

What Are You Thinking?

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*"Looks like just a porch off"
"come on, get in there
already!"
"where is the water?!"
"geez, he pulled the 300' for
this?"
"where are my gloves?"
"okay, a quick dash and then
right on in"
"man, are we ever gonna eat
tonight?"*

The battalion chief pulled over just before the entrance of the cull de sac. He had heard the first due engine officer report that the bulk of the fire had been knocked and that they were checking for extension. Heading down the street he notices the driver of Ladder 7 running past him in the opposite direction. The familiar smell of a house fire fills the air. He comes up behind Engine 2 at the hydrant. "Strange," he thinks to himself "they were third due. I didn't hear them mark up ahead of the second due." Passing Engine 2, the chief is passed by the driver of Ladder 7, this time running towards the fire building, carrying a ladder. Nearing the fire building he can see Engines 7 and 3 both in the front. Up ahead he can see Rescue 2 has their rig beached in a neighbor's front yard.

As the battalion chief continues his size up he notices two lines have been run into the house. The fire was in an upstairs bedroom. The officer of the second arriving engine started the command process and can be seen in the front yard. As he approaches he hears the progress report on his handi-talkie. "Uh, Engine 3 to Communications, we uh, we had a small fire, the fire is knocked and we're checking extension. Have everyone else not on the scene stage on the cross street."

The dispatcher attempts to acknowledge this but is immediately cut off by another voice on the fireground. "Engine 3 lineman to the lieutenant. Hey Jimmy, tell 'em they don't need to be openin' the roof on this place, we got it knocked."

The battalion chief stops for a moment, taking it all in, and notices no sound of a power saw, nor any ladders to the roof, save one single ladder to a burnt out second floor window. He sees the driver that just passed him raising a second ladder to a different window. "Well, at least they haven't burnt it down." he thinks, trying to reassure himself. Approaching the lieutenant of Engine 3, his eye catches the trace of smoke from around a gable vent on the roof on the side of the house. Turning to the lieutenant he asks,

"Who do you have checking the extension?"

"Uh that should be Ladder 7 chief, we're working on it. It was just a room and contents fire."

"Okay" the chief says, "how about you go on in and see what else they need inside for me, okay?" The lieutenant from 3 passes the chief his initial command sheet and makes his way inside the house.

The chief looks over and sees the crew of Rescue 2 in the yard standing ready as the rapid intervention team. They have an assortment of tools in a stokes basket, and while at first glance they appear ready to go, closer look at the face of each member shows disgust and contempt for having to stand outside. As the chief looks at the command sheet, he contacts Communications advising them that he now has the command and will provide a progress report shortly. As soon as he finishes, the officer of Engine 7 calls for him.

"Engine 7 officer to Command; bring all units in to the fire building. I have fire in the attic and need the roof opened up!" Circling the wagons, the battalion chief puts the companies to work. "Command to Communications, I have extension into the attic area of a two story single family dwelling. Have the units currently staged, report in to the command post and start an additional one and one. I'll get back to you with the particulars in a moment."

"Command to Rescue 2, open the roof as well and get ladders up for egress."

"Command to Ladder 9, you are the RIC, report to the command post."

"Command to Ladder 7, you are the interior sector, I need a primary search report."

As he continues to evaluate the conditions, he thinks "Maybe we can get a hold on it before it burns the roof off". Off to his side he sees the driver of Ladder 7 with the driver of Engine 3, and he can hear him saying "If you ever, ever, block me out again, I will kick your..."

We can easily be trapped by a fire simply by looking at it. Tunnel vision gets us oriented on just the fire, and we fail at taking in our surroundings, reading the building, developing our personal size-up. Often times little prejudices trap us as well, distracting us from our individual assignments and responsibilities, impacting the fireground.

