

Critiquing Others

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

There will be times when a firefighter under your command performs at an unacceptable level. This can occur in the fire house, or out in the public's eyes (which is far worse). Critiquing, when done correctly, falls under the same category as constructive criticism. In order to skillfully critique others, follow this proven format that is used in the fire service, as well as corporate America.

1. Critique in private.

Unlike praise, which has a greater effect when done in front of others, critiquing should be done in a private setting. If it is a serious matter, the firefighter may want some form of support (such as a union representative) in the room. Otherwise, you should meet with the firefighter, one-on-one.

2. Begin on a positive.

Remember, at this point you may not know if the firefighter is *unaware* of the problem, *unable* to correct the problem, or *unwilling* to correct the problem (see the article titled, *Subordinate Problems, the "3U" Method*). You don't want to assume the worse. There should be things the firefighter does right, be sure to point them out. Doing so will help the individual relax, and he/she will be more open to hear what you say next.

3. Criticize the act, not the person.

There is a difference. If this is a first offense and you immediately criticize the person, you are going to form a hostile working environment. If you want to make your crew fear and dislike you, that's your prerogative, but don't lose sight of the fact you may, one day, put your lives on the line for each other. That alone, should be enough reason for you to want to foster a mutually respectful relationship.

4. Clearly explain what you want (and expect).

Clarity is everything. Explain why the firefighter's actions were wrong, and describe how you would like to see things done differently from here on out. If you have SOP's and department policies, use them as aids. People retain more of what they *read*, than they do of what they just *hear*. Make sure the firefighter leaves the meeting with a clear understanding of what is expected.

5. Develop a solution together and agree on it.

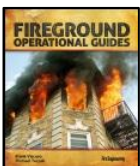
Let firefighters play a part in solving their own problems. This will help them establish a sense of ownership. You probably don't like being dictated to, and neither do they, but let's be honest, there are times you will need to do just that – after all, you are the company officer. If this is not one of those times, try working together. You'll find that most firefighters will respond better to this method.

6. End on a positive note.

You said what you needed to say, there's no need to belabor the point. End the meeting the way you began it, on a positive. This will show the firefighter that you are willing to put the incident behind you and start fresh. Again, you will find that most firefighters will appreciate you more for doing so. The results should speak for themselves.

Numbers 2 and 6 are commonly referred to as *the sandwich technique*. This is when you place the performance issue in between two compliments.

The steps outlined above work, but if you find yourself dealing with a firefighter who simply will not change, or has performed in a way that requires stronger action than a simple critique, consult with your immediate supervisor regarding what actions you should take. Also check out my other articles in our Fire Officer Development Series on FireOpsOnline.com for additional tips.



Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso of the Kearny, NJ Fire Department, is a speaker, fire service instructor, and regular contributor of Fire Engineering magazine. Frank is the author of three books including *Common Valor*, *The Mentor*, and the best-selling fire service textbook *Fireground Operational Guides* (PennWell, 2011, co-authored by DC Mike Terpak). He can be reached via his website www.frankviscuso.com