

So You Want To Be A Company Officer

By JAMES BONNER

What's Next As You Become a Leader in Your Fire Department?

Congratulations on your promotion to company officer and accepting the responsibility to be a leader in your fire department. Now that you have reached this important step in your department, what do you need to know? How do you proceed from this point? How are you going to handle the firefighters you have worked with since you joined the fire department? What are your duties and responsibilities? Will things change now that you have been promoted? What lies ahead for both the fire department and you?

Let me give you some information on how to become an effective company officer.

When I worked as a firefighter in a busy inner-city engine company, a few of my colleagues and I decided to study for promotion to lieutenant. Though we were young firefighters, we were a seasoned bunch, a well-oiled machine. Any one of us could handle whatever came our way no matter what our assignment, whether we were driving the pump, handling the tip, serving as the acting officer or throwing up a ladder for that surprise victim who shows up at the window.

We relished the fact that the surrounding companies knew we would always be in the right position with our own water supply. Due to a department policy of officer rotations every three years, we had a few lieutenants come through our station. Some we enjoyed and a few we were not so fond of. One person who rose above the others was a gentleman who knew how to harness these "young lions," as we were labeled by the more senior members of the battalion.

For three years, we worked with this man as our lieutenant and we so respected him because he was teaching us how to be a first-class company officer. His most prominent asset was that he led by example. He studied hard for an upcoming captain's test; always made the right decision on the fireground, kept us safe; and, most importantly, we felt his heartfelt desire for us to succeed.

Since we were an experienced group, at times we found it difficult to change our comfortable tactics, which we knew had worked time and time again. Yet through his training and in his own smooth way, he communicated with us so that ideas would be exchanged and confidence was instilled in us to handle even the most uncommon tasks.

So what does it take to be a good company officer? What makes an average, so-so or ho-hum company officer? What attributes would you describe in an inadequate company officer? Let's take a look at three types:

CAPTAIN ROBERT DOE

- *Straight arrow, by the book*
- *Impeccable uniform with more bells and whistles than required*
- *Authoritarian management style; barks orders with no interaction*
- *Predictable*

CAPTAIN BOB DOE

- *Congenial, approachable*
- *Dressed in the proper work uniform, neatly pressed*
- *Uses the rule book, but will deviate if the situation demands*
- *Uses other peoples' ideas and gives them credit*
- *Allows subordinates to run with tasks*
- *Predictable, consistent*

CAPTAIN BOBBY "BOSCO" DOE

- *Dressed in a faded, wrinkled uniform*
- *Degrades people*
- *Answers questions with, "I don't care"*
- *Ignores chores he doesn't like; leaves his work for other officers*
- *No compliments for anyone*
- *Unpredictable, inconsistent; each day, he seems like a different person*

Who would you like to work for? A fire officer's duties are the same whether in a career or volunteer organization. Each officer has his or her own style. We have all had bosses, in and out of the fire service, comparable to these individuals. After 17 years as a company officer, I have been effective on some issues and at times not as effective as I would have liked to have been. Though I always had the betterment of the company and the department as my motivation, every decision did not always play out as I had intended. I would like to pass on some lessons I have learned.

The front-line officer, be it master firefighter, sergeant, lieutenant or captain, is promoted on paper, wears a new uniform, and in a career or pay-on-call department receives a raise in pay, but these changes do not make you a valued company officer. Only your actions will earn the respect required to be effective.

We all have likes and dislikes of what our supervisor asks. You are the example for the subordinates assigned to you. Think about when you were a firefighter – what were the attributes of the good company officers, the people you had trust in? This brings us to our first area of discussion.

Role Model

How you conduct yourself is how your company perceives the way you want them to conduct themselves. Not everyone has the same personality, abilities, experience and work ethic. Acknowledge that your subordinates are all different individuals with varied career paths and different life experiences.