Apparatus Response and Positioning

Most departments have a structured order in which apparatus is dispatched and how it should be positioned according to its duties. At times, when companies are on the air, or on the street, when an alarm is dispatched, the order of response is changed. The conflict arises when a company arrives ahead of another company and fails to report this over the department radio. In Prince George's County, the third and fourth due engine companies and the second due truck company are responsible for the rear or Charlie side of the address, and position accordingly. If, for example, you are the third due engine company, and arrive ahead of the second due engine company, taking their position, and do not announce this, then the second due engine company will not know to go to the rear and advance their line to the floor above or the exposure. One simple little thing has now kept a line from being placed as it should.

This is especially important for the engine company to do, even when arriving in normal order. Engine officers and drivers need to be aware of whether or not the truck company has made it into the block. If your company is picking up a line at the hydrant, then you need to make sure the truck is on the scene, or can get by your apparatus. Truckmen get easily distracted and need to be right up close to the building. A top notch engine company will pull over or leave room for the truck, allowing them access. In this situation, they engine officer and crew can leave the rig and make their way to the scene if they have to. Trucks also need to ensure that the engine is not going to block them out. If they turn the corner and see an engine company pulling in at the same time, the truck officer may need to call out on the radio for the engine to pull over for a second. Even though truckmen can get distracted, enginemen can only think of one thing at a time, so each has to help the other out. Some engine drivers nose in to a hydrant to utilize the front suction, however they fail to realize that by nosing in, at an angle, they block the street (at least in my area). They fail to realize that that front suction is probably long enough to reach and bend without having to nose in. They

also fail to realize that they can take a length of supply line off the back and sleeve the hydrant just as well. Just a few little things that can mess up the whole fireground.

Unit Assignments

Everyone wants to go to work. That's why terms like "lawn shepherds" and "outstanding firefighter" (emphasis on 'out' 'standing') are used in a negative way. Prejudices come up when we think that work is only being on the line, or doing the search. Having to stage or stand fast, and even being the rapid intervention crew, is not popular. After a fire that severely burned several firefighters, one severely, the Prince George's County Fire Department created the assignment that a rescue squad or the next closest special service (squad or truck) would be dispatched and assumes the rapid intervention crew assignment, or RIC. If the due squad arrived ahead of a due truck company, they had to report this, and could be sent to "work" with the chief officer assigning the RIC to another special service. The problem arose in my area with despite being the due rescue squad, we nearly always arrived ahead of the first due truck, and at times even the second due engine, and were still assigned as the RIC. The prejudice comes from individual problems among chief officers and companies. Chief ___ doesn't like Company ___, so if they are going to run their squad, then they'll always be the RIC. My former department even had one instance where, despite arriving ahead of the first due truck, and despite the first due engine making rescues, the chief officer still assigned the squad as the RIC.

This has an obvious effect on the fireground; however another effect that is just as serious is not easily recognized. Personal attitude towards the job. We always complained and moaned about it, and our chiefs went to bat for us when the squad officer had to report why he deviated from the RIC assignment, but we couldn't change the problem. As a result we looked at the RIC as a punishment. Some members even spoke aloud about discontinuing running a rescue squad. A lot of pent up frustration that, without constructive release, shows itself in the attitude of individuals. In the end, the problem still exists, but the company has become more aggressive about being the RIC, and defending their actions when arriving ahead of the trucks. They have even made notice of their exploits on their department website, respectfully stating the problem when it happens. I used to tell the men on my shift that even though we may not like being the RIC, it's a job that is given to us and everyone on the fireground knows it's on us. We need to shine, and if we can't go to "work", then we'll make the incident commander put us to work. I would tell them that if you are the RIC, and you are doing the RIC job, getting ladders up, taking off bars and you see things wrong with the operations report it to command. Don't be a backseat incident commander, but let him know you see problems that need to be fixed and he needs to send you and your crew in, such as: "RIC to Command, the roof needs to be opened up and the due truck is understaffed, assign us to the roof." "RIC to Command, we still don't have a line in exposure four, and we have indications of extension in the cockloft." "RIC to Command, the second due truck is understaffed. I can split my crew if you wish."

