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How Communication Saves Lives

Reliable communication is crucial in a wide range of professional careers, from simple office labor to the industries that are integral in the framework of society. This is especially true regarding the types of occupations that deal with public safety and protection. Without a reliable system of communication, these individuals would be unable to perform their jobs as efficiently, placing the safety of the community at risk. Fire Departments are discourse communities with their own unique set of communication practices relating to the life-saving procedures they undergo every day. The complex system of communication operated by the fire protection services goes largely unnoticed and thus underappreciated by the general public. Between the 911 call and the ultimate arrival of the emergency workers to the scene exists an unseen network of verbal and nonverbal communication that allows the process to appear seamless and efficient. To most, the fire department is an anomaly that only becomes relevant in rare and extreme circumstances. I will attempt to illustrate the daily procedures of this paramount social industry and demystify this elusive occupation, emphasizing the significance of communication.

The chain of communication begins with the public; any time there is a fire or other similar catastrophe requiring emergency services, the common discourse is to call the emergency hotline local to the country you are occupying, which in the United States is the well-publicized 911. The caller will find themselves connected to an emergency dispatcher, a person who serves as the central hub of transmission between fire, medical, and police services. Thirty year fire department veteran Thomas Merrill states “Dispatchers certainly play an extremely important role on the fire/rescue team and must be recognized as professionals as well. However, just like the professional firefighter, the dispatcher must also train and practice and earn that professional

title”. The dispatcher must communicate not only with the caller, who may be panicking, but they must also provide clear and precise instructions to the fire department as to the location and the severity of the emergency. For this reason it is essential that dispatchers exhibit a calm and controlled demeanor regardless of the situation.

In transmitting information to a particular department so that they know the kind of equipment to transport, it is necessary to understand specific terminology and jargon related to fire fighting. Both the dispatcher and every working fire fighter must have extensive knowledge of a very specific library of these terms in order to expedite the process of communicating a particular emergency. While most of these terms are universal across all fire protection units, there are also commands that will vary from department to department. As Michael Wieder admits in his instructional book Fire Service Orientation and Terminology, “Much of the terminology used by a particular department is specifically defined in their particular standard operating procedures, such that two departments may have completely different terms for the same thing”. For a newcomer to the fire service industry, it can be difficult adjusting to a department’s standard operating procedures (SOP). But it is an element of the job that is pivotal in the efficient and successful performance of their responsibilities.

Another little known aspect of the fire fighter occupation is that, similar to the military and police force, there is a ranking system or hierarchy of command that dictates who has the most authority in an emergency situation. The standard firefighter has the least amount of authority: they must adhere to the commands of their superiors at all times. Above them sit the Engineers, these are the individuals who are trained and experienced in driving and operating all aspects of the fire engine. The lieutenant is typically ranked above the Engineer, followed by the Fire Captain, and finally the Chief or Battalion Chief. It is difficult to say with certainty which

position has the most authority, as similar to the way every department has their own unique standard operating procedures, they also differ in the types of ranks they possess and their acknowledged level of superiority. On an average forty eight hour shift, a station will house one Battalion Chief, either one Captain or one Lieutenant, two to three Engineers, and at least four firefighters or EMTs.

Communication between coworkers is also a major part of working in the fire protection service. The better you know the men and women working alongside you, the more effectively you can work together as a team. Looking beyond the standardized signals and phrases used while out on a rescue, which are explicitly defined in Wieders' instructional book, and a requirement for anybody hoping to enter the industry, there is a common allegory that firefighters exhibit a great sense of comradery. Firefighter/paramedic and captain in training Demian Bannister discussed about how firefighters communicate with each other, both on and off shift. "There's never a dull moment at a fire station, if there's not a call we're either cleaning up, working out, making food, sometimes just sitting around, but we're always together." Demian has worked for the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District for four years, with almost the same group of people for that entire time. "When you spend forty eight hours straight with someone, six or seven times a month, you really get to know them. We're always cracking jokes about each other. We're really just like family."

I was granted the opportunity to live at the firehouse for one workday to observe and be immersed in the kind of lifestyle these individuals experience every day. Despite being an outsider, the firefighters were very welcoming and inclusive. The first thing that stood out to me about them was their efficiency in every task. When preparing food, they would all take their place in the kitchen and assist with some part of the meal. Nobody complained, nobody was

neglecting to help, and nobody had to direct; it was like watching a well-oiled machine. In Lucille Parkinson McCarthy's "A Stranger in Strange Lands", she accounts a student's struggles to succeed across different disciplines due to a lack of familiarity with those discipline's expectations. Similarly, I found it difficult to successfully immerse myself in this community of efficiency despite the firefighter's efforts to include me. My lack of understanding of key terms also placed me at a disadvantage in this community. When a call from the dispatcher came over the speakers, the firefighters immediately jumped to action with the same level of efficiency they had displayed during dinner, while I failed to decipher what it was the dispatcher had announced. There is much more to being a firefighter than climbing ladders and spraying hoses; it is a close-knit community of people who dedicate all of their attention to protecting the public in the most efficient way possible.

Every county in the United States is split into a number of zones, the size and quantity of which is dependent on the size and economy of the county. Every zone has a dedicated fire station; some counties have only one, others have up to ten. When the dispatcher receives a call about a fire emergency, they notify the station that is under the jurisdiction of the zone where the emergency is happening, whereupon they deploy the appropriate amount of resources for the task. However, if the station does not have enough resources (for example, if their staff is already deployed on other calls, or the station is too small to handle the situation), then they must contact stations from neighboring zones for assistance. This massive web of information and telecommunication runs seamlessly every single day, preserving the safety and well-being of every citizen. The urgency of fast and reliable communication between stations is apparent, as confusion or miscommunication could lead to a delay in response time, which in this industry could mean the difference between life and death.

Works Cited

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