

25 Things Probationary Firefighters Should Know and Do

By Frank Viscuso and Michael Terpak

So, you have just been sworn in as a firefighter. Congratulations on your achievement. You may or may not have completed your academy training, but you are about to report to your shift for the first time to meet the team of firefighters you will be working with, maybe for the next twenty years of your life. Sure, you are excited, but as you sit and think about everything you “don’t” know, you can feel your anxiety level rising. We can relate. We have been there.

Firefighting in general is difficult, but a firefighter’s probationary period is typically the most difficult part of his or her career. This is the way it is supposed to be, because your probationary period, which usually lasts 12 months, is the period where a good department will challenge you to rise and meet their standards. This is not a time to take lightly, because it is during this period when your actions are scrutinized by upper management, and what you do, or fail to do, can result in your termination, ending your career as a firefighter. If that scares you, it should, but not enough that you don’t accept the challenge. Being a firefighter is all about accepting challenges. It’s what we do.

During your probationary period you’re likely to feel alone. It would be wise to remember that the men and women you are working with have all been “probies” at some point. In many departments, each time an individual receives a promotion, they have to complete another probationary period. Why is this? The answer is simple; it’s important to determine whether or not that individual is capable of performing the duties that are required in this new position.

If you have completed the academy, you may be wondering why you are still under the microscope. One of the reasons for this is that the men and women you will be riding with want to ensure that you have retained the information you were taught in the academy. They also want to help bring you to the next level – the street smart level – of firefighting. Yes, you will learn early on that textbook firefighting, and real life firefighting, are two different things.

Being on probation does not mean that others have the right to harass or intimidate you. It does; however, mean that they will push you to see what you are made of. It is their obligation to do so because it is their life that you may have to save one day. This is why they will push you, and evaluate you, and sometimes judge you, but they’ll also do more than just that. They will also help educate and prepare you to become a functioning member of their crew.

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For now, you are a “probie.” You may ask, what is that, exactly? In layman’s terms, this is the time you gain your reputation – the one that will stay with you for the duration of your career. Do we have your attention yet? Good, because we know what you are about to experience and we want to help. Attached is a list of twenty-five things every probationary firefighter should know and do. As a new firefighter, there are things you should know. For example, everyone firefighter knows the probie’s list of responsibilities around the firehouse could be summed up in one word... everything. As a probationary firefighter; however, you may have tons of questions about, well, everything.

Since we have walked in your shoes, we have compiled the list below to help prepare you for the tasks ahead. Again, we welcome you to the fire service and we wish you a safe and prosperous career.

