, not only from a police officer

but from several members of the public who were perplexed as to why we left the parade, I began my response. I explained that we tried desperately to exit the parade to no avail, that we in fact did not speed and could prove it by downloading the data recorder in the apparatus (most notably used if there was a serious crash involving the apparatus), that this was a real fire with the lives of civilians and firefighters at stake and not some smells and bells alarm, and in fact my driver was injured and subsequently put off the line fighting this fire. I went on to say that I decided as the officer to proceed carefully through the route, that I stood behind my decision, and that I made it with sound judgment and definitive reasoning, and that's why I was here, to make decisions as part of my job. The tour commander stated he would have done the same thing because there really was no other option. No further investigation or discipline was warranted. I made a decision as the officer and that's where this entire problem ended. Another example is when I worked on that same shift on overtime several times earlier, and unfortunately both bosses assigned (chief officers) allowed personal feelings to dictate their decision-making process which ultimately provided a fertile ground for each to play against each other like two bullies in the playground, thus creating a negative, hostile work environment where no officers dared make an independent decision, or for that matter, any decision at all. You can imagine how dysfunctional and stifling the environment was, having the latitude for independent judgment based on sound information summarily removed, especially at incidents. Coming from my own shift, I felt like a fish out of water.

Computer scientist Grace Hopper's notable quote "It's better to ask for forgiveness than permission!" is rooted in the approach of prioritizing initial timely actions and the willingness to take calculated risks over the gamble of delayed permission, approval or even objection, then subsequently dealing with possible negative consequences afterward. This does have its place in the fire officer's algorithm when decisive actions are demanded in situations where opportunity or creativity are time sensitive, normal processes may be overly bureaucratic (too many moving parts), and waiting for confirmation may actually impede any action. Obviously there would be times when this approach is inappropriate, such as when it opposes confirmed orders, where there is a high risk for harm or the delicate bond of trust is challenged, or simply when a yes or no response will suffice. I'm referencing the ability to make decisions as the officer, in line with set expectations under department directives, standards, and practices within the chain of command, and not a renegade free-lance reckless attitude often empowered from repeatedly being lucky rather than being smart. Fire officers are not robots! Part of making proper decisions is possessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities to know your job, the willpower and perseverance to perform your job, and the confidence and fortitude to not only stand behind your decisions, but to take the heat if your wrong as well! You as the officer or a person in charge should be prepared to answer to your decisions, your decision-making process, and the subsequent result of those decisions. Otherwise, maybe this isn't the job for you. Just because you have the rank, title, and responsibility of a leader, doesn't necessarily

equate to the requisite knowledge, skill or ability to make sound decisions. That may take years of practice and making mistakes before you perfect your craft. Equally important is to have the maturity and capacity to admit when you're wrong and learn from it, not just administer blame under a defensive pretext. The bottom line is this: indecision is no-decision, so you as the officer, do your job and make a decision, then stand behind it- that's why you're there!