Designing Your Training Programs – Part 1 of 3.

It is a beautiful thing what a well-trained and dedicated firefighter or medic can accomplish in the face of physical adversity, an austere environment, fear, despair, and death.

Physical adversity, austere environments, fear, despair, and death are the challenges faced by those who serve in our agencies when they hit the streets. It doesn't matter if they are an EMR, EMT, Paramedic, Firefighter, Engineer, Officer, or any combination thereof; each one must be prepared to make contact with adversity in a rapidly declining environment while managing their fear and anxiety in the face of absolute risk, injury or death. This must all occur while ensuring their mission or task is completed as timely and safely as possible. This is what your training should be all about: enabling those who serve to deploy, fight, win, and come home to their families and loved ones.

The emergency scene is constantly changing, and it is always evolving. However, the mission, the task, and the standards (for the most part) remain constant. I recently read an essay (which inspired this article) that recounted Jewish historian Flavius Josephus's observation of the ancient Roman army. Flavius was the military leader of the Jewish forces of Galilee. In 67 AD, he surrendered to the Roman army, led by Vespasian, after the six-week siege of Yodfat. In recounting the battle, he spoke about the superiority of the Roman soldier: "…For their nation does not wait for the outbreak of war to give men their first lesson on arms; they do not sit with folded hands in peacetime only to put them in motion in the hour of need. On the contrary, as though they had been born with weapons in hand, they never have a truce from training, never wait for emergencies to arise. Moreover, their peace maneuvers are no less strenuous than veritable warfare; each soldier daily throws all his energy into his drill, as though he were in action". He went on to say, "Their exercises are unbloody battles, and their battles bloody exercises."

No action can better prepare someone for performance than that completed in "battle" (or on the emergency scene, in our case). In the absence of a constant feed of high stress and complex emergencies to mitigate, how do we prepare our agency's men and women to perform with the impressiveness as the Roman soldier does in battle?

Designing Your Training Programs

There are numerous considerations to ponder when developing high-performing firefighters and medics. In this article, I am not going to review the following:

- Need Assessments
- Safety
- NFPA or DOT Standards
- NREMT Skills
- IAC655

Or any of the other multitudes of standards, guidelines, laws, and policies that we routinely allow to guide our training programs. Instead, I will address Training Realism and developing "battle" ready firefighters. It is a long-held belief by high-performing firefighters and medics that nothing prepares a fire department for emergency mitigation more than the physical act of mitigating emergencies. Nothing prepares you better for a fire on the fourth floor of a walkup apartment than stretching lines up four floors on a working fire in a walkup apartment. Likewise, nothing

can prepare you for managing a bi-lateral tension pneumothorax than decompressing a GSW patient with a bi-lateral tension pneumothorax and a crashing blood pressure.

To have an effective and competent organization, you must deliver training that places your firefighters and medics in conditions that are as realistic as possible and come as close as possible to putting the individuals, companies, and chiefs in situations that they will face on the streets.

Task, Conditions, and Standards

Training design generally has three components: Tasks, Conditions, and Standards.

Task – The thing an individual or company is expected to accomplish. An example might be to perform a trauma assessment, package the patient, and provide appropriate interventions to stabilize the patient during transport. Or maybe the task is to be the first arriving tanker at a working fire in a non-hydrated area. Deliver water, and set up drop tanks for the supply engine.
Conditions – The circumstances in which the task is to be performed. Examples might be day versus night, clear weather versus rain, delayed/prolonged medic response, or a long-narrow driveway to access a residential fire.
Standards – The level of competence and effectiveness at which the task is to be performed. Examples might include time standards or benchmarks within which the task must be completed.

Identifying the task, conditions, and standards drives training realism. Flavius Josephus observed that the Roman soldier performed at a superior level because they had repeatedly "been there and done that" in their training before ever stepping on the battlefield.

Training Effectiveness

Every firefighter in America enters into the service with little to no experience. It is rare that someone, especially in our state, comes from an educational program equipped with all the skills and knowledge to hit the streets immediately after being hired. Even if they did, allowing them to do so would be reckless. Too many variables exist between organizations, their equipment, response environment, and SOPs/SOGs. These variables would likely cause more dysfunction than function on the fireground for an agency that releases a "green" firefighter to run calls. The effectiveness of a candidate's initial training should focus on being a functional member of the organization as much as it does on the firefighter I/II skill sets.

Induction Training

Each agency should have a clearly defined induction training program. Often, this isn't the case, however. In these agencies, induction training might not happen at all or consist of attending a meeting or two to meet the other firefighters, get voted on, and collect some PPE. Some agencies may use task books or skills check-offs that must be completed, while others will require an orientation program that mandates a defined amount of ride-a-long time. At the other end of the spectrum, a new hire might attend a long (between 6-9 months), full-time recruit academy. Larger agencies often utilize these academies with their deeper pockets and resources.

