

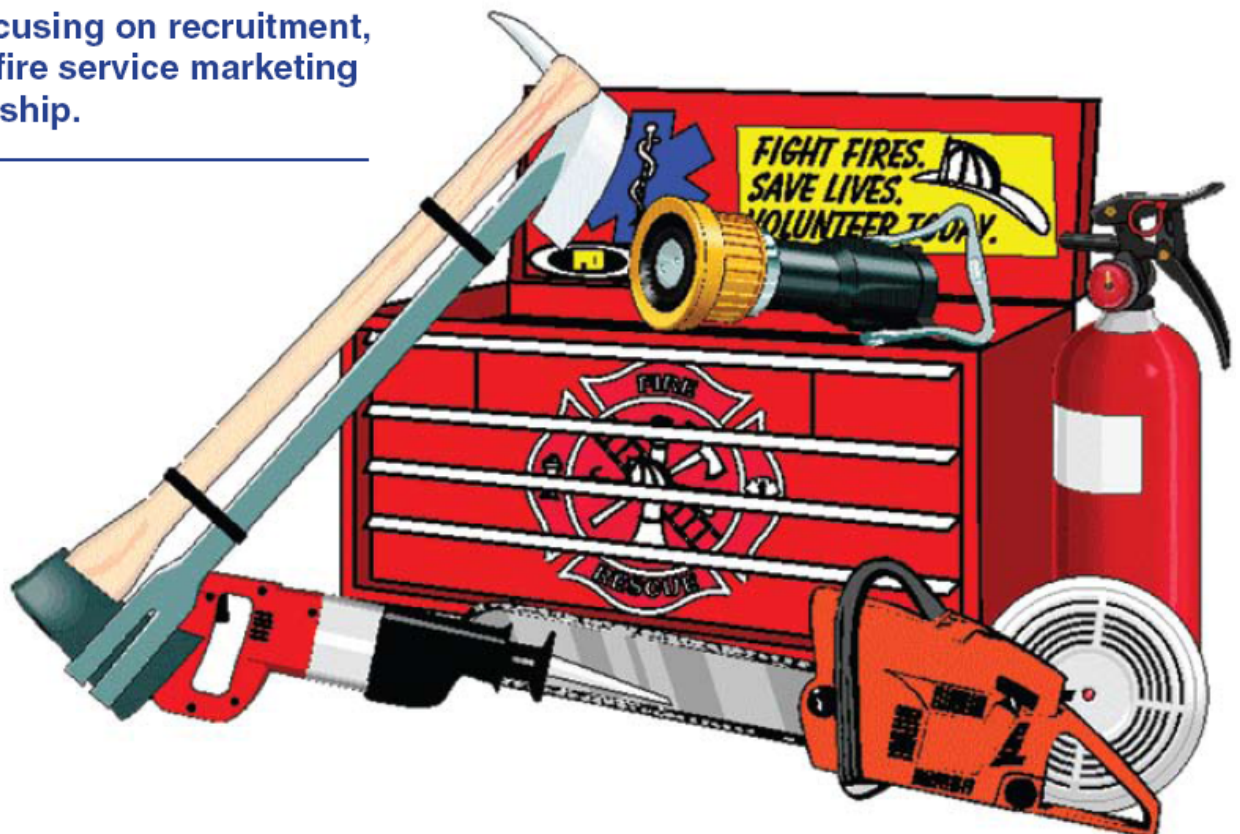
# RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TOOLKIT:

Dig In.

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This article is one in a series of toolkits focusing on recruitment, retention, fire service marketing and leadership.

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Dig in.

