

FAST/CLOSE/WET

By: Alan V. Brunacini

The struggle to reduce firefighter occupational death and injury is currently an issue that is receiving a never before seen level of concern and attention. Our service is no longer willing to accept that an insult to our welfare and survival is an inevitable part of doing our job. This new safety emphasis has found its way on to the agenda of virtually every fire organization. It has actually caused the development of some new ones. The safety campaign has produced an avalanche of new programs, projects and pleadings. Thus far, all of the efforts have not made a big impact on the statistics. In fact, the first thing we all see when the computer greets the new day is the morning edition of the daily electronic fire service obituary column... a really cheerful way to start the day. This change in our concern for safety has also created an increased frustration when all of our prevention efforts simply do not work. To add to that feeling, in spite of all the prevention energy, there actually may be (statistically) more current hazard zone operational injuries and deaths than in the past. I have been a student of firefighter safety for most of my career, so I feel that same frustration.

We have directed our current efforts to refining and improving equipment, procedures, training, leadership, command, and technology to somehow reduce the injury/death rate. These are all organizational and operational components that would logically become part of any occupational change program. Along with the ongoing discussion about using all these standard pieces and parts to make what we do safer, for the past several years I have also heard the continual comment "we must change our CULTURE

to solve the safety problem”. In the past, I have not heard us refer to fire service culture as an obstruction to change in quite the focused way as it is now referred to in this discussion. As I trudge around and try to understand more about how our culture is connected to our safety, I realize that I have not really paid much attention (at least not consciously) to cultural stuff during my career. I don’t think that I really could produce a very intelligent definition of what ‘culture’ is. Given that I now hear the cultural reference used all the time, I have started to give it more of my attention, ask questions, listen critically – and most of all, think about it a lot.

When I engaged a certain firefighter about culture, he says: “Chief, culture is a lot like love.....you don’t see it – you feel it”. Given that he is a B shifter who has been married five times, I assume he has a lot of experience (!) with how love ‘feels’. I continue my questioning”Where does our culture come from?” He answers: “I don’t know, it was here when I got here”. That simple response produced a mental jolt that caused me to adjust the direction of my attention. If ‘it’ (culture) was here when he got here, it had to come from someplace. It is very difficult to develop an understanding of a very historic process by just looking at where that process is in its current time/state. It’s tough to catch on to the plot and the cast of characters of a really long movie when you come in at the middle. Getting beat up and sometimes killed in our business is nothing new. It has sadly been going on since the very beginning of our service. Based on that historic reality, my cultural reflection caused me to realize that the way to better understand today was to go back to what led up to the current point. This realization caused me to go back to the home office of our service and start at the start.

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Ben Franklin is the father of our service. He organized us into the beginning of the American fire service in the 1700s (lets say for round numbers 1740). He recognized that when a fire situation exceeded the ability of a citizen to control, that it became the responsibility of the local government to provide and manage a response that will assist that citizen. Such a firefighting response was (and still is) necessary to maintain a civilized level of local good order and security. Ben was an incredible thinker and developed many of the advancements of his time that are still in place supporting the way our country is formed. He had an exceptional ability to ‘think out of the box’, even though they probably did not call it that then. He originated the concept that providing firefighting services was a public function and that original concept became the basic foundation of our service.

As he assembled the original firefighting response and operational plan it quickly became evident that delivering such a special high performance service would require very special people to become firefighters. Ben had to consider the response and operational requirements of delivering firefighting service and then develop a profile to recruit a worker who was willing and capable of doing such work. Being able to quickly move firefighting apparatus, enter high hazard areas to control active fires with heavy hose lines, to tactically protect and physically rescue fire victims required strong, smart and very aggressive young men (all men in those early days). That person must be very physically fit /tough to be able to do the difficult/dangerous manual labor involved in firefighting. Such characters typically come with “young man’s invincibility syndrome”, which made them perfectly suited for Ben’s response system.

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They also had to be very mentally alert to think and react quickly under rapidly changing combat conditions. Ben knew that fighting fires required a very quick response, so he did not have the time to inspire timid firefighters when there was an alarm. In fact, the basic unnatural act of running into a burning building required a person who would subordinate their personal safety for the challenge of doing up close and very personal fire combat in a very dangerous place. Taking these risks required a very action oriented person with a short range orientation, who was both episodic and competitive, so they would actually look forward to and be anxious to immediately respond and fight. This requires a hyper active and slightly attention deficit personality, simply because it is very difficult to convince highly reflective, very careful individuals who are very future oriented to run into high hazard places that are on fire. These were then and still are the basic characteristics of an American Firefighter.

