

ORANGE PEEL

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BE PROUD-BE PROFESSIONAL-BE A FIREMAN

My dad is a cop, he has a large sword that used to hang in the hallway of his office and next to it is a small plaque that reads, Be True Be Swift Be Just. I chose a career in public service just like he did but I didn't want to fight bad guys, I wanted to fight fires. I had my own small plaque that got me fired up each day, it was just a small paper note taped to my rear view mirror and it read, Be Proud Be Professional Be a Fireman. Well, I had the first part as soon as my uncle pinned my badge over my heart. I had the title of fireman even before I started my first day in the firehouse and even though I had been paid to be a fireman I still was not a professional. Sure I had a professional attitude and I saw the words "maintains a professional appearance" on a couple of evaluations, but I didn't feel like a professional.

I've had plenty of jobs and a few professional careers most of which were in residential construction, so I will base most of my comparisons from this perspective. You will most likely also have many experiences to which you can compare. More than half of the jobs in residential construction are labor only jobs. Some would say no skill or special training is required. I disagree. Even if a worker is picking up trash and sweeping floors for payment he will do it well or he will not be paid. The construction environment is like that- you either work hard or you don't work. When a worker takes pride in a job well done he is usually rewarded for a job well done. I saw a contractor offer a job in a specialty trade to a guy just because he showed up early, cleaned up the jobsite very well, and worked late to get things done. A tradesman is a very good term for a blue-collar hard-working construction worker, for the term literally means a worker in a skilled trade.

It takes a while to get to the skilled part, just as it does in the fire service. We are well trained in basic firefighting principals during the academy. We learn on the job and we hopefully study the trade for a lifetime. I say trade because let's face it- firefighting is a blue-collar labor job. I know that all of us in the last ten years have had to become "Hazmat-medical-bacheloret-computer programmers" but the tasks we perform while on the fire ground require the ability to perform skilled labor. Yes, we do need to be mentally prepared too. Did you get enough mental preparation in the academy? Did you mentally prepare yourself last tour in the bathroom stall with a fire magazine?

A professional can't stop training because he so badly wants to be a professional.

So I found myself struggling initially to become a good fireman. I wanted to be great and was so caught up in impressing everyone that I barely even scratched the surface of learning the trade. This seems to be the case with most new fireman, trying to fit in and make a good name. As soon as this “traditional” initiation phase is done it’s time to get on with it. Become a professional. I’m not saying that in the first year or two of becoming a fireman one doesn’t learn some of the major parts of the craft, my meaning is that a lot of time is spent on important but other lessons.

I’m on a ladder at 0745 trying to wire a \$4000.00 chandelier and not destroy it in the process and I hear a finish carpenter tell his apprentice about a specific setting on the miter saw. He is so familiar with his equipment that he can see the saw’s angle is incorrect from 15 feet away and is able to verbalize from his vantage point to his young cut man exactly how to “dial in” the saw. This is not unlike walking by a stretched hose line on the fire ground and moving your eyes quickly from the engine along the hose all the way checking for kinks and counting couplings before you move on to your assigned task. Do you do this? Are you a professional?

I’m helping a concrete contractor for a few days on a large pour and while we begin to grade and tamp some gravel base I see a framing carpenter moving very fast across a dirt lot towards a compressor that is malfunctioning. He shuts it down. I keep on working and look over every so often to see what he’s doing. He opens his tool box and goes to work on the compressor. He quickly has the compressor fixed and I hear a nailer “popping” about two minutes later. During lunch I ask the guy about his problem. He tells me that he could tell it was the relief valve from inside the house. He explains how he keeps a couple in his tool box and how it has only happened one time before. If he did not use his tools everyday and become an expert at how they work he would not know about all of the little things that could go wrong, or how to fix them. Just imagine how much time it would have taken him to pack up his tools and drive to find the right part or how long and labor intensive it would’ve been to use his hammer all day! Time is money to these guys.

Have you trained this week on how to fix your SCBA if something went wrong inside a smoke-filled structure with no visibility? Have you donned a blacked out mask and had a fellow fireman sound his PASS device somewhere in the firehouse while you search for him and secure an air source for him while wearing your gloves? You would do this because it just might be too hot to remove your glove when you’re trying to save a brothers life. You would do this with a PASS device sounding loudly to distract you and make it difficult. You would do this because you are a professional. Just imagine how long it would feel to your downed brother if you fumbled with the SCBA and with your movements before you were able to get him out. Time is not money to these guys – its life or death.

I’m being taught to “make up” an electrical panel by my boss, a master electrician. This panel happens to be hot (energized) and I’m a little apprehensive but want to learn this so I can do it and the boss can concentrate on other stuff. I neatly tuck all of the “homeruns” (main circuits) down the sides of the panel and begin grounding and securing all of the neutral wires when BANG my screw driver touches the hot bussing and sparks fly. I am pushed back and my driver is toast. My boss explains again to me how the bussing is hot and I will be killed if the energy gets a hold of me. I ask about the current in the panel.

My boss tells me that it really doesn't matter and I should concentrate. The job is complete and we discuss electrical current and electrical panel amperage ratings. I know now what certain amounts of electrical current and amperage mean and how they will react. Do you read the manual for the auto- extrication tools? Do you know how much PSI or kinetic force is applied when using the spreaders? What if there is a certain way the tool will pin your hand and not allow you to back off the control and if so you would crush your fingers? You would read that information immediately wouldn't you? You wouldn't waste another minute watching TV instead of training if it meant losing your hand and possibly the best job on the planet would you?

A professional is defined as one who follows a certain line of conduct as if it were a career and a person who conforms to the ethical standards for purposes of gain in an endeavor often engaged in by amateurs. I have read a quote somewhere from Joaquin Phoenix about his experience in the Baltimore Fire Academy before filming Ladder 49. He talks about how hard it was and how the things they did in the make-believe world of the movies are things that fireman actually do in real life. Yeah, and for a lot less money. The actors in this movie are professionals and they train hard to sharpen their skills, to make us believe what we see is real. Phoenix went through an entire fire academy same time, same drills, same PT, and same mistakes as the other new recruits. He knew we would be watching and even though Hollywood puts their spin on it he wanted it to look real and to "get it right". As firemen we know who is watching us and who we need to get it right for.

Know how far your hose will reach. Know what GPM and PSI that nozzle is rated at. Know what it feels like to open it up at that pressure. Know that the smoothbore is better. Try advancing a hose line up a few flights of stairs at your local parking structure or stadium while flowing water (get permission first). Check your personal flashlight batteries, and your fellow firefighters' SCBA. Take the saws out even if you don't work on the truck. Stop training with just your company and get the others around you out to drill. Go take more classes and read service manuals. Like a sponge, ring yourself out and get ready to absorb some more information, for knowledge is power.

The next time you see a construction crew working, stop and watch them. Watch a guy on a ladder hoisting a hod full of stucco and how quickly he moves up and down the ladder. Watch the roofers move along the ridge or in the valley so they don't fall. Watch a carpenter reach into his nail bags and pull out a tool without looking down, because his movements are so rehearsed he does it with out thinking. Professionalism is not all about training but training will make you a more professional firefighter. Do it because you love this job. Do it because you value your life and the lives of your brothers. Do it for the people who need us. Do it because you're a professional.