*“Early on in my fire service career, we responded to a report of a tractor-trailer rolled over on a nearby state highway. We arrived on scene and found a truck lying on its passenger side. The wheels were facing the roadway and the top of the cab was on the shoulder of the road. The truck driver was being treated as walking wounded. It seemed like a relatively benign accident.*

*As we approached the curb side we realized that this was no ordinary call. It turned out that the truck driver had a young female traveling with him. When the tractor trailer tumbled on its passenger side, the girl apparently fell half way out the window. Only her right arm was now visible outside the overturned cab, turned up at a ninety-degree angle towards us, her hand waving frantically.*

*She was buried alive and her muffled screams could be heard from underneath the several feet of mud and snow that accumulated on the side of the road when the truck finally skidded to a stop.*

*Being the smallest and lightest of our crew, I was suspended by my ankles into the cab by two other firefighters. As I began digging feverishly with my bare hands in the muck that the eighteen-wheeler had plowed through, her cries for help became fainter and fainter, until they stopped all together.*

*You can imagine the outcome – and the emotions that came with it: frustration, anger, sadness – every extreme imaginable. I was in maybe 19 or 20 at the time and completely unprepared to deal with the personal side of tragedy. The whole episode lasted just a few minutes, but it was an experience I will never forget.”*

Why do I share this story with you? Not to be a bragger, for there are no bragging rights to be had in recovering those who we could not save in time.

My goal is simply to stress to you the importance of telling stories, of sharing our experiences.

Very early on in their book titled: “Made to Stick,” brothers Chip Heath and Dan Heath point to the fire service’s success in sharing stories as a means of sharing experiences, passing down critical information to their successors. The book is based on the premise of why some ideas survive while others die.

“Firefighters naturally swap stories after every fire, and by doing so they multiply their experience; after years of hearing stories, they have a richer, more complete mental catalog of critical situations they might confront during a fire and the appropriate responses to those situations,” they say in describing the sixth principle of their “stickiness” theory.

The Heath brothers are not firefighters. Chip is a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford. Dan is a former researcher at Harvard. The book is about many businesses, including the business of delivering emergency services. But you don’t need to be a Stanford or Harvard graduate to figure out that they’re right.

It’s my opinion that the need for telling stories in the fire service has never been greater. We may be winning the battle of fire prevention but as our fire load goes down, so does our experience level – a double-edged sword.

The way I see it, there are essentially three ways of compensating for this downturn of experience.

First, we can prematurely promote personnel who are unprepared to progress. We know how well that works... *Not!* The outcome is not only predictable and unfair to those we put in this position; it can be deadly as well.

Secondly, increase both the quantity and quality of your training. Train more often and get the most realistic training that safety standards allow. This is paramount and cannot be overstated.

Lastly, learn from others.

But what’s required to accomplish that? We, the more experienced of our profession, need to be better and more frequent story tellers.

In recent conversations with a lot of firefighters, I ask them if this accurately describes their fire department: We have a stable cadre of firefighters with five years of experience and less, and a dwindling cache of firefighters with fifteen years of experience or more. Furthermore, we're real lean in the five to fifteen years of experience range. Essentially, we lack depth, qualified bench strength in our organization.



I haven't met anyone yet who hasn't nodded their head in at least partial agreement.

Let's first take a look at what transpires while we're building off of our first five years in the fire service. Ideally, those next ten years are supposed to be the officer development phase. We've captured their attention, they're getting the hang of things, starting to really contribute and they're ready for more challenges; hopefully growing towards a position of increased responsibility and leadership.

Here's part of the challenge. Their first five years might look nothing like our first five years in the fire service, thanks to the aforementioned decreasing fire load. It may take them ten or more years to gain the same level of real life firefighting experience that some of us saw when we entered this career twenty years ago or more.

If we match this same ten year niche against the 25-35 year old demographic I referred to in "From the X-Box to the Box Alarm," we come up against another obstacle. In this time warp I affectionately call "the lost years," most volunteer firefighters are simultaneously going through a time of significant personal and professional growth. Think about what traditionally happens during this period in a person's life: marriage, careers, families, job advancement, home ownership, etc.

Furthermore, it's my belief that this ten-year gap in experience directly correlates to a ten-year period where we were asleep at the switch in the fire service.

There was about a ten-year spell where we focused more on being professional and less on our people. Some of us even dropped the word "volunteer" from "volunteer fire department." We forfeited the virtues of being volunteers in favor of being viewed as equals to our paid counterparts. Worse yet, we let our trusted position as the social epicenter of the community run out the end of the hose line.