Ben realized that when there was a fire that the situation required rapid response, so he taught his fire lads that they must be FAST. He also knew that he did not have long range hydraulic application equipment, so his firefighters had to get CLOSE to the fire. Ben also understood that the fire could not live in the same space with an adequate amount of water so he told his troops get the fire WET. This created our basic response routine: FAST/CLOSE/WET. It is short, simple, understandable and extremely challenging to consistently do well. The original response routine that Ben established in 1740 has defined the cultural context of our service since that beginning and has set the stage for how we have operated for the next almost 300 years. If we manage FAST/CLOSE/WET properly, it can be our highest and finest tradition - if FAST/CLOSE/WET is unmanaged, it can (and does) create the saddest days in our

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lives. Like most really powerful strengths it has the potential to become a really powerful weakness.

The FAST/CLOSE/WET message from Ben to the boys created clear direction that our role centered on a very straightforward obligation to act. We are effective to the extent that we can respond and operate (i.e., act) to effectively intervene in a fire that is underway. F/C/W serves that service delivery responsibility very well. The simply stated mission also becomes the basis for a promise that we made to the citizen when we become a firefighter: when that citizen is threatened by a fire and calls us for help, we will quickly respond and physically place our body in between that person and the fire. We have kept that promise one call at a time every day since 1740. That promise creates a very unusual relationship between a worker and a customer. That very special action oriented customer connection has produced an almost 300 year love affair between Mrs. Smith and Firefighter Smith. Mrs. Smith knows if she is in danger and calls us for help, we will respond quickly, solve her problem and be nice to her. Firefighters act out their identity by physically fighting out of control conditions until they are under control – they don't do thermal studies, they don't form hazardous condition committees, they don't write reports and philosophize about how dangerous fires are - they respond FAST, they get CLOSE to the problem, and they get the fire WET.

One of the things Ben quickly understood was that directly dealing with out of control fire conditions is a very dangerous business. Facing such dangerous episodes challenged and excited the fire lads. Doing battle motivated them to use their physical capability and skill to fight and overpower the out of control energy (fire). A singular focus on structural firefighting started in the very beginning and continued with very little

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external or internal distraction for a long, long time - from our beginning to almost the 1960s. Simply, we did not do the all risk menu of service we do today – no EMS, hazmat, high angle/confined space/swift water rescue. There also was no IC providing management control or safety officers patrolling the fireground. No OSHA, NFPA standards, Department of Labor or NIOSH. No safety regulators or advocates. No risk managers - very few lawyers or guys in black dresses.

This two century period where we mostly did just structural firefighting established the most durable, enduring and definitive cultural socialization that has ever occurred in any occupation. It was pretty simple: if they called us it was because a building was on fire. We were able to do daredevil structural firefighting, many times taking crazy risks that produced half burned up buildings that were hauled to the local land fill two weeks later. We routinely traded our welfare for non productive, but very exciting hazard zone occupation. There was very little questioning or complaining (inside or outside) when a firefighter got beat up or killed - we knew that casualties are a regular part of going to war. We never articulated it, but acceptable losses were just part of the deal. For 225 years it was okay for a burning building to kill us. It sounds goofy to say that it was okay to vocationally die, but we proved it by doing it for 250 years before the recent risk management plan based safety response appeared.

When the fire kills us, our department typically conducts a huge ritualistic funeral ceremony, engraves our name on the honor wall and makes us an eternal hero. Every LODD gets the same terminal ritual regardless if the firefighter was taking an appropriate risk to protect a savable life or was recreationally freelancing in a clearly defensive place. A Fire Chief would commit instant occupational suicide by saying that

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the reason everyone is here today in their dress blues is because our dearly departed failed to follow the department safety plan. Genuine bravery and terminal stupidity both get the same eulogy. Our young firefighters are motivated and inspired to attack even harder by the ceremonialization of our battleground death. This is a major reason it has taken so long to have this discussion.

