

Mentoring:

Perspectives of the Rookie and the Veteran

BY BRIAN WARD AND DAVID RHODES

WHY IS MENTORING SO IMPORTANT? WHAT value can be gained from such a program, formally or informally? It's the chance to pass on knowledge and experience that cannot be found in a book or a PowerPoint® program. Mentoring in practice is the fostering of a relationship between an experienced veteran who shares his knowledge and experience with a less experienced firefighter or officer. Although this may sound simple enough in theory, we sometimes don't allow ourselves to gain all of the benefits that can come from a mentorship. This article presents a two-perspective approach to mentoring, which illustrates that both the veteran and the rookie firefighter must be committed to the principles of mentoring.

ROOKIE PERSPECTIVE: Brian Ward

So, you have made it through recruit school and you're a certified firefighter. You're eager and ready to be cut loose for your first shift. Or maybe you have been in the field for awhile, ran a few calls, and fought some good fires. Now what? What's new? Where do you go from here?

In our line of work, it's vital that we continue to learn and build our knowledge base. The fire service will never reach a point where we can stop learning. As building construction evolves, technology advances, and fire behavior changes, firefighters and officers need to grasp onto the knowledge of our experienced personnel. It's not good enough to just go to the schools, receive the education, and get the certificate. We have to focus on the items we can learn only from experience.

One of the prime examples I encountered early in my career concerned the building construction features of a church built in the early 1900s in my former first-in district. This church had been renovated and changed hands several times. While conducting a preplan, although it was not obvious from any interior or exterior vantage point, we learned from one of the veterans who grew up in the area and watched the church evolve over the years that the church had three rain roofs built one on top of the other. How important is it

to have this information? Without his experience, we would never have known.

Picking a Mentor

There is no one item or thought that I have ever developed on my own. First of all, I'm not that smart, but I found the personnel in the station who had an enormous amount of experience and knowledge and wanted to share it. They were just waiting for someone to listen. Look around your station or department and find the individuals who seem to always know what is going on, those who put their hands on the tools even though it's not truck day. At incident scenes, they operate without orders (not freelancing); they always seem to know what has to be done, why it needs to be done, and when to do it, and they always maintain their composure no matter what is going on.

There are other characteristics that go along with experience. Look for the individuals who always have a positive attitude about work and the desire to be a little bit better every day. Positive attitudes are contagious and will help you stay focused on the organization's mission and forget about what "I" want. These same individuals are those who constantly ask questions and try to figure out safer and more efficient ways to perform the job and a proactive approach to problem solving. They consider it their personal responsibility to send everyone home in the same condition in which they came to work that day. On top of that, they make it their responsibility to send the same people into retirement the same way they entered the job, as healthy as can be.

Creating the Mentorship

After finding the role model you want to mold yourself after, jump in his back pocket and soak up every bit of information you can. As the less experienced individual in the mentorship, you have to be devoted to training, take the initiative to get out there, and put your hands on the tools when no one else does. You also have to be willing to take advice and constructive criticism to build the relationship to where everyone involved is comfortable exchanging knowledge and experience. More often than not, the less experienced individuals have

to prove themselves in the station. As this occurs and these individuals become successful in their daily operations, the experienced people take notice. They start to ask themselves what they can do to impart their knowledge and experience to the people who need it and will value it.

As all of this happens, after a little hard work, you begin to build a mentorship with the more experienced personnel. Hopefully, this will increase your knowledge, help with your background for situational awareness, and advance your career well beyond anything that you would have accomplished by yourself. That last point is very important to remember. No matter how hard I have worked or what I have accomplished, everything that I have been involved with has been directly related to someone's giving me a chance, someone's believing that I could "lead up." All things are possible if you open your ears and embrace all the opportunities around you.

A closing example for this type of mentorship occurred

As a veteran member, you have to let go of wanting to be the star of the show and focus your attention on creating stars.

whether he realizes it or not. This is multiplied a hundredfold if you are a company officer and a thousandfold if you're a chief officer. Everything you say and do is evaluated, absorbed, and processed. Your words and actions are most often discussed in groups when you are not around to clarify your meaning or intent. That is the reason it is vitally important to lead by example and from the front. It is a pretty accurate fact that the attitude of the company officer is the attitude of the entire company. My friend, the late Chief Tom Brennan, loved to tell the story of how he could tell the dynamics and the attitude of the company officer in any station within a couple of minutes of conversation with the newest member. He told the story of the six-month rookie who engaged him in a conversation about pay and informed Brennan that "the city has been screwing us for years."

Our words and actions must convey the message we want our members to receive and should leave little to interpret.

When I got involved in Everyone Goes Home (EGH) as the Georgia advocate. National Advocate Manager Billy Hayes and Assistant Chief (Ret.) Ron Dennis-Avonozale, Arizona, saw my devotion to firefighter safety. They chose to mentor me in the EGH program. I became the Georgia advocate in a very short time. Through personal example, I have laid out two results on opposite realms of mentoring, but they are both direct benefits of mentoring and the success that can come with it on the fireground and in your career.

VETERAN PERSPECTIVE: David Rhodes

The decisions our members make (good and bad) are a direct result of their experiences. One of the most important roles veteran members have is to pass along the street knowledge that only experience brings. This experience includes lessons learned at the task, tactical, and strategic levels. There are always opportunities to pass along knowledge to new firefighters who show interest and remind you of yourself. You know the type—the "sponge" who asks a million questions and is actively engaged. As a veteran, these individuals keep you going because they are so motivated and uncorrupted by the years of misaligned expectations between the administration and line officers. These members make up the 10 percenters who get things done. What do we do about the other 90 percent? As a veteran member, you have to let go of wanting to be the star of the show and focus your attention on creating stars.

