

A young boy with blonde hair, wearing a red t-shirt and dark shorts, is seen from the side, looking towards a line of fire trucks. The trucks are parked on a street, and the scene is outdoors with trees in the background. The boy's expression is one of interest and awe.

Saving Stories

How storytelling can
help save the volunteer
fire service

By Tiger Schmittendorf

PHOTO: ISTOCK.COM

The Evans Center Fire Hall was just around the corner, a few hundred yards from my house, as the crow flies.

Growing up so close, the firehouse was an obvious choice as a place to hang out with my friends. We helped out at the carnivals and other fundraisers, and when they added a banquet hall, we helped the contractors move supplies. My initials are carved in the sidewalk they poured. I was 8.

And, of course, we ran to the curb whenever the fire siren went off. It was loud, and it seemed to cycle forever. With the windows open on a warm summer night, you could hear a siren from a fire station 10 miles away.

Whenever we heard its distinctive wail, we would run out and look to see if the fire trucks were coming down our road. We watched them race out of the station, lights flashing and sirens whining. The firefighters in their rubber coats and boots and metal helmets were strapped to the tailboard of the fire engine by a coarse rope belt that had a sharp hook on the end that would gut you like a fish if it ever caught you. I still have one of those.

Oh, how we wanted to be those guys.

Every firefighter I meet speaks of how, from the time they were very young, they dreamed of being a firefighter. I was one of those kids. I call them “run-to-the-curb”-type kids.

So where’s the lesson in these childhood memories?

STORYTELLING & “THE LOST YEARS”

The need for storytelling 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.

Many volunteers describe their departments as consisting of a stable cadre of firefighters with 5 years of experience (or less) and a dwindling cache of responders with 15 years of experience or more. However, we lack personnel with 5–15 years of experience. We lack depth and qualified “bench strength” in our organizations.

Let’s first take a look at what transpires after our first 5 years in the fire service. The next 10 years are supposed to be the officer-development phase. We’ve captured their attention; they’re getting the hang of things and hopefully growing toward a position of increased responsibility and leadership.

If we match this same 10-year niche against the common 25–35-year-old demographic that fills this slot, we come up against another obstacle. In this time warp I affectionately call “the lost years,” most volunteer firefighters are going through a time of significant personal and professional growth—marriage, career advancement, families, home ownership, etc.

Furthermore, it’s my belief that this 10-year gap in experience directly correlates to a 10-year spell in the 1990s and beyond when, in an effort to elevate our status in the community, we focused more on appearing, sounding and being professional—and less on our people. Some of us even dropped the word “volunteer” from volunteer fire department. Worse yet, we let our trusted position as the social epicenter of the community run out the end of the hoseline.

We viewed storytelling 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 our values.

Let’s face it: Every time a senior member of your department steps out of the line, retires or dies, we lose years and years of valuable experience—years you can’t put a price on and may never regain. In the past 10 years, our turnover rate skyrocketed until, like the stock market, the bubble burst.

What did that buy us? We invested heavily in things that are useless without the right quantity and quality of people to staff them.

I often say that you can tell the difference between those who have the fire service in their blood, and those who don’t. It’s an addiction. And like anything else that can get in your blood, it can hurt you if you let it. This harsh reality reminds us to prioritize our first family first, and to balance our love for the fire service with our love for those who love us and the other important things in our life.

MADE TO STICK

Very early into their book “Made to Stick,” brothers Chip 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 focuses on 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.

WHAT WE NEED

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

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

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

So what do we do? Conduct a needs assessment. Break down your membership by age, years of experience, training level and skill sets. You might be shocked at what you find. Then complete a skills assessment of your people and match it against your needs assessment. Identify and address your gaps.

Invest heavily in education—yours and theirs—and not just tactics and strategies but organizational management, too. Take notes. Talk to people who’ve had success in successful organizations. Learn from their experiences.

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Saving Stories

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

The Heaths 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.



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FIND THE PASSION INSIDE

I think the next 10 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.

For those who were run-to-the-curb kids, remember what it was that attracted you to the fire service in the first place. Re-instill the old excitement, curiosity and *fun* that takes you back to your childhood, and makes you run to the apparatus floor.

If you weren’t one of those kids, you’ve got your work cut out for you, but like everything else in the fire service, we can adapt and overcome. Start by reminding yourself of what brought you to the fire service and use that as a jumping-off point to self-motivate your passion for the job. And, if you can invigorate that kid-like level of enthusiasm in others, you’ve got a new firefighter fulfilling their life-long dream—or an experienced firefighter fanning new flames of eagerness for what we do.

BECOME A STORYTELLER

Our ability to share information and experiences through effective story telling will be a critical skill set in sustaining the future of the fire service. It’s a form of mentoring, of teaching and of leading.

Our contagiousness, our ability to spread our fever for the fire service, our “love for the job,” as Chief Rick Lasky calls it, is critical to the survival of the fire service as we know it, now.

Storytelling passes on our traditions, conveys our values and protects the rich heritage of the fire service. So become a great storyteller, a trusted source. Share your knowledge and experience. Give back. Demonstrate a real desire to develop your replacements. Become more engaged with your people than ever before. Be a *real* leader. Care.

And run to the curb! 🚒

Tiger Schmittendorf serves as deputy fire coordinator for the Erie County Department of Emergency Services in Buffalo, N.Y. He created a recruitment effort that doubled his own fire department’s membership and netted more than 500 new recruits countywide. Schmittendorf is a nationally certified fire instructor and has been a firefighter since 1980. Connect with him on FirefighterNation.com, visit his blog at www.tigerschmittendorf.com and tell your story at www.runtothecurb.com.