

# Professionalism in the Fire Service

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**T**HE FIRE SERVICE IS IN A NATURAL STATE OF FLUX. Baby boomers are retiring, leaving after serving for the past 30 years. As the Generation X firefighters move into leadership and fill the resulting gaps, they must step up and produce. With these retirements, years of experience and knowledge are leaving the fire service. Today's officers are responsible to fill these voids and plot the future. They must remember and respect the past yet lead with confidence. Our decisions, behaviors, and leadership will define the fire service for the next quarter century.

Today's leaders are facing lean and responsible government that holds the fire service accountable for productivity and responsible spending. Municipal councils and managers cannot continue to protect public safety during budget cuts.

Likewise, technology is improving firefighting techniques; traditional firefighting tactics are becoming automated and automatic. Residential sprinklers are coming; state legislators are more favorable toward them, and the argument of builders and other special interests that installing residential sprinklers in new construction is too expensive is losing.

The fire service is no longer a protected group. Workforce reduction, not four-person staffing, is now the norm. The industry is changing, but we are still not adapting to the changing tide of government and technology.

Self-preservation is key to our future. The fire service must institute a concentrated and deliberate attempt to be a *professional* fire service. "Professional" is not defined by pay or by who receives a paycheck for providing the service. Although a monetary contract or winnings may define professional athletes, professionalism in the fire service is much more broad and intangible.

In today's fire service, every member in every department is expected to operate and behave professionally at all times. The time on shift, on the clock, or at the station does not define duty for a public servant. When we accept the honor and privilege to join the fire service, we accept that the job or membership will define our lives, our behavior, and our attitude. We decorate our cars with stickers and license plates that identify us as firefighters, we put fire statues in our flowerbeds, and we wear T-shirts and job shirts every day we are off duty. Conversation at most family or social outings builds on the fire department; people are interested in our job, our duties, and our service. When someone finds out we are in the fire service, they immediately want to learn more about the

job, and we are happy to oblige them, telling them about the work, the lifestyle, and what an honor it is to be part of the fire service.

Fortunately, this interaction and the curiosity about fire service lore allow us to continually market our profession. We should take every opportunity to market the fire service and realize that it is a privilege to discuss our profession with interested citizens and family members. Knowing that, we have a responsibility. We must promote the fire service through professionalism. We must behave professionally at all times and strive to move our profession to the next level. How do we collectively ensure we move our noble profession to the next level?

The following are 16 ways to promote fire service professionalism. The challenge is that feedback may be limited, since public opinion and satisfaction ratings concerning the fire department are usually 95 percent or higher in most communities. Capturing the citizen is certainly important, but capturing the other public safety professionals in your city or town is also a goal. Capturing members of city government, your council, and city leaders is key. Professionalism is contagious, so take the opportunity to continually strive for perfection.

**1 Attitude.** Always have a positive attitude, and be grateful for the opportunity to be a member of the fire service. Never show citizens or others that you are not thankful to be out there assisting the public in any capacity. In our job duties, we must anticipate that we engage citizens and other city and county employees at times and incidents that are not always glamorous or convenient. Never let them know you are not pleased to serve or not grateful for the opportunity to respond to their aid.

**2 Appearance.** Maintain a constant respect for your appearance. Dress for success. Wear clean, pressed, department-issued uniforms. Personal appearance is important to demonstrate you are prepared and able to assist at any time. We are judged by our appearance, so always remember that and provide a positive image. On your days off, wear only shirts and clothes that will show the fire service in a professional manner. Resist the desire to wear vulgar and obscene T-shirts that will make the public look down on the profession.

**3 Allegiance.** Always demonstrate loyalty to your department, your officers, and your chief. Dissent privately, not publicly in front of others or around coworkers. The fire service is a team. Show respect to your teammates and your leadership.

**4 Assiduousness.** Complete all job tasks, duties, and assignments in a manner that demonstrates attention to de-