

# Make It Personal

I recently attended a seminar on preparation for line-of-duty deaths and firefighter funerals. If you've ever read one of my blogs on FirefighterNation.com, you know that I have very strong feelings on line-of-duty deaths.

But, for the first time, the subject *really* hit home with me. While it's important to plan that stuff, if we really think about it, doesn't the need for proper funeral planning only further acknowledge our acceptance of failure in protecting our own from the risks we face?

Too often we focus more time, energy and attention on those types of activities instead of the things we can do to prevent them. Firefighter safety, like fire prevention itself, is not glamorous. Whether it's civilian or firefighter lives, it's easier to take stock of those lost than those saved by implementing effective safety measures.

The 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives (LSIs), available at [www.everyonegoeshome.com](http://www.everyonegoeshome.com), are our roadmap to improved safety practices.

Firefighters must start living the Life Safety Initiatives for us to see an impact on LODDs

Story & Photo by Tiger Schmittendorf

A close review shows us that while several of the concepts must be addressed at a national level, many of the initiatives are *personalized* calls for effective risk management.

## OWN IT

The first four LSIs (see sidebar on next page) focus on increasing accountability for how we integrate risk management within incident management at every level within our organizations. They address the need for a health and safety culture change within the fire service.

Our culture is built from our values, beliefs, mindset, attitudes, actions and behaviors. But I question whether the LSIs personalize the solutions enough for us to embrace them—or whether the deciding factor for real behavioral change will come from the wake-up call of a personal near miss or the sting of losing someone dear to us. What will be the catalyst for change for you, for me, for us?

The solution lies in how we apply these safety initiatives. Like anything else we do in the fire service, changing our culture, especially when it comes to safety, is challenging at best. It requires courage from the top down and the bottom up, simultaneously.

Personal responsibility is the key at every level of the fire service safety chain. It all starts with each of us. Management can market the safety concepts to us, but those messages are lost if we don't make them our own.



Changing our culture requires a personal commitment to safety at every level of the fire service. Management can market the safety concepts to us, but those messages are lost if we don't live them in all of our actions, every day.

## CONDUCT A SAFETY ASSESSMENT

Like any other form of “advertising,” we need to surround ourselves with safety messages to constantly reinforce their meaning. Posters, postcards to your members, business cards, e-mails, videos and hands-on training are all ways to get the safety message across to your firefighters, subliminally or through “in your face” marketing techniques. But are they enough?

To make the LSIs more than hollow rhetoric, we must pause and examine all of our practices and identify opportunities to improve the level of safety at which they are performed.

A great time to get started is during this year’s Fire/EMS Safety, Health and Survival Week, scheduled for June 14–20 (the event formerly known as the Firefighter Stand Down). But don’t stop there. Self-assessment should be a continual process.

Completing a thorough safety analysis doesn’t require reams of forms, slide rules or a degree in rocket science. Whether we realize it or not, we hold safety meetings almost every time we get together, often around the kitchen table or sitting on the tailboard as we dissect the last run or the actions of another fire company. We just need to be honest about our own unsafe acts and support each other to correct them.

Initiative No. 4 tells us that firefighters must be empowered to stop unsafe acts. That empowerment doesn’t come just from leadership; it comes from each other. Once in a while we need to drop the tough exterior and allow each other to speak freely about what scares the stuffing out of us on the fireground.

It’s not enough to just remove the threat of retaliation for speaking out; real success will come when we actually reward those who create positive changes in our safety culture. A popular Homeland Security theme is: “If you see something, say something.” That should be our safety motto, too.

Some might argue that we’re attempting to soften, to sterilize the fire service with all this safety stuff. Nonsense. The ability for any firefighter to throw a figurative or real red flag at an incident scene is still a reactive but effective means of saving lives. That will never change.

## IMPLEMENTING THE INITIATIVES

Once we’ve completed our safety assessment, we need to study the 16 LSIs as a complete organization, not just as part of a class a few firefighters attend and then attempt to disseminate across the team with varied results. There are so many tools and resources available, including a variety of Web sites and other sources, that there should be no excuse for not incorporating a different safety theme into every training session and every teachable moment.

Our attitude toward safety is the only thing that stands between “It hasn’t happened to us” and “It hasn’t happened to us *yet*.”

Armed with a plan (the 16 initiatives), a list of opportunities (safety assessment) and the knowledge to act (training), we can now go about the business of changing our safety culture. The best place to start is with the low-hanging fruit. Small victories add up quickly and build lasting momentum. Nothing breeds success like success itself.

Some examples:

- You don’t have a mandatory seatbelt use policy? Google it and get one. E-mail me and I’ll send you one. Tweak it to be your own. Train on it. Implement it and after a month of 100 percent compliance, reward your firefighters and let them pick the next safety challenge to tackle.
- Still running hot to cold calls? Still bullying your way through intersections with a 20-ton piece of apparatus and an oversized air



## The First 4 Life Safety Initiatives

- 1** Define and advocate the need for a cultural change within the fire service relating to safety, incorporating leadership, management, supervision, accountability and personal responsibility.
- 2** Enhance the personal and organizational accountability for health and safety throughout the fire service.
- 3** Focus greater attention on the integration of risk management with incident management at all levels, including strategic, tactical and planning responsibilities.
- 4** All firefighters must be empowered to stop unsafe practices.

*Note:* For the complete list of the 16 Life Safety Initiatives, go to [www.everyonegoeshome.com/initiatives.html](http://www.everyonegoeshome.com/initiatives.html).

horn hoping that the sheer sound pressure will push oncoming traffic out of your path? Get a grip. Get a response and intersection policy in place. Not sure where to start? Here’s a real simple one that even I can remember: Stop, look, listen. Then proceed ... slowly. Every time.

- And then there’s firefighter health and fitness. We’re at a higher risk for both heart disease and cancer. How long have we known that? Start with more thorough exams at your annual physicals. Why do we spend years specifying a single piece of fire apparatus and only minutes to choose our medical screeners? Educate your firefighters on how to avoid the risks. Educate their families on what to look for and you’ll never find stronger advocates for any of your safety programs. Is STS (Spare Tire Syndrome) slowing your firefighters down? Initiate a “Biggest Loser” contest like many firehouses have done, and reward your members for coercing their fellow firefighters into the competition. Pay by the pound and offer gift certificates for free fitness center memberships. It doesn’t have to be complicated or expensive.

## A FINAL WORD

In this day and age, there’s no shortage of access to information, no lack of available training, no insurmountable barriers to our safety success—only attitudes and excuses.

It takes more imagination than money to understand and embrace the premise of the 16 Life Safety Initiatives. It takes more willingness than it does sheer will.

It just takes the courage to be safe.

Stay safe. Train often.

Tiger Schmittendorf serves as deputy fire coordinator for the Erie County Department of Emergency Services in Buffalo, N.Y. He is responsible for coordinating the training of 97 fire departments and more than 5,000 firefighters. Schmittendorf is a nationally certified fire instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. He served most recently as a leader on the unified command team that managed the recovery from the crash of Continental Flight 3407 in Clarence Center, N.Y. Connect with him on FirefighterNation.com or visit his blog at [www.tigerschmittendorf.com](http://www.tigerschmittendorf.com).