Your brothers,
Deputy Chief’s Michael Terpak & Frank Viscuso

25 Things Probationary Firefighters Should Know and Do

1. **Respect the job:** Firefighting is one of the most respected professions in our Country. For every person who wears a firefighter uniform, there are at least ten more who wish they could. As much of an honor as it is to become a Firefighter, it is equally as much a dishonor to become complacent. Those who don't care about the job are disrespectful to the both profession and their coworkers. Respect the job, work hard, and be proud of the profession you have chosen.
2. **Arrive early:** Arrive at work at least 30 minutes before your shift begins. This will give you the opportunity to prepare by familiarizing yourself with the apparatus you are assigned to. This is a habit you will want to keep for the duration of your career. Preparation for the big fire begins the moment you walk through the door, not the moment your shift begins.
3. **Be social:** Introduce yourself to everyone you meet. This is especially important on your first day. Greet other firefighters with a handshake and simply say, "Hello, I'm Firefighter _____. It's nice to meet you." These are the men and women you will be putting your life on the line with, and for. If you are meeting an officer, make sure you greet him/her by the proper title. It is imperative that you understand the ranking system and address their rank. A simple, "Hello Captain," before you introduce yourself, would suffice.
4. **Find the senior firefighter:** A good senior firefighter on your shift/station will be your greatest asset. Ask him/her all of those questions you have regarding your first day. Questions like, "What housework should I do?" (See #5 and #6), or "Which bed/locker is mine?" The senior firefighter is there to answer those questions, not the Officer. The Captain, for example, has greater responsibilities than to show you where the mop is.
5. **Be proactive around the firehouse:** Don't wait for someone to tell you what to do. As a probationary firefighter, you basically do everything. If the phone rings, answer it. If someone knocks on the door, see who it is. After lunch, volunteer to do the dishes. If you sit and watch the other firefighters doing these things, they will develop an unfavorable opinion of you early on. As a rule of thumb, if you think you are not doing enough, you probably aren't.
6. **Be the first to rise and the last to sleep:** Plan on being the last one to go to bed. This is the time to assure that the firehouse is secured and tidy. This is also a great time to read up on fire related material. Wake up 30 minutes before the others, make coffee, and do whatever tasks are necessary around the firehouse. The others will respect you for it.
7. **Find a mentor:** This may not be easy to do on the first or second day, but in time you will find the person who impresses you with his/her knowledge and attitude, and is receptive to you. Most Firefighters would be honored to share their knowledge and help mentor a probationary firefighter, but you will have to make it clear that you want their help. Align yourself with the right people, because every successful person will tell you that association is the key to success.
8. **Know your riding position and responsibilities:** you will be assigned a position by the officer, who will also instruct you on the responsibilities of that position. Everyone on an apparatus has specific duties and tasks that they are expected to know and accomplish in order to ensure success at an incident. Understand what is expected of you before you go out the door.

9. **Check your equipment:** This rule cannot be overstated. Check your Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and SCBA. Check nozzles, saws, tools, etc. Starting on day one, prepare yourself by checking to see where everything is located, so when the officer asks for a specific tool, you won't be foolishly running around the apparatus looking for it. Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.
10. **Wear your safety gear:** Contrary to what you might think, you are NOT indestructible. You have been issued protective clothing to help ensure that you go home at the end of your shift. The clothing cannot protect you if it's sitting in your gear locker. Wear your hood, your gloves, and your mask! Button your collar. Give yourself every chance of getting back home in the same shape as when you left.
11. **Ask:** When you have a question, ask it. Not asking a question for fear of looking foolish will only get you in trouble. You will be working with knowledgeable firefighters, but to benefit from their knowledge, you must be willing to make the first move. They can't answer your question if they don't know what that question is. The firefighters preparing this document have a combined fifty years on the job, and they still ask questions. Twenty years from today, you will be also... if you're smart.
12. **Talk to the off-going crew:** Don't let your counterpart leave without giving you a report. Ask questions that will affect your readiness on what happened on their shift. Ex: "Has any equipment been moved, replaced or sent out for repair?" Conversely, don't rush out the door at the end of your shift. Share pertinent information with the crew (and person) that is relieving you. Give them the same courtesy that others extended to you.
13. **Lead by example:** Yes, even a rookie can display the qualities of a leader. If you do your job well, every time – that's the first step. On the fire ground, there is something we call "layered leadership." When an assignment is given, the person receiving the assignment is expected to complete that task. If you tackle assignments with professionalism and a "whatever it takes" attitude, others (even veteran firefighters) may try to reach the standard that you, the rookie, have set.
14. **Don't try to force acceptance:** Your actions both in the firehouse and on the fire ground will be closely scrutinized. Trying to get comfortable too quickly will likely work against you. For example, it is wise to bring in the newspaper, but your job is not to kick your feet up and read it. You can do that on your off time. When on duty, you should be reading about one thing, your job.
15. **Leave your ego at the door:** Don't think, "Been there, done that." In this profession, celebrations are short lived. You (and your crew) are only as good as your next call. Don't be overconfident or cocky because you had a fire on your first day. Sure, the experience will help, but remember, there is a lot to learn in this business and you will NEVER know it all. The day you think you do, is the day you should consider another career.
16. **Respect your elders:** There is an extensive amount of experience and information stored in the minds of the senior members of most departments. To them, you're the "kid" who just got out of the academy, and some of them may remind you of that from time to time. If so, consider that you may be showing them signs of disrespect. It's okay to share your opinion, but don't forget that these men and women paid their dues and have experience that exceeds yours. Respect that fact.