We viewed story telling as boring bragging. We disregarded our senior firefighters. Our answer to retention was to increase our recruitment efforts. People became disposable. We didn't value values. Our turnover rate skyrocketed until, like the stock market, the bubble burst.

What did that buy us? We invested heavily in everything that is useless without the people to staff it. We learned the hard way that you get what you pay for.

Every time a senior member of your department steps out of the line, retires or dies – we lose years and years of valuable experience through attrition. Years we may never regain. Years of experience you can't put a price on.

The first thing I do in the leadership conversations I hold with firefighters around the country is to bring them to early consensus that 95% of the challenges we face are back at the firehouse, not on the fire scene.

Despite this revelation, we invest our time, energy, and yes, our money; in the exact opposite proportion. I have yet to find a fire department that invests as much as 1% of their net budget back into the one asset required to make every other resource work: their people.

What did that buy us? Apparatus we can't staff, calls we can't cover, and other functions of the fire department that are dysfunctional.

Here's my call to action: If you are a chief, an officer, or a wannabe officer; I have two words for you – Dig in.

Dig in to your organizations and figure out what makes them tick. Break down your membership by age, years of experience, training level and skill sets. You might be shocked at what you find. Do a needs assessment. Then do a skills assessment of your people and match it against your needs assessment. Identify and address your gaps.

If you're serious about the survival and success of your fire department, dig in and plan to be in the ranks for up to another ten years while the others catch up to your experience level. But don't just hang around, don't be "R.I.P. – Retired In Place." Really contribute. Really lead.

Invest heavily in education, yours and theirs. Not just tactics and strategies but organizational management too. Read magazines like *Fast Company* and books like "Made to Stick," Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point" and "Leadership" by Rudy Giuliani, to name a few.

Take notes. Talk to people who have had success in successful organizations. Learn from their experiences.

Truly train and nurture your replacements. Mentor, model and mold the future of your fire department. Motivate and cultivate.

As Hall of Fame Football Quarterback Joe Montana told me just the other day, "Let your work ethic be contagious, for your work ethic is what tells your teammates how much they can trust you."

Become a great story teller, a trusted source. Share your knowledge and experience. Give back. Demonstrate a real desire to develop your officers. Become more engaged with your people than ever before. Be a *real* leader. Care.

Chip and Dan Heath finished their fire service analogy with, "Research shows that mentally rehearsing a situation helps us perform better when we encounter that situation in the physical environment. Similarly, hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively."

Call me crazy, but it's almost as if they've figured out our business. I just hope we can too.

I've told anyone that would listen that I think the next ten years are pivotal to the survival and success of the volunteer fire service as we know it today. Without smart investments in our people we'll never see a return on any of our other investments. You have to be in it to win it.

The stakes are high. Will you lay your cards on the table to win – or will you fold?

Lastly, we need to face the reality that we can't overcome all of the external forces around us, of which there are plenty. Nonetheless, there is hope. That hope is you. You don't have to be an officer to be a leader. You can be the internal force for transforming your fire department into not just a surviving, but a thriving organization.

All you have to do is dig in.

For a comprehensive offering of R&R resources, visit my blog at [www.tigerschmittendorf.com](http://www.tigerschmittendorf.com). Click or call if you're looking for ideas or want to volunteer your own. I'd love to hear your stories.

Let me know how I can help.

Until next time... "Stay safe. Train often."



*Tiger Schmittendorf is chairman of FASNY's Recruitment and Retention Committee and serves the County of Erie Department of Emergency Services (Buffalo NY) as Deputy Fire Coordinator. He created a recruitment effort that doubled his own fire department's membership and helped net 525+ new volunteers countywide. A frequent presenter on the subjects of leadership, incident management, safety, recruitment and retention, he is a Nationally Certified Fire Instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. Visit his blog at [www.tigerschmittendorf.com](http://www.tigerschmittendorf.com).*