Regardless of the type of initial training program your agency utilizes, it needs to be well thought out and meets the needs of the organization and the public they serve. This is no easy undertaking and always presents new challenges. As soon as your induction training is designed, you will face budgetary, recruitment, staffing, and resourcing issues that adversely affect your program. The need to constantly forecast and evaluate your onboarding and training programs has never been as crucial as it is today.

Another consideration is who will be providing the training for your new firefighters. Smaller agencies may regulate it to one or two training nights a month or rely upon the on-duty crews to administer the program. Training new firefighters in this environment are the most cost-effective. However, its effectiveness is often subject to the community's daily activities, emergency response needs, and individuals who may have little to no interest in training the new candidate. Creating an environment conducive to learning is challenging if the training is constantly interrupted or led by unmotivated firefighters. If your agency has the luxury of assigning staff specifically to training, the obvious "go-to" instructors might be the best, strongest, and most respected firefighters and officers you have. But that means your best, strongest, and most respected firefighters and officers are not on the street; they are not developing and mentoring your existing firefighters. Selecting your training cadre should create opportunities for developing your future leaders as well as your newest hires.

Performance Based Instruction

It has been said that an instructor's reputation is inversely proportional to how far away they are from their home agency. That is, the further you are away from your co-workers, the better your reputation is. That is because your co-workers know your work ethic, and they see your skills on the fireground. One of the most essential keys to a candidate's success is being placed in an environment surrounded by competent and respected fire instructors. It may not be in the best interest of the candidate (or the agency, for that matter) to have an instructor that has been removed from the street for more than a year or whose skill set is not respected by their peers. We have all heard it before, "those who can't do, teach." I realized that within four months of taking a staff assignment, I was already disconnecting from the firefighters operating on the streets and that my skillsets were rapidly declining. Therefore, I am not an ideal candidate for instructing new firefighters in my organization.

"Performance-Based Instruction" is the concept that the instructor has mastery of the skills they are instructing **and** is capable of demonstrating that mastery to the candidates over and over again. The Performance-based instruction model consists of the following steps:

- **Instructor Show Examples –** The instructor introduces the skill by introducing the candidate to the practical application of the skill(s). Videos can introduce this but then demonstrated by the instructor physically performing the skill. The candidate needs to see the skill done correctly, slowly at first, and then at full fireground speed.
- **Crawl-throughs** – This is what I often refer to as the "helmets and gloves" step. The skills are performed at a slower pace, with the candidate only wearing their helmet and gloves. This allows the instructor to observe and correct any issues on the fly. The candidate is only focused on the sequence of performing the skill. Instructors engage and coach the candidate while they are performing the skill. The candidate should verbalize the skill while performing it. This should be a low-stress activity.

- **Walk-throughs** - Similar to above, but the stress should start to increase. Increasing stress may include moving to full PPE (as suitable for the skill being completed) and moving toward the fireground operational tempo. The instructor will still monitor the candidate and identify any errors, encouraging the student to self-identify the mistakes and then execute the correction. The goal here is to increase the candidate's confidence and proficiency in the skill(s) being taught.
- **Run-throughs** – This is the skill performed at fireground tempo with increased stress added to the scenarios, radios, mask, and working with other candidates. Instructors should observe to prevent safety issues and monitor "successful failures." (when the candidate fails, but a cognitive connection is made between the failure and skill development).

Coaching is critical for the candidate's success. When coaching the candidate, instructors should interject as follows:

1. "Stop." Have the candidate stop.
2. Ask the candidate, "What's going on?"
3. Ask the candidate, "What is your plan?"
4. Have the candidate fix the "issue."
5. Have the candidate "Finish the drill."

The key takeaway is that firefighter candidates learn best when performance and reflection are paired with coaching and mentoring. Instructors should recognize that a candidate's proficiency does not indicate mastery. The goal is to develop an "unconscious competency" in the candidate. That is, the firefighter candidate can perform the skill without thinking about it. This is a sign that the candidate has reached a performance level where additional skills can be stacked upon the previously learned skill, building a solid foundation for future development.

Part two of this series will review designing career developmental programs for your existing firefighters and officers and the common failures of training officers/divisions, resourcing for training, and evaluating and improving your training program using data, observation, and feedback.

Part three of this series will review designing standards, designing Performance Improvement Plans, and documenting the underperforming firefighters.

Brandon Roark began his journey in the fire service in 1992 as a spirited 14-year-old junior firefighter in Abingdon, Virginia. Today, he is the Assistant Chief of Training at the South Bend Fire Department, a role he fulfills with the same passion and dedication that ignited his career over three decades ago. Brandon's expertise and love for firefighting have led him to co-found the Lake Effect Fire Nuggets and the annual Lake Effect Fire Conference, making significant contributions to local fire service education and community building.

Brandon's life, though, isn't all fire. He's been blissfully married for 16 years, a feat he credits to his wife's saint-like patience and her poor decision-making. He has loved only one woman, three dogs, all the whiskey, a few beers, twenty-three nieces, nephews, God-children, and the American Fire Service. His story is a rollercoaster of professional dedication, personal love, the outdoors, and a touch of good humor, making him not just a valued friend but also a cherished member of his community.