Program Development Format
for Administrative Scenarios

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

Back in 2010, I had written an article for Fire Engineering titled "The simple approach to writing Standard Operating Procedure's (SOP's)." In that article I outlined five steps that, when followed, will provide you with a comprehensive format that can be used to develop and implement standard operating procedures. Having written more than fifty operating guidelines for my department, I can say with confidence that those five simple steps can help you to write an effective and comprehensive SOP, regardless of whether you are a novice or a seasoned firefighter even if you have limited writing experience.

The exciting thing about this format is it can be used for more than just developing SOP's, it can also be used when developing any type of program, whether it's a community awareness fire prevention and education program, a public relations program, or a department wide mandatory training class on any subject. With this thought in mind, I want to encourage you to consider the five step outline in this article an effective format that can be used not only within your department for program development reasons, but also as a format for administrative scenarios when taking a Chief Officer promotional exams. Perhaps you may have heard of these five steps before. They are known as "PRDIE," which stands for Planning, Research, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate.

Let's say your department is interested in initiating a public relations program that is designed to encourage young children to read. As a new officer, you have been asked to develop this program – Below is an example of how you could approach this task using this proven administrative format.

STEP 1: PLANNING

You've already conducted a needs assessment, identified your problem and came up with the solution of a public relations program. You should initiate this stage by forming a committee. It could have two members or more; the committee's size may vary. The members should be motivated and knowledgeable about the subject on which you are developing this program. For example, co-workers who have children or those with teaching experience should be considered. When choosing members for your committee, look outside of your department for legal and expert opinions on the topic. Your committee should also include representatives of groups that will be affected by the program. In this example, local teachers or board of education members could provide valuable insight.

Once your committee is formed, schedule a meeting and choose a committee manager. This is the most effective way to facilitate coordination. As the individual responsible for

developing the program, you should also assume the role of committee manager. At the meeting, effectively communicate the specific goals and objectives you are trying to meet so that all members have a clear understanding of the task at hand. Prescribe a course of action by delegating tasks; designate a timeline for their completion. Early tasks are mainly fact-finding and research oriented, such as those outlined in step 2 below. Members should write down their assignments so there is no confusion about who is assigned which task. Document what occurred at the meeting, and prepare a report for your superior. These two actions should be taken after each of the five steps in the process.

STEP 2: RESEARCH

It's imperative that the committee members research all facts that are pertinent to the development of this program. In this example, the best place to begin is by doing an internet search of other successful reading programs like "Read Across America." In short, seek help from those in the know.

It is also helpful to contact other local fire departments to see if they have a program and/or an SOP on the topic. You may also be able to do this with a simple Internet search, since many departments post their SOPs on their Web sites.

Call around and see who may already have developed and implemented a successful program. One simple call may provide you with 90 percent of the information needed. It's not always necessary to reinvent the wheel, especially since we are not in cut-throat corporate America, where sharing information with a competitor is frowned upon and bad business. The brotherhood in the fire service is strong enough so that firefighters willingly share information with other departments.

Research every aspect of the topic at hand, including the training of personnel or the purchasing of new equipment as well as all costs that will be involved. You will want to identify who your target audience is (for example: perhaps all the 3rd graders that attend your local grammar schools). You also want to identify which firefighters, or combination of firefighters and teachers, will be interacting directly with the children. You also want to look into what types of books you want to read and whether or not you will be leaving additional books with the children after you leave.

Find out if there is money in the budget to cover the expenses or if there are grants or other means available to help your department offset those costs. Keep in mind that every member of the committee must realize that they are part of an overall team. Even if one person's area of research seems small in comparison to another, they must all be aware that each of them is responsible for providing a valuable piece to the puzzle.

Once the research is complete, the committee should meet again and move to step 3.

STEP 3: DEVELOP

During this meeting, collect all the information that each committee member has acquired, put it on the table and discuss it. At this point, the arranging of an overall program (perhaps in the form of a SOP) will usually fall on one person's shoulders -- most likely yours. This is where the writing begins. Although that may seem intimidating, keep in mind that you are not writing a novel, you are simply developing an outline of procedures to follow.