Implicit Mentoring

A veteran member of the organization is always mentoring

Explicit Mentoring

As a veteran member of the organization, you have an obligation to pass along information and experience. This can be through a formal program or on your own informally. For you to be successful at doing this, you have to genuinely want your members to succeed. You also have to be comfortable with your own abilities and not feel threatened by passing along knowledge. There are many still in the fire service who heard knowledge because they think the person with the most information and knowledge will have the most power.

Another friend and mentor of mine, the late Scott Millisap, taught me that the way to make yourself valuable is to make yourself invaluable by making sure that if you are not around things will still run with the same vigor as if you were there. This necessitates that you become vulnerable to your members and very open with them. Explicit mentoring is easy at the company level; it is more difficult at the battalion chief level. This direct mentoring requires an element that is not readily plentiful at the battalion level and higher—it's called TIME. To mentor someone, you have to spend time with that person. This is one critical organizational means to survival that has

● MENTORING

been greatly impacted by staffing and budget cuts. As we are forced to operate at minimum and below minimum staffing, it is difficult to pull a captain up for a shift to ride along with the battalion chief. This captain gets in the chief's car only when the chief is off. You can't mentor if you're not there.

At the company level, it is a little easier to let the firefighter in the back ride in charge while you ride in the back. This is the most valuable experience this firefighter will ever get, and you are right there as a safety net and coach. Even as we move down the line, we can make sure the rookie is on the nozzle and, in most cases, we can slow down just enough to explain what is happening with the fire and why we have the hose in this particular place and why we are about to do what we are about to do. Those three to five seconds help develop the firefighter and prevent his developing a false sense of security. His situational awareness is way off, so you are correcting and giving him situational awareness, forcing him to recognize certain things that he would have missed had you not stepped up.

The following are some examples of explicit mentoring:

- Let a member ride along with you and act in your position while you are there. Coach the member, but force him to make the decisions. Only overrule the decisions if the member compromises the safety of the incident. Provide feedback during and after the incident. Don't focus so much on the decisions themselves but on what the member based his decisions: What logic and process were used, and why?
- Conduct role play scenario-based training that requires a member to practice decision making at the next level.
- Look for opportunities to point out things during real incidents, and explain what is happening and why you're doing what you're doing.
- Spend time with your members.

Millions of taxpayer dollars are being spent on "shadowing" programs for newly developing incident management teams. Is it too much to put a few thousand dollars in our budgets to fund internal shadowing programs for our company and command officers? Have we asked for it in our budget?

Creating Opportunities

One of the most overlooked mentoring techniques is the creation of opportunities for your members. I have always hated the have-and-have-not mentality in an organization. I hate the fact that certain individuals are chosen to succeed and others are denied opportunities. This organizational culture destroys morale and the will of even the 10 percenters. As a mentor, you have to create opportunities for your members to grow and succeed. This can be as simple as approving a request for an outside training course or inviting your aide to sit in on a meeting as an observer or a participant. I will never forget the words of my battalion aide after his first staff meeting: "Wow, now I know why things are so messed up!"

Your members also need to get outside your organization and learn how other organizations do things. This exposure creates a well-rounded individual who will appreciate the

things your organization is doing right and bring back suggestions on how to improve things that may be getting done better elsewhere. You also need to pull individuals out of their comfort zone. If we don't do this, we end up with great fire-ground commanders who can't compose a memo or an administrative genius who writes a manual on how to write memos but can't command a vehicle fire. Look for opportunities for your members to become involved in projects or training that they probably would not volunteer for on their own.

Some suggestions for ways to create opportunities include the following:

- Approve training requests (say yes more than you say no).
- Suggest training courses.
- Involve members in department projects.
- Match talent to organizational needs.
- Talk about the members' weaknesses, and suggest ways of overcoming them.
- Invite members to attend meetings with you.

Some individuals are afraid of formal mentoring programs because they don't think that everyone should be a mentor. We have to face the fact that everyone is a mentor whether we want them to be or not. I have learned many lessons from those styles and personalities that I did not particularly like or identify with. These individuals taught me a lot about what not to do if given the opportunity to handle a similar situation. These lessons are just as important as, if not more important than, learning from the best member in the organization, because they are based on real life. We can't shelter our members from bad leaders and bad decision makers, but we should formally force them to spend time with those who exhibit competence and live by our organizational values. This balance is good for the members' development and helps them develop their own style. ●

● **BRIAN WARD** is a firefighter/acting officer with the Gwinnett County (GA) Fire Department. He is a past training officer and chairman of the Metro Atlanta Training Officers, a Georgia advocate for Everyone Goes Home, and the co-chair of the International Society of Fire Service Instructors Membership Task Force. He was recently awarded the National Seal of Excellence from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation/Everyone Goes Home. He has an associate degree in fire science and is completing his bachelor's degree at the University of Cincinnati. He is the founder of FireServiceSLT.com and Georgia Smoke Diver #741.

● **DAVID RHODES** is a 26-year veteran of the fire service, serving as a battalion chief with the Atlanta (GA) Fire Department. He is a chief elder for the Georgia Smoke Diver Program, a member of the Fire Department Instructors Conference (FDIC) executive advisory board, a hands-on training coordinator for the FDIC, an editorial advisory board member of *Fire Engineering*, and an adjunct instructor for the Georgia Fire Academy. He serves as the incident commander for the Georgia Emergency Management-Metro Atlanta All Hazards Incident Management Team and is a task force leader for the Georgia Search and Rescue Team.

e
d
o
g
o
p
e
c
e
c
w
w
pr
ha
on
an
ha
So
tio
als
Th
alv
I
anc
anc
dor
pu
thir
I
anc
with
fere
ww

