

Are We Just Giving Lip Service to Firefighter Safety?

THINK we all can agree that there's much more emphasis on safety today than in years past. But it's still too easy to find fire service stories about something that violates any common-sense approach to safety or to hear about something that went wrong on scene, resulting in a close call, an accident, an injury or a line-of-duty death (LODD).

Take a look at the latest LODD after-action report (AAR), specifically the executive summary and the recommendations; then compare it to an AAR from 20 years ago. I bet you probably won't see many differences.

While you may not see the terms thermal imaging camera, rapid intervention team, two-in/two-out or accountability in an AAR from 20 or 25 years ago, you'll more than likely see a number of common contributing factors.

Some of these factors include safety/staffing, incident command and command and control, communications, fire behavior, building construction, training, human/cultural items, water supply and fire prevention, to name just a few.

Albert Einstein's definition of insanity is frequently used these days: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. And yet, it could be argued that nothing has really changed in the contributing factors of LODDs and the fire service continues to do the same thing over and over again.

Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. It could be argued that in the contributing factors to LODDs, the fire service continues to do the same thing over and over again.

I don't say this to Monday-morning quarterback or place blame or show disrespect to anyone or any department. I say this because I sincerely want to reduce the number of close calls, injuries and fatalities to fire service personnel. Seriously.

I believe there are some in the fire service who say one thing but do another; they're just giving lip service to safety.

Even worse, I think there are some who don't even give lip service to safety—they're just unsafe because that's the acceptable thing to do within their culture. There are some fire service personnel who believe it's OK to die in a fire and even die just to save property.

Don't believe me? Take a group of firefighters and ask them how many of them love to fight fire. Hopefully all their hands will rise. Then ask how many of them believe in firefighter safety; hopefully all their hands will rise again.

Now for the real test: ask how many believe in the need

to place fire sprinklers in every structure around the country.

I bet you won't get the same 100% compliance rate as when you asked the first question. Then ask why they didn't raise their hands to support fire sprinklers. What kind of answers will you receive? I've asked that question on numerous occasions and hear the same answers: "There won't be as many fires." "It will take all the fun out of the job." "That's not why I got into this line of work." "There won't be a need for as many firefighters."

"So, if you don't want to put sprinklers in every structure, does that mean you don't care about firefighter safety?"

I get it.

But ask them the next question: "So, if you don't want to put sprinklers in every structure, does that mean you don't care about firefighter safety?"

That's when reality sets in for some and I can really sense the awkwardness in the air.

It usually provides for a healthy and meaningful discussion when we attempt to bridge the fact that if every structure had sprinklers, there would probably be fewer fires, not to mention less significant fires, which should result in fewer human lives lost—including the lives of firefighters.

I know I was one of those individuals who got into the fire service for a variety of reasons, two of which were fighting fire and saving lives. I really miss getting to be on the first-due engine, being on the nozzle or even being the incident commander.

But as a training chief, I know I have much bigger obligation: to ensure personnel are trained and educated to the best of my (and their) ability and to ensure our personnel go home safely and ultimately get to enjoy their retirement.

Let's do our best to not give lip service to safety; our personnel, their families and the citizens and communities we serve deserve better than that.

Lastly, I know being safe sometimes isn't the popular or the fun thing. However, as fire officers (fire chiefs, chief officers and company officers), we have the obligation to ensure we're leading by example and doing the right thing for our personnel, which sometimes isn't popular.

Nobody said leadership was going to be easy. ☹

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