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The Critique: Lessons Taken Home 3.08.04

I was a tourist today. I grabbed my “interested party” passport and went to a critique of a fire that I was not on. I must tell you that it was refreshing to sit there and learn valuable lessons without feeling the pressure we all feel when our split-second decisions are evaluated by an audience of our peers.

Surprisingly enough *I sat through the whole thing and did not utter a word*. I had promised to be quiet so I took mental notes instead. I will share with you what I took from that critique in just a minute but I have another agenda first.

The incident commander from that fire led the critique and he did something that you rarely see, he admitted that he lost control, that he missed key transmissions, and that it was only the grace of God that kept someone from getting seriously hurt on the call. In the eyes of TinHelmet that is some commendable stuff. I am sure his boss talked to him after the fire but I am also pretty sure that his boss did not tell him to make public admission of failures. However, because he did it took the pressure right out of the room, it put everyone else at ease. It is a lot easier to talk about what went wrong when our boss stands up first and says what he did wrong. Soon after he was done another person in the room spoke candidly about mistakes. This is the stuff that growth is made of.

As a group we are not perfect, nor will we ever be, however, our goal should always be perfection and candor is the vehicle that will carry us there. Of course, at some point we will have to stop talking and start acting, but if we never talk it out our actions will always be sub-par.

Enough of that talk though and let get to what we can all learn from what happened that morning. Some of these points were made by the Chiefs in the room, some are made by me, but they are all applicable to the discussion.

In the critique numerous failures were identified and I will address them one at a time:

1. *Failure to establish a continuous water supply*

COME ON ! It is 2004, the fire was in a suburban neighborhood with adequate hydrant coverage, the smallest pumper we have pumps 1250gpm, and we carry on average 750 gallons of water with us. Because of a communications glitch there were five engines on the initial call instead of the usual four. The Safety Dispatch brought at least one additional engine and the Task Force Alarm brought two more. So in the end there were at least eight pumpers on the scene of a single-family house that was burning.

THERE IS NO RATIONAL EXCUSE IN THIS SITUATION FOR THERE NOT BEING A CONTINUOUS WATER SUPPLY!

THIS IS NOT AN OFFICER PROBLEM IT IS A DRIVER PROBLEM.

Remember we used to do house fires with two engines and a special service. Wagon drivers are just as responsible as unit officers for ensuring that the objectives of the mission are reached. As the unit officer I will tell you to “pick up the line!” I do not need to tell you how. I do not need to help you unless we are setting up a dump site or fill site. In the tinhelmet world if I, as the officer, **have to** help the driver “hook-up”, I will, but he/she won’t be driving me for a long time to come!

There will be problems, we expect that, but we also expect you to fix them. It is a sad commentary that it took so long for the first engine to get water especially since the first five engines were on the scene within minutes of one another. Another quick point is that we really need to train our wagon drivers to understand their role in the system and train them to act independently to fix problems as they arise.

We also need to learn how to identify drivers who don’t cut the mustard and relieve them of their duties until they demonstrate an ability to function under pressure.

2. **Strategy and Tactics**

It is imperative that we are all playing out of the same playbook and that if we are calling “audibles” on the line we need to be sure that everyone has the same play in mind. But to do that we need a more comprehensive playbook, this much is true.

3. **Laddering/Ventilation**

The laddering of this house was horrendous. Our laddering of structures in general is horrendous. At least one shift in Takoma Park ensures that each member of the truck company throws at least one ladder, and then two of them stay on to throw more while the other goes in, and then they keep throwing them until they run out of ladders or the structure is laddered appropriately.

People always lament having a three person truck, they say it ain't enough to get the job done well. Those people are right it is not enough but they forget our incident priorities. LIFE SAFETY comes first.