17. **Stay physically fit:** Firefighting is one of the most physically demanding jobs in the world. Consider the fact that a significant number of firefighters die each year due to stress induced heart attacks. Some of those deaths may have been avoided if the firefighter ate healthier, worked out more consistently, and was proactive with regular physical and cardiovascular exams. In short, Stay Fit! Your life depends on it.
18. **Stay mentally fit:** The most important tool you have is the one under your helmet and in between your ears. You have to exercise that tool daily by attending as many classes and reading as many books as you can. There is an endless supply of educational materials out there. A smart firefighter will understand that the day they stop reading about the job is the day they should retire. If you think you have run out of things to study and learn, you have greatly underestimated the complexity of the job.
19. **If you feel stressed, tell your officer:** While on duty, you will see and experience traumatic occurrences that exceed what the average person will see in their lifetime (Multiple alarm fires, serious injuries, death, etc). In time, you will become partially immune to most of this, but you will always be affected to some degree. Some people are good at hiding their stress, but this will catch up to you and affect your personal life as well as your professional life. Don't be foolish enough to hesitate to ask for help if you need it.
20. **Have fun:** You may be saying, "Fun? Nothing I've read so far sounds like fun," but you will discover that life as a firefighter can be just that. If, of course, you learn how to take a joke. The fact is many firefighters like to test the sense of humor of probies early on. Don't take things too personally. Have fun, if you don't have a sense of humor, it would be wise to develop one. Survival in the firehouse depends on it.
21. **Be a team player:** Firefighting is the ultimate definition of the word TEAM. Individuals rarely get credit for a job well done, but your crew will be judged by how well you work together. Remember, when things go bad, all you have is your team. Crew continuity is built in the fire station, but teamwork is fine-tuned on the training ground and at the fire scene. It also helps to get involved with off duty, non-firefighting activities as well.
22. **Be accountable:** The only person responsible for your actions is you. If you make a mistake, own up to it. Your co-workers will respect you more for admitting you were wrong than by trying to hide or justify your actions. Accountability is also important on the fire ground. If your officer asks you to do something, do it, then immediately report back to him. Freelancing at a fire is a major problem that could end up costing someone their life.
23. **Respect the public:** Being a firefighter is an honor and privilege. Being issued a badge doesn't mean you deserve special treatment. On the contrary, firefighting is a business of service. When people have problems, they call you for help. They let you in their homes because they trust you and believe that you are a professional. Treat them with the same respect you would want others to treat you, and your family with in a time of need.
24. **Make safety your priority:** No matter where you are or what you are doing, think safety. On the fire ground especially, it is easy to get so caught up in the moment, that you forget the basics. Take a moment to think about what you are doing before you do it. In that moment, think, "is this the safest way I can accomplish this task?" The job is dangerous enough. There is no room for poor judgment and unsafe practices.

25. **Pay it forward:** As the years go by, you will move from probie to experienced firefighter. One day you may be the senior firefighter, or even the company officer. Don't ever forget what it feels like to be the rookie shaking in his boots. The probies of tomorrow deserve the same respect and tutelage that you will receive. If hazing and condescension were your tutors, then you be the one to break that destructive cycle. Be a dedicated firefighter, and help out the rookie, even if you weren't helped. Individually we can get better, but only as a whole can we become great.

As you can see from what you have just read, being a probationary firefighter is hard work, but if you weren't up for the challenge, you would never have chosen this profession in the first place. Accept the challenge, work hard, and stay hungry to learn. When someone is giving you advice, listen. Remember, you have one mouth and two ears, use them proportionately. As human beings, it's important to understand that we don't learn anything by talking. We learn by listening, reading and doing.

After you successfully complete your probationary period, your attitude and behavior should not change. If you take the advice we have given you above, you will have established some great habits. Keep them and they will serve you well.



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