

Attributes of an Active Safety Culture

And Why They Apply to the Fire Service

By: Steve Thorne

Introduction

Firefighters have always been recognized and admired for having a challenging and often high risk profession. Their work requires them to respond to a myriad of incidents and often place themselves in harms way in a moment's notice. Further, firefighters are trained to provide timely response. In life threatening incidents, seconds can mean the difference between a life saved and a life lost.

In this type of work, where time pressures and unexpected work conditions are routine, the risk of firefighter injury or death is high. It is estimated that there are approximately 1.1 million firefighters in the United States. Of these, 313,000 are career and 823,000 are volunteers [NIOSH, 2008]. Karter and Molis, [2007] report that in 2006 there were 83,400 firefighter injuries in the line of duty, an increase of 4.1% from the year before. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) [2008], responsible for the NIOSH Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program, reports that on average 100 firefighters die in the line of duty each year. Further, the United States Fire Administration recently reported that 118 firefighters died while on duty in 2007, up from 106 in 2006 [USFA, 2008].

The 2007 numbers equate to a fatality rate of approximately 10.7 per 100,000 firefighters. This is roughly 2.9 times the fatal injury rate for U.S. workers in 2007 [BLS, 2008]. These numbers are alarming and indicate a need for substantial improvements in the area of firefighter safety.

Active Safety Culture

One area of focus for the fire service should be on fostering an active safety culture. In simplest terms, 'safety culture' is the common and generally accepted way people behave in the workplace as it relates to safety behavior. The 'culture' is a group's feeling that everyone in the group will try to behave in a way that protects the safety of each other. [O'Reilly, 2001] It manifests itself in what an organization is (its beliefs, attitudes and values) and what an organization does (its structures, practices, policies and controls). Reason and Dobbles call it the engine that drives the organization toward the goal of maximum attainable safety [2003].

When a safety culture is active, there tends to be fewer injuries in the workplace. OSHA reports that organizations who joined the OSHA Voluntary Protection Program, (a nationally recognized program that promotes an active safety culture) have fewer workplace injuries and illnesses and their percentage of severe injuries (those that result in days away from work, work restrictions or a position transfer) is 52% below the average for their industry [OSHA, 2008].

In organizations that promote an active safety culture, several attributes can be observed that successfully contribute to promoting and achieving a safe workplace. This paper focuses on seven which are considered by the author to be essential to creating and sustaining an active safety culture.

1. *Management Leadership*

When it comes to the work environment, safety begins at the top. Management formally and informally establishes the mission, goals, objectives and expectations for the organization and its people. This includes safety. In an active safety culture, this leadership manifests itself in both words and actions.

The “words”

To start, management has to make it clear that safety is not a priority, it is an **expectation**. I’m reminded of the analogy of safety and core values I heard at a safety conference. It compared safety to getting ready to go to work in the morning. When you’re running late, you may skip breakfast, but you will always get dressed before you head out the door. That’s because getting dressed is a core value. Safety needs to be like getting dressed. You can’t even consider working without first expecting the work to be done safely.

This may sound simplistic, but this fundamental expectation must be established.

Several CEOs of corporations recently recognized by the National Safety Council

[McMillan, 2008] for safety excellence put it this way:

“Safety is not only a core value of our overall corporate culture, it is also a personal value that we expect each of our employees to adopt – whether on a towboat, at a supply warehouse, underground at a coal mine, at a gas site, at the corporate office or at home. Holding safety as a core value is the right thing to do, not just from a business standpoint, but ethically and morally as well.”

---- J. Brett Harvey
President & CEO CONSOL Energy
Coal and Coalbed Methane Company
7,966 workers

“Safety is a value we hold above all values, simply because it’s at the heart of everything we hold most precious. At the end of the day, we want all of our employees to be able to enjoy the fruits of our labor.”

--- Scott Lynn
President & CEO
Guy F. Atkinson Construction LLC
Full-service heavy civil contractor
700 workers

The “walk”

In order to achieve a safe work environment, management must lead by example and “empower” the workforce. This means the leadership must “walk the talk”. Dave Brown, former president and CEO of Owens Corning cites two guiding principles, “leading by example” and “don’t walk by”:

“When a leader commits unconditionally to safety and then doesn’t live that commitment every second of every day, it has a devastating effect on the organization. Safety soon becomes the “flavor of the day”. I like to say: When a leader blinks, the entire organization shuts its eyes. The second principle, ‘don’t walk by’ is the hardest to instill but is incredibly powerful. It is a commitment starting with the leader, to caution any and all individuals who are observed doing something unsafe or who are entering a potentially unsafe environment. You do so for one simple yet powerful reason. You care about the person. “

2. Policies, Controls, and Practices that Integrate Safety.

To be effective in achieving a safe work environment, there must be policies, controls and practices that integrate safety. These are the formal extensions of “the walk” and “the talk”. In the fire service, basic qualifications and training that coincide with the fire service position are an industry practice. These ensure that when personnel respond in

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an emergency, they not only know what to do, but how to do it. Effective policies, controls and practices embed safety. They include training on the safe way of “how to do it” and why certain ways are too risky and unacceptable. Richard Sperber, President, ValleyCrest Companies, a landscape architecture company with over 10,000 workers describes safety integration in his company this way:

“We’ve institutionalized a number of mechanisms to accomplish our [safety] goals. We start with new-hire safety orientation on day one for every employee. We follow that up with weekly safety training, monthly safety review sessions and quarterly performance meetings in all our locations. Our program is driven from the top down, with our division presidents committing to weekly conference calls that include a safety topic each week, incident review and accident prevention training. Our compensation systems reward safe performance and penalize operations that do not meet expectations.”

