

Pride and Ownership: The Love for the Job

SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF

by Rick Lasky

There are a lot of people out there that will tell you that it's not important to be concerned with all of the little things that life presents you with. That's its not that big a deal and you shouldn't "sweat the small stuff." They will explain that by worrying about all of the small stuff, sometimes what they refer to as *insignificant*, does nothing more than complicate your life and create a whole lot of stress. But I think that when you take a hard look at it all, often it's the small stuff that we overlooked or bypass paying attention to, that is causing us the "bigger" problems in life. I'm not recommending that you become a worrywart or get nuts over everything, but just take a little bit better care of the little things.

But when you think about it, life's really not that complicated. It's rather simple if you let it be. As long as you're willing to not let technology drag you completely to the other side. There's a lot of good stuff out there but keep in mind you'll still have to breathe, blink your eyes and relieve yourself. Your Palm Pilot won't be able to do that for you, at least not yet. So when you start to think about it, with all that has happened to us, maybe its time we started worrying about the little things again. The not so technical things again. There're a lot of books out there that will try and tell you how to organize your life. How they think you should live your life and do your job. Now I'm not talking about the books you should be reading like John Salka's leadership book "First In, Last Out" or John Norman's "Fire Officer Handbook of Tactics" or any of Skip Coleman's books, I'm talking about the books that tell you "Not to sweat the small stuff, because its

all small stuff.” I just can’t agree with that. Not when it comes to *our* job. Now’s the time more than ever to sweat the small stuff. It’s what keeps us alive. Read the reports. Read the articles. Look at the facts that lead up to the fatality or injury. The vast majority of the time you’ll see that it was the small stuff that got us into trouble in the first place. “Saving Our Own,” “Get Out Alive” and all of the firefighter rescue programs are great, but maybe if we trained really hard on the *little things*, the small stuff, the basics, we wouldn’t have got ourselves into the jam in the first place where we needed to have to use what we learned in those classes. That often it’s that small stuff that’s killing us. Before we can be good at all of the fancy stuff, we have to be good at the basics. I know we keep hearing that but it’s true. We have to know our job!

When you look at all of the leading causes involving our fatalities and injuries, lack of command and control, not following SOPs, lack of an accountability system, poor communications and some of the others, most can pretty much all be broken down to smaller things. Like following SOPs. Doing that does nothing more than allow all of the players to play from the same playbook. We need something to operate from. Sending a play out onto the field and into the huddle that tells everyone to “Go long” just doesn’t work for us. In a world now full of “control-alt-delete” and all of the “hyperspace” stuff, we’re forgetting about some very important things. One that comes immediately to mind is, are we still working on our basic search techniques? Thermal imagers are great, they’re awesome, but what about when you don’t have one or when the battery goes dead. You still need to know how to search conventional. We still need our landmarks, an outside wall, a sofa, etc., and we’ll still need to get out eventually. And how are we at advancing hose? How many times have we heard our good friend Andy Fredericks say

that getting that first line into place as quickly as possible is what's going to make or break your incident. That being good, being proficient at hose advancement will allow you for a successful attack. Don't wait until you're inside to find out that you don't have water, that your line is kinked on the stairs or out on the lawn or wedged under a door, when bleeding off your line before going in would have prevented that. Little things like that whole building construction-fire behavior thing. If you want to be good, you need to know fire behavior and building construction. You have to know how the building is going to react with the fire and how the fire is going to react with the building. Recently while a hand full of our firefighters were cleaning their rig, I asked them who Frank Brannigan was. I was trying to make a point to a couple of my chiefs. Well they didn't know. I gave them a hint; I said he wrote a book. One answered you mean the one on safety? I said no that was Vinny Dunn's book. Another great one but that's not the one I'm talking about. I gave them another hint. He writes a bi-monthly column in Fire Engineering called the "OI Professor." They looked at me. I said they're smaller articles on building construction. You know, information about some of the small stuff that saves our lives. By the way, next months drill, building construction. Or what about Tom Brennan's monthly articles called "Random Thoughts." They're the ones that are all the way at the back of the magazine. They're usually about a page, page and a half long, but once again nothing fancy, just small stuff that makes a difference. Funny thing about Tom Brennan, a few years ago I had the privilege and honor of doing a speech called Pride and Ownership at both FDIC in Indy and FDIC West in Sacramento. In Indy it went well. Out in Sacramento I ran into a snag. About five minutes into it I looked out into the audience and right there in the middle of the second row was Tom Brennan.

