



Photo by: Bill Thompson 1997

Fireground Communications

By Vincent Dunn

There is a deadly misunderstanding about life-threatening communications in the fire service. This misunderstanding kills firefighters each year. The misunderstanding concerns who is responsible for discovering and communicating life-threatening dangers during fire operations. Firefighters believe this is the fire chiefs responsibility and fire chiefs believe the firefighter is responsible. Who is correct? As long as these two important people on the fireground do not agree on who is responsible for discovering and communicating to others life-threatening information--such as collapse dangers, rapid increase in fire conditions or potential explosion hazards--we never will reduce firefighter death and injury on the fireground.

Hazard discovery

How could such a deadly misunderstanding have been created about such an important life-saving procedure; that is, who looks for and communicates to others unusual life-threatening events during firefighting operations? I have a confession to make. Fire chiefs unwittingly have created this deadly misunderstanding. Over the years, fire chiefs, myself included, have given the impression we can detect or see all fireground hazards about to occur at fires. Sometimes we can, if we have studied firefighting strategy and tactics and

fireground safety. However, even with this knowledge, a fire chief will not discover and communicate most life threatening dangers during a fire. Actually, firefighters must understand that they, along with company officers and sector chiefs--are responsible for discovering and communicating to others life-threatening dangers during a fire.

A deadly misunderstanding in the fire service is thinking that the Incident Commander, standing at the command post directing operations, knows the structural stability and fire and explosion dangers inside and around the perimeter of a burning building. The real truth is the Incident Commander does not know this. Actually, the incident commander at the command post may never have seen the structure before the fire. He probably did not have time during the hectic initial stages of the fire to survey the structure for stability. The incident commander definitely cannot see inside the building. In truth, the incident commander is depending on firefighters company officers and sector chiefs to discover any fireground danger and report them to him at the command post. The firefighters and officers are the eyes and ears of the Incident Commander. The fire service must acknowledge this reality: Firefighters and company officers are the ones who discover and communicate life-threatening dangers at a fire, not the Incident Commander. The Incident Commander is concentrating on hoseline placement, evaluating the resource needs, apparatus and manpower, protecting exposures and giving fire progress status reports. The Incident Commander does not discover life-threatening dangers in or around burning buildings. Firefighters do.

Hazard communication

The other part of the misunderstanding about life-threatening dangers during a fire is, who notifies whom? It is erroneously thought that reports of life-threatening warning signs travel from the top down--from the Incident Commander down to the firefighters. Some falsely believe the incident Commander warns the sector chief of the life-threatening danger, then the sector chief notifies the company officer and the officer tells the firefighters. Don't believe it! Don't think that when you are working at a serious fire and fire conditions are getting bad, the word to get off a burning roof or evacuate a cellar during a spreading fire is going to come from the Incident Commander at the command post. The truth is, you must identify deteriorating conditions and communicate this danger to the command post and take action to safeguard yourself and members in the dangerous area. The communication flow of life-threatening information goes like this: The firefighter sees a danger; he reports it to his officer. The company officer evaluates the danger, decides whether it is a danger and takes the necessary action to safeguard all firefighter under his command. He or she then notifies the sector chief of the danger and safety actions taken. The sector chief evaluates the danger and action taken. He decides if the action taken by the company officer is sufficient. Or, he takes additional safety precautions to safeguard other companies operating under his sector area and then notifies the Incident Commander of the danger and also the action taken to safeguard companies working in the sector. The incident commander takes action to safeguard chiefs and companies working in other sectors. So, life-threatening information originates with the firefighter, company officer and sector chief at most fires--not with the incident commander. As fire chiefs, we should inform all firefighters and fire officers of this truth.

We must encourage communication of life-threatening warnings from all firefighters, officers and chiefs in our command. What must originate from the incident commander at a fire is not life-threatening information, but life-saving information. After a dangerous condition is reported to a chief at a fire, we must take action to safeguard firefighters and officers. This could vary from the simple action of notifying all other sectors of the danger reported, because they could be reassigned to the danger area, or more drastic action might be required, such as ordering withdrawal of firefighters from the sector of the burning building where the danger exists.

Fire service myth

It goes like this: The chief makes a size-up of the burning building and sees something he doesn't like. He orders all firefighters to evacuate the building. Right after all firefighters get out of the burning building, it collapses or explodes. Don't believe it! Sometimes this might happen. But most of the time at fires, what actually happens is this: The Incident Commander receives a report from a firefighter or officer of a dangerous condition. Acting on this report, the Incident Commander pulls everyone out of the burning building. After everyone gets out, the building may or may not collapse or explode.

Lessons learned

Remember, the responsibility for discovering and reporting life-threatening dangers belongs to the firefighters, company officers and sector chiefs. The Incident Commander is responsible for ordering life-saving action. Don't misunderstand this!