Moir Lockheed, Chief Executive of FirstGroup PLC, a transport company with over 135,000 employees worldwide, describes safety integration in his company as follows:

“We empower and engage our staff with safety processes built on the foundation of our First Safety Principles and a commitment to injury prevention....These principles provide key direction empowering everyone to work safely at all times. Our simple message is, “If you cannot do it safely, don’t do it.”

3. Foster Open Communications and Create a Shared Understanding of Safety Expectations

When talking about safety, it's easy for the message to get lost in the rhetoric. I'm reminded of the often repeated expression from the movie "Cool Hand Luke", starring Paul Newman: "What we have here is a failure to communicate". Management must repeat and reinforce the safety expectation. Then ask for feedback to see if the message has been received and understood. The feedback contributes not only to a shared understanding, but also to safety ownership (attribute 4).

4. Take Personal Responsibility for the Safety of Each Other

Taking personal responsibility for the safety of each other is one of the most powerful and most effective attributes in an active safety culture. In the fire service, there are daily opportunities to reinforce safe behaviors in our co-workers. These can be as simple as a reminder to wear your seatbelt, or an admonishment to the apparatus driver to "do the speed limit" on the way to an incident. Positive reinforcement is almost always preferable to negative reinforcement. So, taking the time to observe co-workers doing work safely and providing positive feedback reinforces the right behavior and validates the principle of "actively caring".

More formal examples of taking personal responsibility for the safety of each other include starting meetings with a “safety share” and encouraging worker to share personal lessons learned. Dave Brown notes:

“Many meetings at Owens Corning start with a “safety share”. Employees are encouraged to share personal lessons learned so that others won’t make the same mistake. I’ve seen widely circulated e-mails sharing personal safety lessons, and I frequently receive e-mails from employees from all over the company sharing with me their personal safety lessons learned. These e-mails speak to a deep appreciation for a work environment that made them a better parent, neighbor or friend.”

5. Adopt a “Zero injury” Vision for the Workplace

The shared sense of wanting to avoid injury or harm to co-workers is part of growing a culture of safety [O’Reilly, 2001] and is a fairly common attribute in the workplace. However, adopting a perspective or “vision” that all injuries are preventable is a paradigm shift and can fundamentally change how people work. It starts with examining one’s own view of injuries and determining if this vision can be internalized. A survey of 1,614 randomly selected adults, conducted in August, 2007, found that nearly 1 in 3 Americans believes nothing can be done to prevent accidental injuries [Bello, 2008]. When viewing this belief in the context of the firefighter profession and the current injury and death statistics cited above, it appears there are ample opportunities to improve.

Once the zero injury vision is internalized, it compels everyone in the organization to change behavior and prevent all injuries whenever possible. Should an injury occur, it compels everyone to look for solutions to prevent recurrence.

6. Monitor Performance Trends and Corrective Actions

The adage: “What gets measured gets improved” needs to apply to firefighter safety. Safety issues, most notably work-related injuries and illnesses, need to be defined and monitored. Positive trends need to be reinforced and negative trends need corrective action.

Should an injury occur, it should be evaluated in the context of identifying both the cause(s) and the lessons learned that can be used to prevent recurrence.

Moir Lookheed notes that:

“...we measure and evaluate our performance at the most senior level...and we hold our managers accountable for safety.”

Scott Lynn indicates that:

“...we’re on an aggressive journey to fine-tune how we track activities such as safety contacts, near-miss reporting, skills and leadership training, and

management activities. Conducting independent, third-party interviews and surveys to take a reality check have also been beneficial in keeping us humble.”

7. Recognize that all People are Fallible and Even the Best Make

Mistakes

This simple principle, taught to many us in kindergarten, is often lost or forgotten when it comes to firefighter safety. Fallibility is part of the human condition. In many high risk firefighter work activities, this simple principle needs to be applied when developing safety solutions. When feasible, the hazard should be eliminated. When hazard elimination is not possible, safety solutions should be developed using the following hierarchy of controls [DOE, 2006]:

- engineered controls,
- work practices and administrative controls, and
- personal protective equipment

Summary

The lessons learned from business and industry illustrate that an active safety culture can result in a safer work environment and aid in reducing workplace injuries. The seven attributes cited above can and should be applied to the fire service as part of a

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long term commitment to improve the work environment and most importantly to ensure that everyone goes home safe.

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