Well I vapor locked, I mean it was Tom Brennan. My sector C slammed shut. I could feel that pulse that you have in the side of your head near your temple pounding and my eye started to twitch. But then I remembered that he was one of the reasons that I was up there talking about Pride and Ownership in the first place. Like some of my other mentors that's what he's all about. But the neat thing about Tom is he has the ability to take things that a lot of people have made very difficult and complicated and break it down so everyone can understand it. Little bits and pieces that all add up to the big picture. You know, the small stuff. The rest of the speech went fine.

The Three "F's"

Another "Ol Professor" of mine, Chief Eddy Enright, taught me about the "3 F's," well four if you spell firefighter with two words. I like to spell it like Bill Manning does as one word. But they're Firefighters, Fire Apparatus, and Fire Houses. Seems kinda of simple, just the three, but there's some really great things to think about with each one. Just looking at our firefighters, the first "F". Are we taking care of each other like we should? Why did it take the events of September 11th to get us all calling each other brothers and sisters again? It's been kinda nice not hearing that whole East coast vs. West coast and North vs. South thing hasn't it? We've come together as a team, one team. And the hugs feel better than ever.

But with our firefighters, are we taking care of the small things like our uniforms. Do you know what it all stands for and where it came from? What about our turnout gear? Is it ready and in good shape before we go in? Do you have an inspection program? Before you go in, do you take a look at your partner? Is he or she as ready as you are? Is your team ready? Did you wear it to the scene? Let me clarify, did you put it on before

you left the firehouse? I remember an extra alarm incident we had at our hospital where we had a mutual aid truck company show up and we needed to put them to work pretty quick only to be delayed while they put their gear on and got ready. Do you bleed off your line; know the lengths and amount of hose in your hose beds and how to get it there? Do you understand and know your nozzles and what they will and will not do for you? Can you go with a bigger line when you need to and are you efficient with deploying it? And do you use door chocks to block open a door while you're searching a room or to keep a door from closing on you and your hose? Is your flashlight working? Better yet do you even have a flashlight? As you walk around the exhibit floors at the shows you attend, after you buy all of the t-shirts you want, buy yourself a good flashlight. Carry two! Yours and the department's. Don't rely on just the department's. Don't be stubborn. Your life is worth the investment. As Chief Freeman has always said "Don't let them put on your tombstone, bastards wouldn't buy me a flashlight." Is your portable radio working and ready to go, with a charged battery? And are we working to ensure that every firefighter has his or her own radio? And if you have one, do you know how it works? What about your PASS device? Is it working and do you know how to operate it? We used to call them slacker devices because if they went off it meant that you weren't doing any work. But to put it bluntly, do you realize just how many firefighters would be alive today if they had just turned it on or made sure it worked? Do you believe in rapid intervention crews and do you have one ready when you're operating on your scene? Do you carry side cutters or a Leatherman tool to help cut a firefighter (or yourself) out of an entanglement with wires and can you get to them with your turnout gear on? What about your accountability tags? Do you use them or do they just take up

space on your helmet or turnout coat? Doesn't accountability not just start with our officers or a board with Velcro on it, but with each and every one of us? Don't we owe that to each other and to our families? Whatever system you have, are you using it? Keep in mind that the system that you are using is to accountability, the same as a Haligan bar is to forcible entry. If you don't use it or don't know how, it won't work. One more little thing, how about your SCBA? Do you know it inside and out? It's probably one of the most important things you're going to bring to the fire. Another thought to ponder. Most SCBA malfunctions, about 85%, are operator error. Get to know your SCBA on a first name basis. Are your tools ready and do you take care of them? Do you know how to use them? Showing up on the fireground without your tools is not a good thing unless you're good at magic tricks or something. And get rid of the closet pike poles. You can't force in with them and sure can't force out with them and to be honest, they're just not a good pike pole. I've seen firefighters standing on top of chairs trying to reach the ceiling with those. And I'm not really comfortable reaching up over my head often in smoke and hoping to pull something down and possibly on my head. Grab a tool that will do some work for you and if you need it to, get you out in a pinch. How's the attitude in the firehouse? Do you have a good hydrant inspection program? How about your ground ladders skills? Are we addressing traffic control at accident scenes and are we doing everything we can to get there (and back to the firehouse) safely? How's the attitude of the firefighters? Do they know that their officers care about them? Do their officers care about them? They better. Our company officers are where it all happens. How well are they taking care of their guys? Are you mentoring and building tomorrow's leaders? Are you preparing them to move up?

