

ORANGE PEEL

January 31, 2004

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THE FIRST WHIP

In today's modern fire department the positions of rank are explicitly defined. From the chief of the department to the captains to the engineers to the firefighters, all ranks and responsibilities are known. If unsure, one can turn to their manual of operations for a clear and concise explanation. There are, however, positions within those ranks that are not defined and may not even be known about. One of those positions is known as *the first whip*.

The first whip, or senior man, is the senior firefighter of the crew or house. The term first whip comes from the times of horse drawn engines and the first whip was the senior fireman who held the whip and drove the horses. The first whip is not necessarily the oldest firefighter in the house or the one that has been there the longest. Although both of these facts usually do describe the first whip they do not define him. The first whip is the firefighter who carries his company and his department on his shoulders with extreme pride. He cares about learning and about teaching what he has learned to those who will listen. He is passionate about preserving the brotherhood of the fire service. He cares about doing the right thing, on and off the fire scene.

The first whip has many responsibilities both at the emergency scene and at the firehouse. Although these responsibilities are not written down anywhere they are nonetheless very important. The firehouse, though less exciting than the emergency scene, is where most of the hard work and problem solving occur. The fire scene will usually be run by a certain game plan. There is no game plan for running a firehouse. So the role of the first whip is paramount to having an orderly, smooth running and enjoyable firehouse.

A good first whip concerns himself with the day in and day out workings of the firehouse. He **does not** necessarily run the firehouse, although it may at times seem like he is. He **does** handle the "mundane" and the "routine" so that his captain can concentrate on more important things. He runs interference for his captain, dealing with the simple items he can handle. The first whip and the rest of the crew, for example, will order supplies. The captain will have to sign the paperwork but the first whip should be familiar with what the house needs. The first whip should be the one that ensures that housework is done properly. He should be involved with maintaining station pride. Pride in his company goes without saying and pride in his station should be equally important.

The firehouse is **his** house. Unfortunately, the firehouse is also the taxpayer's house. If the people he protects are the landlords then he is the renter. He gets to stay there rent-free as long as he goes out and saves them whenever they call. So station pride can go a long way to pleasing the landlords as well as making him feel good about his station. It's not always easy to motivate the crew to pull weeds or wash windows. But the first whip needs to be the catalyst and may even have to start the chore alone. Wanting to help him should motivate the crew to join in. Leading by example will gain respect of his crew as well as alleviate the captain from being the "bad guy" who has to tell them what chores to do.

As stated earlier, the first whip's main job is to run interference for his captain. This becomes critical when dealing with a probationary firefighter or a shift trader/over-timer. These firefighters will have questions. The firefighter who is there for one day will need to know his riding position and assignment as well as his housework duties and where he is to sleep. The probie will have these questions and many more. The first whip will need to take the initiative and open the lines of communication. He needs to intercept these questions before they make it to his captain and he needs to let it be known that he is the one to ask. His captain should not have to answer questions pertaining to what side of the rig to sit on and where the mop bucket might be found. Of course any good captain will want to say a few words to a new crewmember, especially if it is a probie. But hopefully his conversation will end with, "Firefighter Smith will show you around and answer any questions." If the first whip has done his job the new guy should answer with, "Thanks Captain Jones, Firefighter Smith has already started showing me around." If that new crewmember is a probationary firefighter, the first whip has taken the first step to introducing him to life in his firehouse and his fire department.

Getting involved with a new firefighter is a great way to influence the future. By his words, but more importantly by his actions, the first whip can help mold young firefighters into productive members of his department. He can pass on his experience concerning the correct way to fight fire. He can also show the probationary firefighter that it is okay to be enthusiastic about the job. After all, the first whip will be looked up to, if for no other reason than his number of years on the job. If the new firefighter can see that after ten or so years a senior firefighter can still be excited about the job than an image will be created in this young firefighter's mind. Hopefully this image will carry on long after he is off probation. Possibly this image will inspire this new firefighter to continue to learn and train. And maybe he will work to improve himself in every aspect of the job because he loves it and not because he has to. By showing the new firefighter the "get to go to work" attitude instead of the "have to go to work" attitude the first whip has hopefully made a career long impression.

Now it should be mentioned here that *first whips are not captains*. There is no collar brass associated with being a first whip. First whips should not try to change protocol or rewrite the rules and regulations. He should confide in his captain before making any questionable decision. Captains get paid the big bucks for making tough decisions. So let them. The first whip's actions should not lead to his captain having to cover for him in front of the chief. Remember, a first whip runs interference for his captain he does not create it.

For the first whip, the fire scene is actually less complicated than the firehouse. He ensures that the plan of attack that his crew has trained on gets carried out. The captain is the “coach” and the first whip is the “quarterback.” Whatever the captain calls for, the first whip needs to be ready to carry out without being told twice. He is his captain’s extra set of eyes and ears. He should create a confident crew that can deal with any circumstance. He should relieve his captain of doubt and anxiety that the correct line will be stretched, or that the proper tools will be carried or that the search will be done proficiently. His captain should be confident the first whip knows that as a back-up firefighter his position is at the front door pulling hose and not right behind the nozzle. These fire scene “plays” are practiced on the drill ground and the first whip must ensure their completion. He must have good control of his and his partner’s actions. This will relieve the “coach” of worrying about the “play” so he can concentrate on winning the “game”.

The same holds true for other emergencies. Whether it is car accidents, medical aids or “bells and smells” the first whip must have a plan. As with fires, the right equipment makes all the difference. The first whip cannot get complacent. He must remember that he has another firefighter watching him. If he goes to an alarm bell without the proper gear on so will the other firefighter. Again, the captain should not need to worry if his crew will be dressed correctly, because one day that alarm bell on the sixth floor *will* be a fire.

The first whip must be ready and make sure that his partner is ready. He can’t let his captain down. The same goes for medical aids. Bring all the equipment you think you might need. DON’T GET COMPLACENT. *Complacency is contagious.* If the first whip is complacent than the junior firefighter will get complacent. The first whip cannot afford to be complacent and neither can his crew.

The first whip, or senior man, is the firefighter who is regarded as the “go to” person of his crew. He helps his captain run the firehouse as well as the fire scene. He assumes this responsibility because he knows how vital a first whip is to the smooth operations of his crew, his firehouse and his department. Although no extra pay or prestige comes with being the first whip, he assumes the position with pride because he wants to make a difference. If he does his job right, a first whip will help mold the young firefighters of his department and in turn mold his department.