

THE LOST ART OF FIREMANSHIP

Let face facts, this job is not rocket science. Those of average intelligence, with common sense and basic mechanical aptitude can excel in the fire service. Then why have we lost the basic knowledge, skills and abilities to perform our jobs?

It can all fall back upon the lost art of firemanship. Yes I used the “man” version, but *firemanship* is not about gender, rather it refers to the basic skills that that fire service has used for generations.

As boy scouts I studied the basics of firefighting and earned my “Firemanship” merit badge. We learned about the fire triangle and if we took away a leg of the triangle, the fire would go out. We learned hot air rises and fire always looks for the path of least resistance. I learned these things when I was 12 years old. Why is it that this basic information seems to be foreign to most people entering the fire service today?

Yes that was many years ago, but I still use those simple boyhood lessons every day. Not to generation bash, but the kids these days have grown-up in a much different time and culture than I did.

We have the pleasure of hosting a junior college fire academy at our department. This allows me the opportunity to witness the “cream-of-the-crop” and the future of our profession. And what I see makes me worry. Many of the “kids” appear to lack basic life skills: how to clean a toilet; how to press a shirt; how to cook a basic meal or how to follow simple instructions. It is not all their fault. We as a society must take our share of the blame. Our fast food, fast lane, and fast internet world has taken away the need for our youth to learn the skills that it takes to be a good firefighter.

We again fail them in the academy. We have forsaken the must know skills: hoselines, ladder throws, search and rescue and PPE use. As an example I have seen as little as four hours of the fire academy dedicated to SCBA. The students get to don the BA once and maybe do a quick right-hand search, and then they are onto the next topic.

The instructors have spent much more time on topics such as Hazmat, confined space and terrorism. These are all important given the world we live in, but they should not replace the information that the entry level grunt firefighter needs to know. Education should focus on pulling hose, throwing ladders and basic fire behavior--- good basic firemanship. A Firefighter 1 certification should mean more than just being able to recognize a hose or ladder, but the new firefighter must know how to use them, in their sleep.

It is just not the “new kids” that lack the luster and shine of good firemanship, but guys that have been on the job for some time. Just to review a basic tenant of firefighting: ***Firefighting is inherently dangerous.*** When did we forget this fact? Fire is hot. There is smoke, dangerous gases, little or no visibility and FIRE. I have been on incidents where we were admonished to avoid going in because it was burning. I ask you if we do not go in to put the fire out then what are we there for? This is where common sense comes into play: We enter the environment knowing that it is dangerous. We are running in, while everyone else is run out to take actions to make the situation better.

Another example of the loss of Firemanship is demonstrated by a department culture where it is acceptable to sit in the front lawn, surrounded by a pile of water bottles after using your first SCBA bottle rehabbing , all the while the home continues to burn. Firefighting means you are going to get dirty, be hot, tired and just plain get your back side kicked. When did it become ok to abandon your job because you are sweating?

We have also lost the basic knowledge of fire behavior. A neighboring department was working a residential fire, when the radio lit up with anxious traffic reporting an attic fire. They seemed truly surprised that there was fire extension to the attic space. All I could do not to yell at the radio and say “no duh dumb sh**.”

Yes, I have spent a great deal time griping about what is wrong, and I would be remiss if I did not offer any solutions. I am mindful of the old saying admonishing those who live in glass houses not through stones. So I took my 6 foot hook and cleared the glass, sash and all, hopefully letting the stale air out.

First, we cannot change how the next generation is raised. But we can encourage vocational education. It should be ok to take a shop class. People should know how things work and how to fix things and I don’t mean debugging a computer program or how to hard reboot a CPU.

Second, we must not forsake our traditions. Fire has been fought by men and women, crawling down hot, smokey hallways taking a beating to put the fire out. It was dangerous then and remains dangerous now. Let’s not let forget the lessons learned by our predecessors; take the time to teach the New Kid what firemanship is about, what the job is about.

Third, we must continue our professional and personal education. We cannot just learn something and think we know it forever. Our job environment changes too much to remain entrenched in some old technique we learned in drill school. Keep an open mind, but do not forget the basics.

Remember put the wet stuff on the red stuff. We can solve all the fire ground problems by putting the fire out. With no fire, there is no need for a rescue. No exposure problems and no need for the RIC.

As a profession we must return to the basics of our trade: Hot, dirty, hard work that every generation has done before us. Keep yourself educated, in shape and be true to the job. Remember we are the fire service and it is only as good as we make. Do not forget *Firemanship*, because without it public works could do our job.