To earn respect, the one thing that cannot change is your capacity to be fair, calm and polite, and at appropriate times jovial. Be the person that you would like to work for. How you conduct yourself is how firefighters and paramedics perceive as acceptable behavior. "Do as I say, not as I do," will make you a very unpopular boss and stifle the ability of each individual to move forward:

- You dress like an unmade bed, they dress like an unmade bed
- You're late, they're late
- You don't check your equipment, they don't check their equipment
- You leave tasks to be completed by other officers, they leave tasks to be completed by other members
- You brush off the public, they brush off the public
- You volunteer for extra duties, they volunteer for extra duties
- You complain about your superiors, they will complain about them and also you
- You follow all rules and regulations, they follow those same rules and regulations
- You are a safe and aggressive fire officer on the fireground, they become safe and aggressive on the fireground

Your conduct sends a message at all times. Know the standard operating procedures (SOPs) or standard operating guidelines (SOGs) of your department. Position your company where the chief and other responding apparatus will expect you to be. Deciding to make an unexpected, non-communicated move on the fireground so your company can sneak a hoseline past the first-due company sets an adverse standard that will bring angry feelings from the chief and neighboring units. Don't showboat. Work together and be a role model for helping each company to carry out their assignment.

Dress for the occasion. If you are representing the fire department, even if the occasion calls for a work station uniform, wear a neatly pressed work uniform. Don't allow convenient excuses be the reason for looking like a raggedly dressed bunch of uncaring individuals. This sends the message to department superiors and the public that you don't care. A full dress uniform is not always required, but attention to neatness is.

Whether interacting with civilians or other station members, always be a professional. Maintain calmness, no matter how angry you may be. Work hard at maintaining a

composed atmosphere. During a calm discussion, you'll be surprised at how many ideas will surface to solve the problem. Regardless of how insulting someone may be, it is never an excuse to belittle anyone, be it a subordinate or citizen. You lose the opportunity to make your point when you resort to confrontational tactics.

Motivation

There are varying reasons and contributing factors that affect your degree of success in motivating your firefighters. This occurs because there are varied tasks, people are diverse and there are department morale shifts. Allowing firefighters and paramedics to be involved in the decision-making process immediately improves morale.

Nobody has fun doing a job they dislike. Ease the pain by letting them decide how to do the job. The members need to be sold on the benefits of what they are doing. Examples are:

- Building inspections can be coupled with an informal pre-planning tour. Throw out "what-if" questions. Standpipe and sprinkler locations, access and escape routes, evacuation routes, exposures, etc. Ask experienced members to offer their solutions.
- Apparatus training can go along with a factual, but unusual pumping or main ladder dilemma. Allow senior members to offer their own horror stories as training tools.
- Ladders can be placed just to see what windows can be reached, even in an engine company. Use a true-life multiple rescue situation and ask the members what they think. What would they have done if they were the officer?
- Encourage participatory training by letting each member pick a topic and participate in planning the training. Ask the group where they feel they could improve.
- School presentations occasionally receive a groan from the firefighters. Talk about it with the company members days before. Let them decide on doing something different. See if they can create a message that hits home with the kids. Have fun with it.

Communication

You cannot assume that an individual is aware that he or she is doing something wrong unless you speak to that person and make it clear that you want a certain action or inaction to change. Keep each individual abreast of how he or she is doing, even if all the news is good news.

Two of the best mentors I have encountered are firefighters, not chiefs or captains, but firefighters who were exceptionally competent people in everything they did. They had the wonderful ability to pull me aside, criticize me, offer a solution, and make me feel good about it. If you have a person like this, make him or her aware of how helpful he or she is. Let yourself learn from them.

On the other hand, you as the company officer have the difficult duty of keeping members informed of areas that need to improve. In addition to the facts that department rules may be broken or the chief requires a task done in a certain fashion, this member is part of a team. You owe it to each team member to intercede on his or her behalf if a member of that team is dragging them down.

Serve your subordinates as well as you serve your superiors. Your company needs you to stand up for them when a member of the group doesn't carry his or her own weight. Communication between you and all the members lets the weak links know where they are weak and makes the group aware that you are working toward helping them.

