

# Speaking of Safety

BY CRAIG H. SHELLEY  
AND ANTHONY COLE

## DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF SAFETY

**M**UCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN lately on the subject of firefighter injuries and deaths. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation held a summit of fire service leaders in March 2004 to focus on preventing line-of-duty deaths.

Sixteen key initiatives and implementation strategies emerged from the summit. The first initiative listed was to “define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety, incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability, and personal responsibility.”

Webster’s defines culture as the “ideas, customs, skills, arts, etc. of a people or group that are transferred, communicated, or passed along.”<sup>2</sup> Culture can also be described as the values, norms, and beliefs of an organization. In *First In, Last Out: Leadership Lessons from the New York Fire Department*, author John Salka writes: “The moment probies show up at their assigned firehouses for their first day on the job, they’re inducted into the culture of the department.”<sup>3</sup>

To prevent line-of-duty injuries and deaths we need to change the existing fire service culture and also need to develop a “culture of safety.”

Having worked in the municipal and the industrial fire services, we can see a difference in how safety is presented and approached within both venues. In industry, safety is a continuous theme or mantra, mainly driven by private industry’s requirement to comply with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations. OSHA enforces

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various federal regulations that govern how private industry must protect its workers. How can we in the fire service incorporate this continuous theme of safety and thus develop the culture of safety?

The culture of safety starts with a health and safety program, such as the National Fire Protection Association’s (NFPA) 1500, *Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program*. NFPA 1500 states that the application of this standard for all agencies (public, military, private,

etc.) holding the responsibility for providing fire, rescue, or other emergency services should include the minimum requirements for an occupational safety and health program. More importantly, safety must become a way of life, be dynamic, and be incorporated into on- and off-duty activities. It must include wellness programs that are part of the culture of the department and not just a document on the shelf in the fire chief’s office. Is your department’s safety program dynamic and all-encompassing?

The health and safety program must be a reality not only in your department but also in the hearts and heads of your employees. There must be leadership and commitment on the part of the fire service leaders. Additionally, the program should enable employee ownership to allow freedom to express change or improvement. Are fire officers enablers of unsafe practices—promoting and aiding such behavior among firefighters? Or, do they empower personnel to report and correct unsafe conditions or acts?

It has long been known that fire service personal protective equipment (PPE) needs regular care and maintenance, especially periodic cleaning, to protect the wearer fully and effectively. But how many officers allow bunker gear to retain that “salty” look without confronting the responsible individual? The officer who allows this effectively becomes an enabler. Fire chiefs and officers should set the example and be actively involved in promoting safety. When we empower our employees, every individual becomes a “safety officer.” Along with empowerment, your employees need to be educated in the necessity for safety.

How can we further advance the culture of safety? Let’s look at our mission and vision statements. Do they reflect a commitment to safety? Does the mission or vision statement specifically mention the word “safety”?

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What about your core values? How many departments have core value statements? And do these core values promote safety?

Following are some ideas that can assist in developing a culture of safety within an organization.

- **Discuss safety regularly.** Chief and company officers should discuss safety issues at weekly or monthly meetings and should ask firefighters safety-related questions during roll calls and station visits.

- **Promote a safety topic of the month.** These should cover safety on the job and off the job. Develop posters on selected topics, and display them prominently in your fire stations and administrative offices.

- **Create a safety quiz show.** If your department has a private cable television channel, develop a quiz-show format in which firefighters compete to answer safety-related questions.

- **Provide a daily safety message.** Issue a daily safety message to be read and discussed at roll call. One large department had such a message sent out on its computer system in the mornings, but it was delivered after roll call; as a result, the message was rarely conveyed to the firefighters. These messages need to be communicated *prior* to roll call so they can be presented *at* roll call. When discussing safety with our members, we need to talk with them, not at them.

- **Put "safe" into SOP.** Change the acronym SOP from standard operating procedure to safe operating procedure. Safety should be our standard.

- **Create a safety suggestion program.** Create a worthwhile safety suggestion program in which such suggestions are legitimately reviewed and the people submitting the suggestions are recognized in some fashion.

- **Prepare for injuries even at training.** The use of an incident action plan (IAP) with a medical plan that provides information on incident/drill medical aid stations, transportation services, hospitals, and medical emergency procedures should be implemented during drills and training exercises. Relevant safety issues such as personnel safety hazards associated with the drill should be included on ICS form 202 (Incident Objectives) or can be transferred to an IAP attachment page titled "Safety Message." Prior to beginning the drill or training exercise, the IAP and its attachments are discussed with all participants.

- **Be "safety whys."** Promote the "why" of

safety. Recently, the fire chief of a large department mandated that members wear safety vests while operating at activities in which bunker gear was not worn. In talking to the firefighters, it was observed that they did not believe in this new policy. To ensure buy-in from our members, we need to present the reason for the policy—not just issue it. If the "why" of the program is communicated early, the members will be more receptive.

- **Report and follow up with near-miss reports.** Near-miss reporting can be a valuable asset to a department to prevent accidents and injuries in the future. For every major injury, there are 10 minor injuries, 30 near-misses, and 600 unsafe acts.<sup>4</sup> We need to encourage proper reporting from our members to track these events and find the root cause so that we can correct the problems. There may be a culture that discourages reporting incidents and near misses.

- **Post safety tips on paystubs and computer screensavers.** This will increase safety awareness in your members.

- **Focus on your people.** A people-oriented safety management program should result in the development of a culture of safety.

- **Encourage employee/firefighter ownership in the safety program.** Allowing ownership in a program makes the process more personal instead of being just an "order."

We remember when we first entered the fire service. It was a culture of leather lungs, scruffy turnout coats, and scorched helmets. Now, most firefighters wear self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) and take better care of their PPE. However, the fire service still accepts deaths and injuries as an occupational hazard. We need to modify this element of acceptance and develop a culture of safety—one where safety is part of our daily lives, both on and off the job, and deaths and injuries are not accepted as part of the profession. ■

**Endnotes**

1. National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, *Firefighter Life Safety Summit Initial Report*, April 14, 2003, 4.
2. Neufeldt, Victoria, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991, 337.
3. Salka, John, with Barret Neville and Dennis Smith, *First In, Last Out: Leadership Lessons from the New York Fire Department*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2004, 92.
4. Bird, Frank E. and George L. Germain, *Practical Loss Control Leadership*. Loganville, Ga.: Institute Publishing, 1990.



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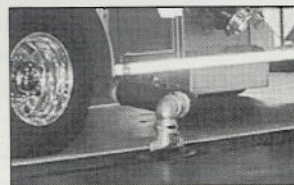
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