The way the cultural process continued was really pretty simple: each new generation learns the F/C/W routine from the old generation. The firefighter who told me “it (the culture) was here when I got here “nailed it. The way we are accepted into the department is by getting into the back of the slow moving continuous organization ‘line’, and then staying in that line for the rest of our career (I stayed in it for 48 years). The line has old guys at the head and young guys/gals at the back. The line is regulated and controlled by being accepted or rejected by the peer process. In that peer centered way, we are a little bit of a secret society. We regulate ourselves and resist and instinctively defend ourselves from external influence. We insulate ourselves from the outside. If you aren’t a firefighter, you’re a “dry sox” - we are a closed shop. The young firefighters want to be like the old ones. This is how the cultural beat goes on, and on, and on. When you are at the back of the line, you speak when you are spoken to -”kid, just ride backwards and keep your mouth shut!” If you get very far out of the line, one of your elders will smack you back in that line. If you create too much disruption, they kick you out of the line. I had an old scholar describe cultural rejection: “We define you as maladaptive and select you out of the system”.

A major way you are accepted (or not) is by doing your part in the F/C/W routine which is the most defining ritual that occurs inside the organization. Simply, you must pledge

allegiance (by your action) to the traditional attack routine to secure your place in the line. How you attack, or don't attack becomes the most compelling place where we decide if you are adaptive or maladaptive. The ongoing fireground attack continuity creates the most powerful process in our service. We can track what we do today by going back through (only) eleven successive generations – (given that one of our generations is about 25 years). Those generations cross over and integrate in an ongoing and very powerful way that continually connects what we are now doing to what we were doing. Many times we adapt and apply our familiar traditional tactical approach to every situation we encounter, so we just naturally absorb what has changed and make today look like yesterday. This natural reaction creates great stability and a very slow rate of evolution.

What is the point of all this cultural rant?

I don't know exactly what steps we should take to better protect our firefighters, but I think that to be effective we must become both historian and futurist. It would be a huge mistake for us to reject how Ben put us together in the beginning. FAST/CLOSE/WET has served us and the people, places and things we have protected for almost 300 years very well. I think if Ben was here now he would tell us to keep doing the basic service delivery routine, but make the changes that will better protect our firefighters. Doing this will not be easy but we must, because whatever we do next must realistically connect to what has occurred in the past – the new safety approach must emerge from the traditional way we have always operated. Making this then/now/next connection is particularly important to how we can make fireground operations safer. This is an activity where a lot has changed, but a lot has stayed the same. Our apparatus now

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has computer controlled automatic transmissions, air conditioning and a roof over our head, but we still use a fire truck to get us to the fire FAST. We now communicate on portable radios, wear space age PPE and can look behind the beyond with a thermal imager, but we still get as CLOSE as we can to fight the red demon because no one has invented a remote controlled way to apply offensive water. We now have smart sized synthetic hose lines and constant flow nozzles and in spite of all the additives we have dumped in water through the years to make it rapid, slippery, light or foamy but we still mostly use plain old water to murder the fire by getting it WET. Water is pretty timeless and firefighters still deliver and apply it manually on the burning end of our business. Virtually none of the firefighting process is automated, so we are effective to the extent we can do F/C/W.

Whatever we do to be safer must be based on us understanding that our firefighters have never stopped hearing Ben's voice tell them to be FAST/CLOSE/WET when they are responding to a fire. I think this is what culture really means in the current safety discussion.

About the Author

Alan Brunacini joined the Phoenix Fire Department in 1958. He served in every department position. He was promoted to Fire Chief in 1978 and retired in 2006. He is a graduate of the Fire Protection Technology program at Oklahoma State University. He has a BS and an MPA from Arizona State University. He is the past Chairman of the Board of the National Fire Protection Association and the N.F.P.A. Fire Service Occupational Safety Committee (standard 1500). He is the current Chairman of the N.F.P.A. Career Fire Service Career Organization and Deployment Committee (standard 1710). He and his two firefighter sons are currently developing and teaching the local command level Blue Card hazard zone management program. They also present workshops, seminars and conferences to many fire departments throughout the country on various topics. He is the author of *Fire Command, Command Safety, Timeless Tactical Truths, Essentials of Fire Department Customer Service* and *The Anatomy*

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and Physiology of Leadership. He is currently working on several other fire service books. He and his son John own and operate the fire service website www.bshifter.com.

About the Symposium

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