

Will You Be the Best of the Best or Will You Fake It ‘til You Make It?

By: Dr. David Griffin

As I write this, I'm on a flight to Phoenix Arizona to do a keynote speech at the Arizona State Fire School. This will be my 200 plus time I have boarded a plane to speak about the concept of organizational learning and change over the last three years. I tried to relax my mind for a few hours but it wasn't possible. I felt the urge to write. To write about something that I have been performing and teaching a great deal lately. Something that should be close to all of our hearts. It is especially close to mine: fireground survival and performance.

Over the last three years I have been detailed to the training division where I started out as the Driver/Training Coordinator and then moved to Recruit Coordinator and the Assistant Director of Training. Over those three years I have written many leadership articles and purposely abstained from writing tactical pieces due to my leave from the operations division. However, I have now returned to operations as a Captain on Engine 108 in downtown Charleston, which happens to protect my own neighborhood and is the busiest house in the city. Well, tactical writing abstinence is over.

First, it feels great to be back on a rig. My wife Melissa and my Great Dane Lulu (named after Captain Louis Mulkey) walk me to work. On our 7 block stroll to the station every third day, I think about all of the people in the city that expect me to be the best of the best. Expect me to perform every task to perfection to save lives and keep the firefighters safe. Expect me to be able to perform on the fireground. This is not something I take lightly and I hope you as a firefighter or fire officer don't either. Our lives are in each other's hands so if you think it is more important to joke and clown around all day, unfortunately my friend, you're quite confused. Let's turn those jokes and horseplay into meaningful drills based on fireground survival and performance.

Ok, let's do this.

When you think of fireground survival skills, what do you think of? Entanglement hazards? Breaching walls? Collapses? Being lost or disoriented? Well, it's all of the above. If you don't practice skills to remove yourself from these situations repetitively, you will not perform them in a stressful environment. If you think you will "figure it out when the time comes", you are sadly mistaken. If you think you will never be put in this situation, think again. If you don't practice how to call a MAYDAY, you will not call one when your life depends on it.

So, are you prepared or do you just think you're prepared? Do you test yourself in uncomfortable situations to see how you respond or do you cower away from them so not to show weakness? Think about it because this article is going to provoke some soul searching. You ready?

Have you ever seen someone that is not comfortable performing a tactical drill? Their hands are shaking, they aren't processing their thoughts in a timely manner, their motor skills are reduced, and they begin to fold. How is this possible when a major piece of our job is to wear a mask and move through tight spaces with ease and confidence? So here goes the first thought provoking question: When you are about to perform a drill of any type, do you question your ability to perform that skill? I bet some of you do. Why? Do you think that Derek Jeter questioned his ability before he stepped to the plate? Hell no. He was excited to step in the batter's box and prove he was the best because he knew he was prepared. He also knew that even if he failed, he would be better in the long run because he was perfecting his skills every day. Do you have the same kind of attitude?

Question 2: Have you ever called out sick when you find out there's a drill that you have to complete? Yeah, some of you reading this have actually done that. That's pure nonsense. If you're an officer that's done this, you have some serious soul searching to do. Why would someone call out sick rather than go to a drill where one, their skills are tested, and two, they learn information to make them better firefighters? This I cannot comprehend.

Question 3: When you finish a drill where you had your mask on for an extended amount of time, do you simply remove your helmet, your flash hood, unclip the regulator, calmly loosen the straps on the mask, and remove it OR do you rip the entire face piece ensemble off as soon as the instructor says you can come off air? Yeah, some of you reading this have. What you don't understand is that you appear to not be in control of your emotions because you're not. You get so stressed while wearing a simple device that is made for you to perform in the PROFESSION of firefighting. Again, this I don't comprehend. Do you think a Doctor has reduced motor skills when he grabs a scalpel to perform life-saving surgery? Uh, no. He performs in the profession that he has dedicated his life to. So, have you dedicated your life to BEING A FIREFIGHTER or the IDEA of being a firefighter? They are two totally different concepts.

Question 4: This is for the company officers. Do you make all of your firefighters perform hands on drills as you just supervise because you're the company officer? You should be doing the skill first to show how it's done because you're the officer and should be the boss when it comes to doing work. Throwing ladders; be a boss, grab the ladder, and throw it first, one man. Ropes and knots? Be the first to grab the rope and show how it's done. Hose deployment? Oh, you think that's just a firefighter's job? Wrong answer. The firefighters learn from you. Stretch that hose like a champion.

Here's my favorite, "I'm the officer and I'm too old for that. My body doesn't work like it used to." Again wrong answer. It doesn't work like it used to because you don't take care of it with functional fitness, proper nutrition, and the appropriate amount of rest. Do you think the fire cares how old you are? Do you think the citizens you're supposed to protect want to hear that you're too old and can't perform your job? I don't think I need to answer those two; however, I

will give some insight if you're confused. If you're riding the rig, the citizens expect you to be the best. Period. Either do that or move on.

Question 5: Chief Officers, oh don't think I forgot about you. Do you set an example in your interaction with the troops? Do you keep yourself in functional shape that indicates you can still do the job or do you think it's ok to be out of shape because you don't ride a rig anymore? Think again. People look to you to lead the way. Is there a new drill that people are apprehensive about? No problem CHIEF, grab your gear and show them how to do it. After all, you're a Chief, the best of the best right?

You want an example of this, here it goes. My Deputy Chief of Operations, in his late 50's at the time, was one of the first to perform our new department wide physical agility test. He hadn't ridden a rig in over 10+ years but he wasn't scared to fail. He did everything he could to lead the way and guess what; he finished with a better time than some firefighters on the line. That's a CHIEF. That's a BOSS. And I don't mean boss in the traditional sense, I mean BOSS as in the best of the best and not scared to prove it. This is leading by example with actions, not words or the color of a shirt.

Now this article may have rubbed some of you the wrong way and that's fine by me. Sometimes you have to throw some punches to get a response. Harness that feeling you have right now and turn it into positive energy that makes you a better firefighter and fire officer. It's easy to sit back and say ugh this guy doesn't know what he's talking about. He's a Captain that's only been on the job 11 years. I laugh when people say that. My 11 years have included losing nine firefighters in one incident that involved me and my department making huge mistakes that led to their deaths. I live with that every day I wake up and each day I get on the rig. It has changed my outlook on life and the PROFESSION of firefighting. It has brought me to higher education and training I thought I would never experience. It makes me understand the gravity of my responsibility to protect my crew so they can return home to their families. My 11 years of service is full of 30 years of progression. After all, we had to do that to bring our department up to national best practices and help shape the current fire service culture.

As Chief Thomas Carr said before he passed away in 2012, "We will not be defined by the Sofa Super Store Fire. We will be defined for what we accomplished following that incident." Well Chief Carr, you were right. We will be remembered for what we did to change the fire service culture. For all of you reading this, what will you be remembered for? Faking it until you made it, or working nonstop to be a PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTER? The best of the best. Look in the mirror and ask yourself, what do you see? Cheers.

***This is the original article that was published with Fire Engineering. It is included on our website in pdf form due to the fireengineering.com link to the article not being available any longer.**