White Paper: On-boarding fire service recruits can help change the fire service culture
By: Lydia Wilcox

Change is neither a good or a bad thing. Most of us are resistant to change, and in fact, most people won't change until the consequence of not changing are worse than the change itself.

What is change?

Change is not what happens (the outcome), but rather how it is done (the process). Change is a constant in the fire service. Don't think so? Consider for a moment:

- We no longer use horse-drawn fire apparatus;
- We use SCBA and turnout gear instead of wet rags over our mouth and raincoats on our backs; and
- We're no longer a fire service made up exclusively of white males.

Our progression as a public safety function continues today as: fire attack methods are becoming more science based; training standards and documentation are becoming more stringent; and required levels of education for promotion within the service are increasing.

Another significant change that has already started to take place is in the shift from a culture of risk-taking to one which more closely resembles a safety-based culture. Increasingly, firefighters are less than willing to give everything when there is nothing to save. Firefighting is becoming smarter with the adoption of more science-based techniques while moving further away from the original firefighting philosophy established more than 300 years ago, by Benjamin Franklin. Retired Phoenix Fire Chief, Alan Brunacini, first popularized that philosophy as:

Fast. Get to the fire as fast as possible.
Close. Effective firefighting dictates that firefighters must get as close as possible to the fire.
Wet. Get as much water on the fire as possible (Clark, 2015).

This transition from the traditional methods of firefighting and the shift of the fire service culture, can be accomplished more effectively if fire service leaders take a look "outside" to see how the private sector and other parts of the public sector are already addressing the process of change. One of the many tools those sectors are using to better teach the organization's values and culture is on-boarding.

What is on-boarding?

On-boarding is not a new concept in the business world. It's being used more often to engage and inform newly hired employees about the organization's culture. The term "on-boarding" is almost self-explanatory as it implies getting the new hire on board, rather than the old approach of, "When they are here long enough they will know."

On-boarding goes beyond simple orientation; it familiarizes the new hire with the culture and the goals of the organization. It's a proven employment technique that helps a new hire feel more valued and can in turn create a new employee who is truer to those values which leads the employee to better express themselves and ask more questions.

When an employee is more comfortable speaking up, the organization gets more out of the them through: better collaboration; increased information transfer; and articulation of a broader spectrum of ideas and knowledge. (Cable, Gino, and Staats, 2015)

Changing the fire service culture

There has been a lot of discussion in the past several years about the risk-taking culture of the fire service and how it needs to be moved towards a safety-oriented culture. We are seeing more discussions and actions on:
- The effects of occupational stress/critical incident stress and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on firefighters;
- "Zero tolerance" policies on wearing seat belts; and
- Greater emphasis on driver training.

And while those are all positive shifts in the direction of safety, as a service we've been slow to adopt these principles on the fire ground.

The National Fallen Fire Fighter's Foundation (NFFF) developed **16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives** (FLSIs) the first being: "Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety; incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability, and personal responsibility." (NFFF, 2011)

This FLSI not only puts the responsibility of safety on the leaders and managers. It is also states that safety is a group responsibility, placing the onus on all fire service members, from the Chief right down to the newest recruit. This is further reinforced by the fourth FLSI which is: **"**All firefighters must be empowered to stop unsafe practices." (NFFF, 2011)

Beginning with the end in mind

For many departments, when a recruit is hired they are put through a rigorous training program for several weeks or months to give them the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) to do the job safely, effectively and efficiently. Following that technical training, they get assigned to their first crew. Historically, it is the attitudes of that crew that will shape how the recruit sees the culture of the department.

This exposure may very well shape the attitude of the recruit for their entire career. If this crew displays attitudes and behaviours that are not in line with the culture that fire service leaders have established, the recruit may eventually adopt unwanted behaviours (Baigent et al., 2007).

The alternative to this is having an on-boarding program in place for the recruits during their entry-level training. When a new member and more experienced incumbent member [who exemplifies the desired characteristics and behaviors] are paired together, the new hire is better able to express their unique perspective and experience.

