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Officer Development Series – *Leadership Skills*



Freelancing

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

Freelancing is one of the most dangerous, destructive and counterproductive acts an individual, or group of individuals, can do on the fire ground.

The term Freelancing is not the same in the fire service as it is in the corporate world. In corporate America, freelancing is a term used for a person whose skills are available for hire, such as a freelance writer or photographer. On the fire ground; however, freelancing occurs when a person works outside of an established action plan. When a person, or group, begins to do things that the Incident Commander (IC) is not aware of, they are freelancing. To act in a way that contradicts a departments SOP's, without being assigned to that task by a member of the command staff, a person has stepped away from the game plan and begun freelancing. Simply put, if the IC cannot account for, or track, an individual or a company, those people are freelancing.

To illustrate why freelancing is a problem, consider the following scenario.

Dave is a 3 year veteran on his department. His 4 member Engine Company arrived on the scene of a warehouse fire and reported to the IC for their assignment. They were the second Engine Company to arrive on the scene. They were given the task of securing a secondary water supply from a nearby hydrant, and stretching a 2-1/2" hose line into the structure as a backup for the first line, which was already in operation. Warehouse fires require a lot of water and the line they were stretching is heavy and difficult to stretch with just two people. The driver, as always, stayed with the Engine to operate the pump and assure the others received water. Dave's initial job was to connect the supply line to the hydrant so the engine could pump a continuous supply of water to the hose line. As

he was doing this, the Captain and another firefighter – the nozzle man – began to stretch the line into the smoky structure, where visibility was less than 10%. After securing the supply line, Dave was told to follow the line into the structure and meet up with his Captain so they could complete their task of backing up the first line and help extinguish the fire.

Fifteen minutes had gone by and Dave had not reunited with his crew. This was far too much time and the Captain knew it. Something must have gone wrong otherwise Dave would have met up with them by now. The Captain radioed Dave to ask where his location was. There was no response. The Driver heard the transmission and radioed back that Dave had completed his first assignment (securing the water supply) then disappeared. He assumed Dave was somewhere inside the structure. The Captain and the nozzle man, who were now running low on air, left their line and exited the building to find Dave. Because the Captain could not locate Dave, he transmitted an urgent radio message stating that a firefighter was unaccounted for. This halted all operations because the other firefighters on the fire ground heard the transmission and began to look for the lost firefighter. Once outside of the structure, the Captain found Dave. He was working with a ladder company that was trying to force open some steel roll down doors on a loading dock for ventilation purposes. He did not realize his radio was turned off.

Dave said he had forgotten to turn on his radio and he was helping the ladder company because it looked like they could use another pair of hands. The other members of the ladder company were so focused on their job that they did not realize they picked up an extra man. Dave was safe, but his freelancing caused many problems at this fire: The initial Engine Company was placed in a dangerous situation because they were still inside the structure without a backup line. The Incident Commander has to change his overall tactics from fighting the fire, to a firefighter rescue mission. Other firefighters on the scene stopped what they were doing when they heard the urgent message. As a result, the fire grew larger and they ended up losing the warehouse. The entire mission was compromised and ultimately failed because of Dave's actions.

Freelancing should not be tolerated in the Fire Service. It is a key ingredient, and sometimes the only ingredient in the recipe for disaster. Incident Commanders, officers, and firefighters all have the responsibility to assure that team integrity is maintained at all times. Although there are different theories as to who should shoulder the blame when freelancing occurs (a renegade firefighter, a weak company officer, poor training) the chances of freelancing diminish greatly when

all members on a team understand the mission they are trying to accomplish. In short, many times freelancing is a result of poor communication.

