

ORANGE PEEL

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20 THINGS ALL ROOKIES SHOULD KNOW

Someone once said a smart person has knowledge, a wise person shares knowledge. Everyone learns through sharing of knowledge and experience. No one benefits more from this sharing than the “*rookie*”. Following, are twenty guidelines that I have learned from working with some extraordinary firefighters. I share these in the hopes of helping rookies establish themselves as competent and confident members of our profession. These rules can also serve as a refresher for those of us who have more years under our belts.

1. Never Disrespect This Job By No Caring.

It is an honor to be a firefighter. To become complacent is to dishonor those who have gone before us. This job is not just “10 days and a paycheck”. Embrace training as a means to maintain the necessary level of proficiency. Truly loving this job means loving every aspect of it and therefore deserving to wear the badge. This is the greatest profession there is, treat it as such.

2. Lead by example.

Even a rookie can lead by example. Do your job well, every time, and that can rub off on the other members of your crew. Soon they may be trying to reach the standard that you, the rookie, have set.

3. Arrive at work at least 30 minutes before shift change.

Preparation for that big fire begins when you walk through the door. Arriving early allows you to familiarize yourself with the apparatus you are assigned to before that 0805 fire call. It will also endear you to the off going crew by grabbing that end of shift call. Start off on the right foot, arrive early. **If you are on time, you’re late. If your early, you’re on time!**

4. Talk to the off going crew.

Don't let your counterpart leave without getting a report on what happened on their shift. If they had a fire, find out everything about it including what went right and what went wrong. You can learn a lot from both. Did they have any other interesting calls? Was there any equipment moved, replaced, or sent in for repair? Don't be the one who frantically looks for the hook that is out being repaired. Conversely, don't rush out the door at first sight of your replacement. Share your experiences with the crew that is relieving you. Give them the same courtesy that they extended to you.

5. Introduce yourself to everyone you meet.

Take the first step in the communication process. This is especially true on your first day in the house. Greet everyone you see with a hand shake and a "Hi, I am firefighter Smith, nice to meet you." Being new, it is imperative that you meet everyone as soon as possible because you rely on them for everything. The sooner you make them aware of your presence the better off you will be. Do not make your captain hunt you down. They will probably not know who you are so find them and let them know you are on their crew.

6. Find out who the senior firefighter is.

The "first whip" or senior firefighter will be your greatest asset. Ask them all of those questions related to your first day in that house. Which bed is mine? What housework do I do? Where can I find a mop? These types of questions should be asked of the first whip and not the captain. The captain has more important things to do than to show you where the mop bucket is. If no one steps up as the first whip any of the other firefighters should help.

7. Find out your riding position and your responsibilities.

This information can also be obtained from the senior firefighter. They will instruct you on how their crew does things and how you fit in. Understand what is expected of you before you go out the door.

8. Check your equipment.

This rule can never be overstated. Failing to be prepared is preparing to fail. Check your PPE and SCBA. Check every nozzle every shift. Check the rest of the equipment on the engine/truck to make sure it is where you left it the day before. If you are there for the first time, check to see where everything is. Knowledge of what is in those cabinets means you have one less thing to worry about when the big one hits.

9. Wear your safety gear.

Contrary to what you might think you are not indestructible. You have been given protective clothing to ensure that you go home at the end of your shift. This clothing cannot protect you if it stays on the hook in the apparatus room. Wear your hood, pull down your helmet shroud, button your collar, and wear your structure gloves. Give yourself every chance of getting back home in the same shape as when you left.

10. If you have any questions, ASK THEM.

Pride has no business impeding knowledge. Not asking something for fear of looking stupid will only get you in trouble. The bottom line is you need to know what you are doing even at the expense of looking cool.

11. Don't get caught up in the rumor mill.

The kitchen table is a great place for knowledge swapping. It is also where rumors are created, sustained, and traded. As a rookie, don't take part in the rumor mill. You never know who you may offend. What you say can be incorrectly repeated and used to hurt you. If it is fire talk, sit there and absorb. If it is rumor talk, walk away.

12. Don't be in a hurry to gain acceptance.

Your actions will be closely scrutinized, they must speak for themselves. Pulling a pre-connect correctly is more important to your crew than the fact that you were the chief of your old department.

13. Be a team player.

Remember, when things go bad, all you have is your crew. Crew continuity is built at the firehouse as well as on the fire scene. If asked, join your crew for PT or other non-firefighting activities. Attend functions such as retirement parties with your crew. A good crew is built off duty as well as on.

14. Have fun.

As stated in rule #1, this is the greatest profession in the world. Being enthusiastic about being a firefighter can be contagious. Have fun cleaning the toilets as well as fighting fire. Develop a sense of humor; survival in the firehouse depends on it. Enjoying even the smallest aspects of this job is what leads to a happy career.

15. Have pride.

Be proud of where you work. You have chosen your department for a reason. You may not always agree with decisions that are being made above you but do not let that diminish your love for the job and your department. Along with department pride comes company pride. As a rookie you should be looking forward to the time when you will have a permanent house. Work at being the best firefighter, on the best crew, at the best firehouse. Pride will push you to better yourself for the good of your crew. Company pride is the sincerest form of department pride.

16. Don't think "Been there, done that".

You are only as good as your next call. Don't be overconfident. Whether you were a hero or a goat will not help you on the next emergency. What will help is the experience and knowledge that you gained.

17. Never stop learning.

You are finished with the academy and probation. You can stop reading and studying, right? Wrong. The day you stop reading about our job is the day you retire. There is a limitless supply of information out there for you to increase your knowledge base. Practice makes perfect works for reading as well as hands on.

18. Respect your elders.

There is an extensive amount of information held in the minds of the senior members of the department. To gain this information you must be willing to make the first move. Don't be afraid to ask them questions. Ask the senior engineers about how they fought fires in their firefighter days. Ask the firefighters who are about to retire how they would have fought that last fire you were on. Would they have done anything different then? Don't let that knowledge retire when they do.

19. Leave work at work.

And conversely leave your home life at home. Your crew does not deserve your wrath because you and a family member had a fight. And on the other side, try not to take work problems home. Your family does not deserve grief because you pulled the wrong line on a fire.

20. Remember where you came from.

As your career moves on and you are no longer the rookie, be available to the one who is. *Everything you have learned, you have been taught.* Do not be stingy with that knowledge. Those "rookies" shaking in their boots on day one deserves the same respect and tutelage that you received. If hazing and condescension were your tutors then break that chain. Be a true firefighter and help out the rookie even if you weren't. Individually we can get better, but only as a whole can we become great.