It may not work in your area, but my philosophy behind this was that as the RIC, and as an officer, my priorities were the safety of my crew and then the safety of every firefighter while we are assigned the RIC. That means we throw ladders to every window, we take off every set of bars, we have our tools and ourselves ready to go. We also monitor the fireground for potential problems. That is the "intervention" part of RIC. We aren't supposed to put the fire out and dictate tactics and strategy, but we are responsible for the men inside when things go bad. When that happens, we need to ensure that we, the squad, are operating in the best environment we can create as the RIC. Do your assignment to the fullest of your abilities, and never neglect your assignment because you think you're being slighted. Another prejudice involves your attitude towards other companies. I knew of companies that routinely ran understaffed, didn't take their assigned position, would freelance like crazy, or simply fail to complete their assigned duties. Did that impact the fireground? Sometimes, however as an officer I am responsible for my shift, my men, and not what company ___ does or does not do. When we responded to a job, and I knew one of these companies was responding

as well, I simply kept it in the back of my mind that we might have to pull a little extra weight, be a bit more careful. If you run with problems such as this, you need to be thinking of a few little things such as:

- I am not their officer.
- We are not replacing them or doing their job. We have our own job to do.
- We'll deal with any problems one on one, after the fire.
- This is another reason why my shift needs to be on top of things.

A little thing that changes your train of thought.

Radio Returns

In my area, returns are what we call the initial report by the first arriving officer of what he has as he is investigating. You may call it a size-up report or preliminary report. Either way, it gives us a general description of what is found, if it isn't apparent upon arrival. Returns also state the search results, where the extension is, and the like. Radios are perhaps the most important tool we have, and each firefighter should have one.

But, not every firefighter knows how to talk on one.

Everyone, officer and firefighter alike, should know the basics of an initial radio report by the first arriving company. Most departments have a detailed order or SOP stating what is to be said. Some even have it that updates should be given at certain times. Most of us, at least on the east coast, are familiar with the FDNY type of report:

"Battalion one-nine to da Bronx, K."

"One-nine go ahead."

"The address is a five story multiple dwelling, h style, occupied, approximately one-five-oh by one-five-oh, wit fire on da number four floor. I have two lines stretched, one in operation. Primary searches are in progress and da trucks are openin' up. Fire is doubtful, K."

You don't have to be a New Yorker to understand this and have a mental picture in your mind. Some of you after reading this have already thought, "That will go to a second". Clear, concise, and to the point. Here are some opposite examples I have heard in my experience:

A fire reported in a high-rise, numerous calls:

"Engine __ is on the scene."

Where did they layout? Is anything showing?

Working fire in a garden apartment:

"Hey, uh Jimmy, it looks like you got some extension in the attic there."

Who the heck is Jimmy?

"Command to Truck __ I want you to ventilate the house, take out all windows."

Did they need to be told this?

After the fire is knocked down:

"Truck ___ to Interior, confirming the electric has been shut off."

They were on the same floor, separated by 10 feet.

Whatever your department's procedure for initial reports, chances are there is not a lot of thought put into what your members should say next. Some important rules, little things, for everyone to think about would be:

- Think before you speak, and think again once more.
- Use unit, sector, division, or rank titles. There may be more than one Jimmy or Mike on the scene.
- If it is at all possible, talk to the other person face to face. Using the radio when you can easily walk up to the other person just creates unnecessary traffic.
- Remember, your siren and air horn are louder than your voice.
- Screaming, unless it is a mayday, only delays your message because no one can understand you.
- Provide only what is asked or what needs to be said.
- Don't state the obvious when it comes to tactics, especially if you have fireground SOPs. A competent engine company should not have to be told to stretch a line and a competent truck company should not have to be told to ladder the building.
- It is a radio, not a temporary promotion to officer status.
- Just because you have a radio does not mean you must talk on it.

The fireground is complex. We often don't think of it like that, but it is. There are many things that can happen, some out of our control and some within our control. However, nothing can have such a degree of impact on the fireground then the little things that are in our mind that might distract us.