In addition to the many problems that freelancing causes on the fire ground, there is another negative byproduct of freelancing that should be mentioned. If a firefighter consistently happens to neglect his or her duties, and they tend to *not* be where they were supposed to be on a regular basis, the worst possible adjective in the world of firefighting is often used to describe them – Coward. As terrible as this may sound, it's true. And once someone in the fire service is tagged with this title, they will spend the rest of their career trying to prove otherwise. In business, a person who neglects their duties may be called something else – perhaps, incompetent. Right or wrong, that's just the way it is. As an officer you could help your company members avoid this fate by taking actions to prevent freelancing from occurring in the first place.

Whether it's in the fire service, organized sports, or the business world, when one team member free-lances, the entire team mission is compromised.

How to Prevent Freelancing

To prevent freelancing from occurring in the future, you first have to determine how and why it occurred on your team in the first place. Begin by asking yourself the following questions.

- Is freelancing common on my crew?
- When freelancing occurs, is it addressed?
- If so, how is it addressed?
- Who is held accountable?

If Freelancing does not occur on your team, a smart officer should still take time to consider how they would address freelancing before, during, and after an incident?

It is easy to blame an individual for freelancing, but many times, that's taking the easy way out. I believe that an individual is rarely better than the organization they belong to. In other words, if freelancing occurs on a regular basis, it's likely the department's fault. It is the organizations responsibility from day one to establish the

correct expectations. Poor performers can be a result of poor direction. As a company officer, there is one big caveat to this fact. Once you blame your organization you are headed for supervisory disaster. To the others, YOU are the organization. The blame game never works. Instead of wasting your time and energy pointing fingers up, take ownership of your team by setting the right tone and expectations from the beginning. Why? Because the world has too many problem-finders, we need more problem-solvers. Also consider the fact that people who point their finger at others often fail to realize that 3 fingers on that same hand are pointing back at them.

To get to the root of the problem, begin by finding out if the freelancer is Unaware they are doing it, Unwilling to change their ways, or Unable to correct the problem. This is known as the 3U's method, which is described in another article on FireOpsOnline.com titled *Subordinate Problems, the "3U" Method*.

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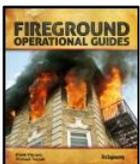
The act of Freelancing can be prevented by taking the following actions:

- Training – Prepare your crew for success by assuring that each person knows what to do when they are presented with common scenarios. This begins with reviewing your department's SOP's and other related documents. Then, get out of quarters and train. Training will take the guesswork out of the equation so there are no misunderstandings on the fire ground.
- Follow-Up in Writing – Training is fantastic, but follow-up is just as important. Work with your training division to help communicate the mission you are trying to accomplish. Once SOP's are created or revised, and/or training notices are sent out on paper, people are more likely to understand and follow through with their assignments on the fire ground.
- Give Clear Directions – When you assign a task to someone, ask them to repeat it back to you so you can be assured they

understand what their assignment is, and what you expect from them. Clarity is everything.

- **Openly Delegate Tasks** – Each member of a crew will have an assigned function and all team members should know their own assignment, as well as everyone else’s on that crew. This will prevent two members from unknowingly working on the same task and duplicating their efforts ineffectively.
- **Hold People Accountable for Actions** – When someone does go off on their own and begins freelancing, address it “properly and professionally.” Failure to do so is equivalent to giving your entire team permission to do whatever they want, whenever they want.
- **Communicate Your Expectations Regularly** – Don’t assume everyone knows what to do at all times. The job of an officer is to provide direction and help keep people focused on their tasks. You will know when someone has fallen off track. If you are unsure, follow your gut. If it looks and feels wrong, it probably is -- fix it - - that’s what a strong company officer does.

In the Fire Service, we understand that Freelancing can be addressed and fixed in a soft environment (around the firehouse) easier that it can in a hard environment (on the fire ground). We also understand that in our profession, freelancing kills people! Ask any organization that experienced a firefighter casualty because of freelancing if they wish they could go back and address the issue long before the incident occurred and you will understand how important early training and prevention is. Freelancing may not result in a casualty on your department, but it sure would contribute to overall team failure.



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