



Mu+ual Aid

A FIRE CHIEF BLOG

Cultural Change Vs. Risk Management

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By Quinn MacLeod

What better gift is there than to pull a structure fire on your birthday? It was a warm summer evening and I was straddling the roof peak of a single-family residence, looking out over the lights of south-suburban Denver. I cradled the saw so it wouldn't fall off the roof and looked around for somewhere to stash it. We decided to just pull off the vent caps instead of continuing to cut, trying to minimize the damage. Damage, I thought to myself, was a joke — the place was trashed.

Ten years later I find myself retired from the fire department and out on a new venture to improve firefighter safety through conceptual workshops. One of the workshops, "Risk Management at the Company Level," strives to teach individuals that they have a responsibility for personal safety and identifying hazards on the fireground. I want to affect change at the company level. I believe that I could have made better decisions during my 20-plus years in the fire service had I known about some simple guidelines and concepts that are being batted around now.

One such concept is the need for a culture change. I don't think we can change our culture. Firefighters love the job when it's most dangerous. I don't know of any firefighters who signed on to run medical calls or conduct a company fire inspection. We can, however, make the culture safer.

In both structural and wildland firefighting, dangers yield the same results if you miscalculate. I was out scouting a fire in Oregon one summer and planned to walk the fire edge back to where the crews were working. Someone talked me out of it, even though fire activity was low and it was early in the day. Later that afternoon we and two other supervisors needed to run down a trail to escape the fire. When we got clear, we all laughed. The safety officer did not.

I had been in the fire service for 17 years at that point and didn't see a problem with that scenario. The safety measures we had in place gave us proper advanced warning, we simply ran to pad our time cushion. Firefighters will place themselves in danger and like it. The challenge is to be in a dangerous situation and make it safe.

Company officers probably are in the best position to affect a safe attitude within their companies, as long as they themselves buy into it. When a firefighter accepts the promotion to officer, does he or she go from being a risk-taking firefighter to a safety-conscious company officer in the 15 seconds it takes to say "yes"? If you can get the safety message across at the firefighter level, chances are they will carry that mentality up through the ranks.

Back on that roof looking for a place to stash the saw, I walked just off the peak because that is where it was easiest — not safest — to walk. I came to a vent and had to either walk above it or below it toward the bottom edge of the 2-story roof. I had good situational awareness and had to decide which way to go around the hazard: the safest way of straddling the peak, the safer way of going above it close to the peak, or the lure of going below it toward the danger of the edge.

Situational awareness is something that every firefighter processes on every incident. The levels of awareness are what differ. By providing better communications and encouraging everyone to pay better attention, we can somewhat level out those differences.

Most firefighters have been in some sort of situation where they have been at risk of injury or death. And in those situations, if we pick them apart, we would probably find common situations that shout, "watch out!" The 18 watch-out situations in wildland firefighting have been around for 50 years and have helped many firefighters identify hazards. There are a few different versions of the structural watch outs. I have created my own. The idea here is to present 20 situations that even the rookie firefighter can pick out. These can be viewed and downloaded at www.integrated-firesolutions.com.

Note: The following paragraph was removed by the editing process of Fire Chief Magazine.

Couple SA and hazard identification together is a combination that when presented points to a change in strategy and tactics, which many times will mitigate the hazardous situation. The idea of the IC giving all firefighters a voice is not meant to allow them to question or second guess the strategy and/or tactics but to question the safety of them. No one should disagree with this thought or feel threatened. The IC should be able to ask the hard question, "what am I missing here", without feeling that they have lost credibility in the eyes of the firefighters that they are leading. The fact of the matter is that four pair of eyes is more effective than one pair. Every IC has had a bad day / fire, the one which no matter what decision they made just did not seem to be the correct one. By raising the responsibility level with regards to every firefighter having an obligation to acquire and strive to raise their situational awareness, the IC will reap the benefits of better than average intelligence.

LCES (lookouts, communications, escape routes, and safety zones) is used by a number of fire departments to help mitigate hazards. In addition small modifications to a tactic, task, or just limiting the exposure of personnel may be enough to avert the danger.

The IC will decide on the course of action, but who will notice the impact first? It will be the companies on the line, so they need to be included in the process. If a course of action proves to be a higher risk, companies need to be free to voice their concerns.

This process does not get in the way of fighting the fire; it becomes the desired way of fighting the fire. We should find ways of consistently identifying hazards and standardizing the incident briefings. Those briefings need to be encouraged at all levels so as to be more effective. Interactive and detailed crew briefings are not normal for us. We need to take the time to do them and make sure they are meaningful, what is produced in the end speaks volumes. The fire service is on the right track and our awareness level is raised everyday by some pretty strong voices out there who want us all to have long, productive and healthy careers and to make it to retirement.

If you're wondering how I went around the roof vent, I can't honestly remember. But my love of the job and life in general probably steered me above the vent so if I slipped I could grab for the peak.

Quinn MacLeod is the owner and lead instructor of Integrated Fire Solutions. He recently retired from the Parker (Colo.) Fire District at the rank of engineer/acting company officer. MacLeod is NWCG-qualified as a wildfire division supervisor and holds a fire science associate's degree and numerous state and national certifications, including Fire Officer and Fire Instructor.