Listening is the most important part of communication. You cannot gather all the facts if you are not listening. When you're talking, you're not listening. It is better to bite your tongue and let the conversation flow than to hamper information that would have normally come out. Force yourself to listen intently; this is useful for allowing the individuals to come up with their own solutions. Let them talk and you listen and guide. Many solutions develop on their own if you allow people to talk within the group as long as they are confident that you will be fair and impartial.

Supervisors I have worked for, even the top brass at times, always earned my respect when they stopped what they were doing, looked me in the eye and listened to what I had to say. They did not always agree, but I knew I was being heard. Allow your group to make their point.

Contrary to this, you owe the company or individual an explanation if you or the chief moves opposite to a suggestion. Many times, the big picture may not be available to them, so try to get the information needed to help the group understand why a decision was made.

We all have areas where we excel and areas where we need improvement. If a member is such a burden on a company in his or her performance, then the discipline route must be considered. What we have discussed above simply should serve as tips to move an individual or company to the next level in their capabilities.

In my assignments as a captain and lieutenant, I always used a little rule of thumb — when I left the assignment, the company would be raised at least to the next level in its performance and self-reliance in each category pertinent to that company, such as firefighting, EMS, extrication, pump/main ladder operation, community outreach, school contacts and pre-planning. When a job is well done, compliment the person or the group

involved. Give them a "nice job" comment or show them your appreciation in some way that they'll take notice. Make a point to say it, but only when deserved.

Discipline

A member consistently failing to perform up to the department standards will force you to be the disciplinarian. This is not a pleasant position for anyone, but you owe it to your company to take steps to correct the situation. A sincere attempt must be made by you to fully inform the member of the problem behavior. A one-on-one, give-and-take, private conversation should be conducted with you listening and gathering as much information as possible. Ask for help from your network of fire service colleagues. There is nothing more embarrassing and destructive than eating crow because you jumped to a conclusion and took action before all of the facts were in.

These private conversations can reveal a deeper problem. Be it family issues, money problems or personality conflicts, use this new-found information in guiding the member toward help and improved performance. Realize that a personal problem will affect a firefighter's performance, so it is important to discover the problem in order to attempt to solve it. Open dialogue with the employee is the only way to obtain this information, then it is your job to solve the problem or direct the firefighter or paramedic to the professionals who can.

Every time you put forth an effort to force someone to improve his or her performance because he or she is having a negative impact on the operation of the company, you must document your actions and the response of the individual involved. Base your documentation on the rules and SOPs of the department. If the company has a daily log or journal, make a note as to your actions.

When the negative behavior is serious to the point where his or her job is in jeopardy, you must keep detailed notes. This will protect you and the department. It is important to keep details of all the positive actions that were taken in the interest of improving the performance of this individual. Ensure that the individual was given every opportunity to improve and that the individual chose not to comply.

When you have exhausted all attempts at winning over this person and getting him or her to buy-in to the needs of the company by having them carry out his or her duties as expected, then you are forced to follow your department guidelines in bringing disciplinary actions. There is a saying when we fail at trying to straighten out a fellow firefighter or paramedic. The lieutenant didn't bring the charges against him or her; they brought the charges on themselves.

Though we prefer to work at confining problems and discipline to within company parameters, three types of personnel problems must strictly follow the department

procedure process from the onset. These problems must have department procedures specifically spelling out the responsibilities of the company officer. They include:

- Sexual harassment
- Racism
- Violence in the workplace

If your department does not have specific procedures for these events, they must be drawn up with legal consultation as soon as possible. When dealing with these types of incidents, you as the company officer have the responsibility to document actions and statements taken from the accused, the victim and all witnesses. There should be immediate notification of your superior officer, who in turn will see that all required notifications are made. These types of incidents require the expertise of specialized investigators to ensure that the rights of the victim, the accused and witnesses are properly protected as well as the safety of all and the protection from retaliation by either party. The department cannot afford to leave out any detail in the search for the truth. In addition to the psychological effects, the monetary loss from lawsuits can destroy the budget of any-size department.