They are more likely to feel valued and more engaged and less likely to absorb poor examples of behaviour that leads to risk taking. Having a new member paired up with someone that understands and reflects the culture and reflects the values and goals of the organization can ultimately guide the career of that firefighter in a positive way.

Hero-orientation as an element of fire service culture

A report written in collaboration between the Surrey (BC) Fire Services and the University of Fraser Valley (BC) identified several factors that contribute to the risk-taking culture in the fire service and identifies how the fire service can move more towards a culture of safety orientation. Cited in the paper is **Situational Awareness**, which is the perception of the event, comprehending what is happening and predicting what will happen. Too often situational awareness is thwarted by the fire service culture. Two of the four dimensions brought forward in the paper are hero-orientation and a veteran-centric milieu (Dow et al., 2013).

Hero-orientation is the perception in the media and the public that those people in the fire service are risk takers, that they are willing to lay down their own lives for strangers (Dow et al., 2013). Allan Brunacini, retired Fire Chief of the Phoenix (Arizona)Fire Department, points out that it doesn't matter how a person dies in the line of duty, either freelancing or trying to save a life, they are given the same hero's funeral (Brunacini in FEMA, 2015).

These influences shape who we hire because the people applying to the fire departments have been primed to share the same values with other fire service members. The depiction of firefighters in popular media (television and movies), the recruiting materials that we use to attract new members, and the elaborate funeral ceremonies that we provide to those firefighters who die in the line of duty are all heavy influences on how potential new members view the job of a firefighter.

A well-develop on-boarding program, implemented for the recruit during entry-level training, can start to change the culture in the fire service from the bottom up. It has been shown that firefighters who identify themselves as heroes are more likely to become risk takers, whereas firefighters that are socialized as public servants don't. (Dow et al., 2013) On-boarding a new

firefighter into the fire service with the correct messages will go a long way towards establishing a career focused more around being intelligently cautious over boldly aggressive.

A veteran-centric environment

A veteran-centric environment, which is common in most fire departments, equates experience with power. When this happens in complete isolation from any other inputs it eventually undervalues knowledge (Dow et al., 2013).

The fire service is a highly competitive workplace for new members to access. Fire service recruiters and Human Resources staffs are seeing an increase in applicants who have post-secondary education, e.g., college-level course work, prior to entering fire service training.

Many more have prior work and life experience. The changing economic landscape and job market are forcing men and women of all ages to make career changes and the fire service offers a more stable employment option.

The fire service must come to terms with these changing demographics of the people it recruits. The new person feels that after completing a competitive applicant testing process they were hired because of the skills and knowledge and life experiences they bring to the job. But when a veteran-centric environment exists, those new hires can feel undervalued and forced to fit into a culture that may rely on out-moded traditions and outdated technology and techniques.

If, however, that recruit is properly on-boarded and allowed to express their opinions, and is empowered to use their knowledge, they will likely become more engaged and feel more valued. They are also less likely to adopt a culture (hero-centric) that doesn't fit with where the fire service is heading (service-centric). On-boarding new recruits during their entry-level training can be a strong complement to a fire service leader's top-down approach to changing the culture within their department.

On-boarding introduces a new hire to the goals, values, assumptions, beliefs and culture of their new workplace. Within the fire service, it can be used towards changing how a service functions within a culture of safety and not that of risk-taking. On-boarding can make a powerful first impression on the new employee: they are there to serve the public; they are not expected to take unnecessary risks; and when the Chief states that everyone has a voice, an opinion and a right to express it, they welcome it.

Another potential positive outcome from the adoption of a system for effective on-boarding is that it can reduce top-level leadership issues. When new hires get the proper culture and operations at the front end, there are fewer performance issues, less personnel conflicts and other personnel management issues which then become a concern of the department's leadership. As Benjamin

Franklin said (writing under his pen name of Poor Richard), "An ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure!"

About the Author

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