

Leadership On the Line: We Killed Firefighter Brian Hunton

By Burton A. Clark 5/20/05

If you do not wear your seat belt when riding on the fire truck, if you do not make your partner put his or her seat belt on, if you drive the fire truck and all passengers are not buckled up, if you are the officer and you do not enforce the seat belt policy, if you are a chief officer and do not hold your company officers accountable, if you are the fire chief and you know that you do not have a 100% compliance 100% of the time with your seat belt policy - you killed Firefighter Brian Hunton.

I can hear the feedback to this charge now. “Clark, you have lost your mind! How dare you accuse me of killing a firefighter! Who the hell do you think you are? I don’t know Brian, I’m not on his company, I wasn’t driving the apparatus, I’m not his officer or chief, firefighters have to take responsibility for themselves. Firefighting is dangerous we all know and accept the risk that’s our job. The charges are unfounded and outrageous. I am not responsible.” Pick your excuse. The fact is that Brian’s death could have happened in any fire department, including yours. It is only by fate or the grace of God that it did not happen to you or me.

Our dysfunctional fire service seat belt culture is the root cause of Brian’s death. That culture ignores safety standards, does not use readily available equipment, flaunts SOP’s, and denies responsibility at the individual, team, and organizational level. Firefighters and officers have told me that using the seat belts will slow them down, resulting in people dying in fires. The latest comment from a firefighter was “The only reason we have a seat belt policy is to cover the department’s ass if I get hurt.”

Culture drives behavior. Our seat belt culture let Brian down and he paid the ultimate price. We are all part of the seat belt problem and solution. We all must take some responsibility for our Brother Brian's death. The question is what are we going to do about it so it does not happen to another brother or sister?

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has just received a one million dollar grant to conduct the Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives Project. At its core this project is trying to change our overall safety culture with training programs, lectures, a web site, conferences, research, excellence awards, and demonstration projects. One of the US Fire Administration's operational goals is related to reducing by 25% the loss of life of firefighters. The USFA also uses training programs, publications, research, grants, and lectures. These two national activities are important to changing our overall safety culture. But if we can not change our seat belt culture immediately, we have no chance of fixing any firefighter safety issue.

Culture is the collective knowledge, teaching, beliefs, values, feelings, science, technology, art, and behaviors of a group or society. Overall the fire service has a proud culture of professionalism, volunteerism, duty, bravery, camaraderie, and service to humankind. Society holds the fire service in high regard. One national poll reported that society trusted firefighters second only to their own family members. That trust includes returning firefighters to their families after the alarm - unharmed. Firefighters trust each other with their very lives. As professionals, both career and volunteer, we have a lot to be proud of.

Culture is a powerful human motivating factor and changing a culture is difficult. At its ultimate, a society defines its culture by where it draws the line in the sand.

Crossing the line has significant consequences. Sometimes an aspect of our culture must be changed for the good of all. Today's popular phrase is "zero tolerance." For example, our culture of drinking alcohol then driving was changed by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) because its members took a stand, drew a line in the sand, and put leadership on the line.

Changing the fire service safety culture is a big challenge because firefighting is inherently dangerous. But changing our seat belt culture is doable now. We have the knowledge, we have the equipment, we have the standards, and we have the moral obligation. But are we willing to draw the line in the sand, are we willing to put our collective leadership on the line? Are we willing to impose zero tolerance on seat belt use?

Fifty five percent of us wear our seat belt but that leaves 45% who do not. It is human nature for some members of an organization not to follow rules voluntarily, so they need to be coerced formally or informally to meet the standards. Let me illustrate.

Formal coercion is expressed in punishment for breaking the rules, for example. If you are a career firefighter and are late for work, there are consequences for your behavior. The rules and consequences are understood by all. They go something like this: Show up for work on time or this will happen: first offense, a letter of reprimand; second offense, days off without pay; habitual lateness, EAP (employee assistance program) counseling; and continued lateness, termination. The volunteer fire service has participation standards (drill, meetings, responses, fund raising, activities, etc.) members must meet to be a volunteer. If they fail to meet the participation standards, consequences look something like this: extra duty, suspension from riding the apparatus,

suspension from the fire station, and termination from the department. Informal coercion, also called peer pressure, is how you treat those who are not conforming. The person is shunned by the group, given a bad reputation, not included in social activities, and counseled by others to do the right thing to be part of the team.

I will bet your career department has over 99% of its members report to work on time. Your volunteer department has over 99% of its members meet their participation requirements. This is likely the case, because our culture dictates that good firefighters show up on time and meet their participation requirements. Rarely do the formal consequences need to be used, but in certain circumstances, they have been. So we all know where the line in the sand is and that leadership will take a stand. The informal consequences help people conform because they want to be part of a winning team.

What percentage of seat belt compliance do you have? If the fire service is going to fix the seat belt problem, we must change our culture by making seat belt rules and the accompanying consequences more important than attendance. No one dies if we are late for work; no one dies if we miss the meeting; we do die without our seat belts on. We must draw the line and take a stand because good firefighters wear their seat belt.

So, here are the new national formal and informal consequences for not using seat belts; they go into effective immediately:

1. A firefighter not wearing a seat belt when the apparatus moves will be suspended for one shift without pay (career) or suspended from the fire station for one week (volunteer). The officer in charge will receive the same discipline. The other firefighters on the apparatus will receive the same discipline.

2. If a firefighter is injured as a result of not wearing a seat belt, the firefighter, officer, others on the apparatus, and the fire chief will be suspended for 30 days.
3. Firefighters and fire departments that do not comply with their seat belt rules will not be thought of as good firefighters or good fire departments.
4. When the next firefighter is killed because the seat belt was not used, all of us will cry and feel ashamed; we failed our brother or sister because we did not put our leadership on the line and make them buckle up.

You can change your seat belt culture or you can think Clark has lost his mind. Either way, I am sitting here crying for Brian Hunton.

Firefighter Brian Hunton 27 years old, with the Amarillo TX FD for 2 years fell out of the ladder truck Saturday April 23 responding to a fire. Brian was putting his gear on, the door opened on a turn, and he fell out. He died from his injuries on Monday. My deepest sympathy to his family, friends, crew, and department. I hope we honor Brian by learning from this tragedy and change our seat belt culture.