Proactive training of all department members should keep members informed of the options available to a person who feels he or she is a victim. Government agencies at the federal, state and local levels have organizations that have rules that must be complied with if any or all agencies are brought into the investigation. Educate yourself and your department on the requirements of the employer. It is a disservice to your department members and your municipality to learn this information after a charge has been made.

Safety

The responsibility of the health and welfare of the company rests on the shoulders of the company officer. When you decided that you wanted to be a company officer, you announced that you were capable of providing safe guidance for the firefighters entrusted to your company. If you do not want the responsibility, decline the promotion.

An incident scene places a demand on the officer to be aware of the position of all company members. You owe it to the incident commander (IC) to demonstrate to him or her that you have an adequate knowledge of the position of all members in your area of concern, be it a sector or company position. If the IC has confidence in you, that your areas of responsibility are accounted for and safe, then you have freed the IC or sector officer to concentrate on other areas required to bring the incident to a successful mitigation.

Every tragic occurrence I have witnessed on a fireground has been due to a series of events that led to a grave consequence. A series of events formed an error chain moving

toward a tragic ending. Stop the chain. Take action to be sure the scene is safe. Some examples of potential problems:

- Ventilation that is not occurring fast enough for the quick-moving interior attack. Facilitate ventilation or back out the advancing hoseline.
- Companies operating inside a dilapidated vacant structure when a few well-placed master streams will accomplish the task in a much safer manner. Remember, it is your responsibility to bring back to the firehouse everyone with all their parts in working order.

To be taken seriously when safety decisions are required comes directly from the respect you have earned. Work toward achieving the trust from your subordinates as well as your chief in your decision making so all involved feel comfortable that they are in safe hands.

Leadership

It can be difficult to lead an experienced, accomplished company. These companies have proven themselves within their fire departments. Their knowledge and work habits have earned them the respect they deserve. To initially gain their respect, you must have an impressive informal resume. Your reputation follows you, and it is hard to get past a poor one.

Whenever I was assigned to a veteran company, I was not so eager to change their routine. There were no immediate problems and they consistently obeyed the rules and regulations of the department. They had their own way of rotating assignments. As the first few weeks went by, I would question each individual as to his or her likes or dislikes with the duty list. A few times, I was surprised to find out that everyone wanted the rotation of assignments changed, but didn't want to rock the boat. We sat down and set up a rotation that was within department guidelines and was acceptable to the majority. This is just one example of moving forward with a veteran company. It is hard to make change among a secure group, but earn their respect first and move on from there.

With new firefighters and paramedics, you automatically are the leader. Tell them up front that you want them to learn to function like a veteran company, and give them an example of such a company and list the reasons why that company is considered so reliable. A long-term goal to work toward is to improve the company to the point where you can be off on vacation and any of the members can serve as an acting officer and the company will function just as if you were there.

Mentoring is a position all of us have experienced in our careers. We all remember our first company officer, good or bad, and we all have an appreciative sentiment toward our first reliable company officer. To mentor means to advise, counsel, guide, teach or tutor. As the company officer, take advantage of the opportunity to make your subordinates better. The earlier in a career a person is exposed to a good mentor, the easier it is to instill good work habits, learn all aspects of the position and perhaps eventually work

toward promotion. Every new firefighter or paramedic should have a mentor, whether it is you or an experienced individual that you can count on.

Conclusion

Work in the direction of earning the respect and confidence of your chief and your company members. If their confidence is not evident, take a hard look at yourself. Solicit other successful company officers in your department for suggestions. Ask your chief for advice on what you can do to improve. Make the effort. Take the group to the next level.

You are their role model. Your actions tell the firefighters and paramedics what is acceptable. You have the duty to make available to your company every opportunity to enhance their careers. You are the fire department to them. You set the tone for their careers in the fire service. Ensure that the example that you set is in their best interest. And again, congratulations on your promotion.

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