Taking care of that area we referred to in an earlier column as your “people staging.” Remembering at the same time that you’re building your own legacy. Are you walking the talk with your “values” and life style? Are you helping them with their promotional studies and study habits? How well are you preparing your men or for that matter yourself for the future? Is their attitude in check? Chiefs and officers, are you letting them be firefighters? What about that other little thing called communication? Shift to shift, roll call. When you don’t have roll call, you miss out on one of the most important times of the day. I’m not talking about the rumors that bounce back and forth but the information exchange about what’s going on or what happened the day before. I used to find it amazing in some firehouses, that when you went there for a visit or a cup of coffee and asked them what they thought about the fire that the shift had the day before and they didn’t know anything about it. How could you not know about a job that happened in your own still district the day before? Besides, roll call is a great time to size up your people. Now, back to the rumor thing. I’ve said many times before that this is the best job in the world. Could you imagine what it would be like if you didn’t have to worry about the rumors or worry about what the other shift was saying? I always found it funny that the shift before you are the slobs and the shift after you are the nitpickers. That’s until you change shifts and realize that your old shift were the slobs and the other shift were the nitpickers. But seriously, could you imagine how much greater this job would be if we were nice to each other all of the time? How many times have you heard “Why do we have to wait for a fire to all get along?” Be nice, say nice things and try to get along. Be a brother. Bottom line again is, we need to take care of each other and

officers, you need to take care of your guys. There are too many people on the outside that don't care about us. Again, the smaller things.

The second "F" in all of this is for Fire Apparatus. Once again, very simple. Are we taking care of our rigs? Are they ready to go? Whether you work shift or come back for a call as a volunteer, will it start when you need it. If your shift starts at 7:00 AM and you catch a call at 8:00 and your rig doesn't start, what'll be your excuse? Being "dead in the house" an hour into your shift doesn't cut it. Do you know what's on your rig or are you one of those guys that run around the rig slamming compartment doors when you're looking for a tool. Knowing what's on your rig is not going to happen through osmosis. You're not going to absorb that information through the compartment door and into your skull. And do you know how to use it all? Do you know what job is assigned for the particular seat that you're riding in? Do you know what your task will be when you get there? And lastly does the rig look good? Once again, just small details.

The third "F" is for the Firehouses. Guys, it's our home. Do you treat like your own? It's supposed to look good. In the past when going to teach at a fire department, I used to try and get in a day early so I could get familiar with the department, the guys, basically just try to get a good read on the department. A friend of mine chief Bennie Crane shared something with me back then that I've never forgotten. He said all you have to do Rick is get there about ten minutes earlier for class than you had planned. Take a look at the rigs. See how their hose beds are finished. Take a look at their tools, how they have their gear laid out and look around the firehouse. Then take a look at the guys. Are they into their jobs, do they have that love for the job, or are they too busy reading the NASDAQ

report. Is their number one job still the number one job? Doing that will tell you all that you need to know about the department and the guys.

In our place, one area we try taking care of the small stuff is in our response to incidents. We try to live by four very simple rules.

Number 1: Every time we go out the door we're going to a fire. It doesn't matter if it's "just that fire alarm again," when we leave, we're dressed, we're ready, we're in the right frame of mind and we have our game face on. Do that and we reduce the odds of getting snookered and hurt. We fight off complacency.

Number 2: There's no fire unless we say there's no fire. We'll take into consideration what the police officer or a civilian is telling us, but we'll make that final decision. We don't like surprises.

Number 3: There's no one in the building only if we say there's no one in the building. Once again we'll listen to the information being offered but we still search. We don't want to miss the neighbor that came in the back door to help, when everyone else was going out the front or the kid that snuck back home and didn't tell his parents or rely on people who's judgment may be off because of what they woke up in, smoke. Some of these people might not remember who all was in the house and may believe that everyone is out.

And number 4: The fire's not out unless we say it's out. It's not above us and it's not below us. Follow those four simple rules and you're less likely to get yourself or your people hurt. And when we ensure that it's out, you don't see that ugly rekindle thing pop up and cause you embarrassment.

And on the mind of everyone while abiding by the above four rules is our risk management statement that I'm sure you've seen before:

- 1) We will risk our lives a lot, in a highly calculated and controlled manner to protect a human life.
- 2) We will risk our lives a little, in a highly calculated and controlled manner to protect property.
- 3) We will not risk our lives at all, to protect lives or property that are already lost.

Maybe you don't have to "sweat the small stuff," but taking care of the little things can often keep them from becoming big things.