A new catch phrase is brewing in MoCo and that is “**preparing the building for a search.**” This idea is so very crucial as we realize that *by placing ladders and clearing windows we do more to improve the survivability of civilians and firefighters that any other thing we could do [we ensure life safety].*

4. Second Due Truck

They were “stuck?” The incident lost an entire truck crew due to a mechanical malfunction. But before they were lost to that they were lost to preparing for a master stream operation that was never ordered by command. *We must stop trying to run the incident ourselves and unless given orders to the contrary we must follow the SOPs. [Myself included]*

**Correct me if I am wrong but I thought the new towers had a usable ladder, not just an escape ladder like the Sutphens. How long did that truck crew sit useless in that bucket when they could have climbed down and got to work? **

5. Exterior attack versus defensive attack versus marginal attack

The first time I heard the term marginal attack I must say I was quite baffled. I thought that we were either going to go get it or we were going squirt it from the curb. This fire was a prime example of what the marginal attack is all about. There was a report of people trapped, early in the morning, the house was on fire with quadrants Charlie and Delta showing heavy fire on the first, second floor and basement. Soon after arrival the fire began to race across the attic.

Our first arriving officer called for a “defensive attack” [I am pretty sure those were the exact words if I got it wrong I apologize.] That officer intended to attack the fire enough to support a search effort. Everyone else thought the officer wanted to do an “exterior only” attack. WOW! You can imagine the nightmare this causes as the second due truck sets up for ladder pipe operations, the rescue squad commits to a search, and everyone else looks lost.

Some people at the critique said that we need more clear definitions of terms. I

think our nomenclature is pretty standard already, our jargon works, and simply put if you don't know what someone meant we have a pretty nice radio system, you can just pick up the microphone and ask.

6. All the portable radios, all the talking, and nobody is communicating

More than one person said that they could not get through to give transmissions, important transmissions. If you ever listen to the radio you can understand how this can be true. **Shut-up.** I think that once the first engine goes on the scene with a “marginal attack” [suggested statement] and begins to operate everyone else, except command, should shut-up until the situation stabilizes. Listen to the police channel they call for radio silence all the time. Only command should be able to “clear the channel” for regular chatter.

If that first engine gets in to trouble they need to be able to transmit. They need uninterrupted air time to outline their attack mode, their lay-out instructions, and their on scene report. Chiefs and ancillary units, fire marshals, canteens, the videographer, all those people should go responding on the main dispatch channel and switch to the fireground channel silently.

Everyone else on the box-alarm has an SOP to follow and they should follow that in the absence of orders to the contrary. What else is there to talk about? If your task requires a lot of talking i.e., water supply, EMS, etc. then get another talk-group.

All units on extra alarms should come up on another talk-group and stage where ordered. Let command call you.

Oh, and while I daily take my hat off to the boys and girls operating the communications center, and while I acknowledge their thankless job that they do well 99.9% of the time, they really have to stop talking so much on the fire ground channel. Our radio channel was designed to belong to the incident commander, let him/her have it and run it. It is up to them to ask for help, to ask for alternate talk-group assignments, to ask for the “run down,” to ask for the evacuation tones.

7. If you don't know don't guess, just ask

If the first due calls a lay-out and you don't understand, ask! If you are not sure which hydrant is the primary hydrant, ask! If you are in the country and unsure what the water supply plan is, ask! Guessing leads to disaster as we demonstrate over, over and over again.

8. The war paint

When communications hits the weirdo box alarm tone the war paint should be smeared on your face. If you are not due on the box then take the paint off. But if you are due then leave your war paint intact, put your game face on and drive into battle with the right frame of mind. The battle ain't over till its over. The box alarm is not the time to catch up with friends, have a party in my honor later if you miss me.

When you arrive, get to fighting and don't stop to breathe until the commander advises that the, "fire is out, checking for extension." Then you can take a moment to catch your breath but not let your guard down. You see the fireground mishap might occur just as you enter re-hab and you might have to put your coat back on and get back to work.

Even Kenny Rogers recognized this when he sang, "...there will be time enough for talking when the dealing's done..."

I hear a lot of chatter about distinguishing between evacuating for life and evacuation for the sake of re-grouping, neither statement means that the battle is over. We must remain engaged until we are released from the scene.

I have said all that I have to say about this one. I am glad I went to the critique. Everyone should go to one every once in a while just to see and listen. I learned some things this morning and that is always a bonus.

charles bailey for Tinhelmet-