The outline should clearly state the name of the program, the goals of the program and the actions each person is expected to take in order to assure success. Some of this has been done in the Research Stage, but now is the time to fine tune everything.

Indicate specific techniques and methods to follow to in order for firefighters to perform their tasks in a way that represents the department properly and enables the program to accomplish its goals. There are various ways to format what you put down on paper. The most effective format is an SOP. An effective SOP includes the following sections: Purpose, Scope, Responsibility, and Procedures or Guidelines. (Note: For information on developing SOP's, go

to FireEngineering.com and search for my article titled 'the simple approach for writing effective SOP's' or check out my book Operational Guides for the Fire Service).

At the very least, you want to make sure the document you develop includes:
- The reason why the document was developed.
- An outline of when and where this program and procedure shall apply.
- A list each member who shares the responsibility of implementing the program.
- Specific guidelines each participant must follow in order to assure success.
- A mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of the program. (This will be discussed more in steps four and five).

Once the document or SOP is formatted, have each committee member review it for accuracy, and ask other knowledgeable and willing firefighters or subject experts to proofread it. They can also check for technical inconsistencies. I spend so much time cutting and pasting sentences and paragraphs that I tend to make simple grammatical errors that I can easily overlook. A first-time reader is more likely to notice typos.

STEP 4: IMPLEMENT

Implementing an important program should not be done without first evaluating its effectiveness. For example, choose one school to test your "pilot program." Use this opportunity to work out any kinks. Include as many firefighters as needed in order to assess whether or not you feel your efforts had enabled you to meet your goals. Once this is complete, it's time to bring that document, and the pilot program results, to your chief or superiors to have them review it.

The committee or program manager should meet with the chief to review the final product and discuss the implementation process. This is usually done with a special notice with the new document attached. Include a date of implementation so there is no confusion about when the program initiation date becomes effective.

Once the program is established and implemented, all firefighters should review the written document. Remember that this is a public relations program. What good would it be if the public didn't know about it? With this in mind, the committee members should consider the best ways to "spread the word." Here are some possible ways to inform the public of your new program.
- Local newspapers (contact the publisher or your community reporter).
- Local television programs (contact the program's producer).
- Brochures mailed to all local residents (there will be significant costs involved with this method).
- The Internet (post the program on your department or municipal website; develop a page on Facebook or other social networks).
- Additional options include: community notification channels on television, and school handouts that teachers can give their students to bring home).

You can choose one or all of the methods above. Your best option would be a combination of those listed above, otherwise known as a 'multi-media' campaign. Whichever method you choose, be sure to include all essential information, such as: Program locations, times, and dates.

STEP 5: EVALUATION

A big mistake many departments make comes a year or two after the implementation of a program. To prevent this, remember "RER,"' which stands for Review, Evaluate, and Revise. These three words are as effective and as essential in the firehouse as they are on the fire scene.

During the reviewing process, which may come one week or one year into the program, ask yourself or your committee simple questions such as, is this program still an effective way to meet our objectives? Does this program contradict acceptable methods or public relations standards that are followed throughout the fire service? If you have developed an SOP, ask if the SOP still the "one best way" to accomplish the required task? The answers to these questions will determine if the program needs revision at that time. Also be sure to compare

pre-program results with post-program results and evaluate whether your department has been more effective since this procedure was implemented. In the scenario outlined in this article, the questions to ask are:

     1. Have you improved your relations with the public you serve?

     2. Have you accomplished your goals of encouraging young children to read?

After all, those were your two main goals. It is also imperative that your organization cycle any and all programs through the planning stage often to ensure they continue to meet their goals and objectives.

I'd like to share one more thought regarding the development of programs. A good leader will not forget to reward the committee members and others who helped to develop department programs. Some departments may go as far as to provide comp days or overtime for those who spend time working on the program. This, however, is becoming less and less likely with the state of today's economy. You may not have any control over how your department rewards committee members, but you do have control over how you reward them. At the very least, a simple thank you can go a long way.

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