

ORANGE PEEL

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THE NEW OFFICER- Lessons Learned

I am a brand new acting captain and it goes without saying that I have very little experience sitting in the front seat. Sitting up there has given me a whole new perspective on this great job of ours. I have made many observations on how to do the captain's job but those were from the back seat. Now that I realize the responsibilities that come with doing the work of an officer, those observations have to be tempered. So I present to you the lessons that I have learned from sitting in the front seat.

YOUR CREW IS YOUR NUMBER ONE PRIORITY.

Your crew's well being is your number one priority and should take precedence over everything else. Getting your crew back to their loved ones in the same physical and mental state is paramount. This does not mean forgoing all obligations and doing only what your crew wants. It means taking them out and training with them so they are better suited to handle the unexpected. It means taking the time to explain to the younger members why we stretch hose the way we do. It means convincing your veteran engineer of the benefits of learning about RIC, even if he only has six months to retirement. Show your crew that you believe in them and they will follow you anywhere. Take care of your crew and they will take care of you.

WHISPER TO A SCREAM...WHICH GETS HEARD BETTER. (YOU CAN'T BLOW INTO THESE BUGLES TO BE HEARD)

Screaming to be heard is not an effective way to communicate to your crew. Your message gets thru a lot better if done under a less than ear piercing decibel. This is especially true on the emergency scene where everyone is excited. Be the calm one. This will instill calm in you crew. Even if you are not completely sure of what to do, your crew won't know that you are unsure. If your crew thinks that you are squared away they are less likely to free-lance. On the opposite end you do have to speak up now and then. The strong silent type has to mix in some words. Crew directions have to be assertive and loud enough to be heard. You cannot have command presence if you can't be heard.

DON'T FORGET WHERE YOU CAME FROM, OR DIDN'T COME FROM.

Remember that we all started from the same bottom rung on the fire department ladder. You shouldn't act as if you never stretched the wrong line, couldn't start the saw or forgot to take down the flag. It's hard being a new firefighter, so give them a break. Attila the Hun does not need to make an appearance with every mistake. This is especially true when dealing with medics. Most of us did not come thru as paramedics, so we have no idea what it is like to be on a medic. Running 20 calls on an engine in one shift is totally different from running 20 calls on a medic. Be the understanding captain that will help medics stay out of trouble and do their job. This becomes especially important at 3:30 AM when their patients have been worn thin. Compassion works for over worked medics as well as the public.

DEMANDING RESPECT IS THE SUREST WAY NOT TO GET RESPECT.

“I AM THE CAPTAIN AND YOU WILL DO AS I SAY.... OR ELSE.” It is very hard to respect that captain. You cannot steal respect, buy it or demand it. The only way to gain respect is to earn it. You earn it by being fair, level headed and willing to admit when you are wrong. Being fallible is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign that you're human. There is no shame in asking for help, even if it is from the probationary firefighter. The shame should come from not asking and letting a problem get worse. Your crew can only respect you if they see that you are one of them. Don't try to pretend that you are better than them. You're not.

DON'T TREAT PEOPLE HOW YOU WOULD WANT TO BE TREATED, TREAT THEM AS THEY WANT TO BE TREATED.

Yes, I know that this is a cliché but it works for the fire service. You have to learn the different personalities of your crewmembers. Treating your crew, as you like to be treated, without finding out if that's how they like to be treated is asking for trouble. I love energy and noise in the firehouse. If I assume the same for my crew I could be in for some transfer requests.

MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO. (A.K.A. LEAD BY EXAMPLE)

Nothing is beneath you. There are no jobs that you can't do because you are the officer. Step up and help out. A good way to motivate someone to do something unpleasant is to show them that you are willing to do it to also. This shows them that you are more interested in getting the job done, than in watching them sweat thru an unpleasant ordeal. It also shows them that you are willing to sweat right along side of them which will lead to crew unity. A crew united can move mountains. Obtain this unity by helping out on house or equipment inspection, or by doing the dishes so that the young medic can eat and not have to worry about getting up to do them. Getting your hands dirty does not weaken your stance as an officer, it strengthens it.

SUGGESTIONS vs DECISIONS

As the senior firefighter you make suggestions to your captain all day long. Do this, do that, let's stretch this line, let's jump that call. We have all done it. But when you move up to the front seat those suggestions now become decisions. You are no longer just suggesting but you are deciding, with those decisions possibly altering the way a fire or critical medical aid goes. Listen to the suggestions that come from behind you and then make a decision based on your knowledge and experience.

TRAIN AND YE SHALL LIVE (A MUCH BETTER LIFE)

Training improves everything. It makes you and your crew better at handling the job. It gives them confidence which in turn lowers their stress level. Training improves public relations by lessening the impact of their emergency. It endears you to your chief because he looks good when you turn a potential "fully involved" into a "room and contents." Make training fun. Challenge your crew by creating scenarios and let them make the decisions on how to handle them. You will find that you will learn as much from them as you might think they learn from you. Shared Knowledge is Power.

That is what I have learned so far about transitioning from senior firefighter to captain. It is an ongoing process and I find it intriguing and scary at the same time. I hope to learn from my many mistakes and one day become a firefighter worthy of the title Captain.