Polishing the "Boots," Part 1

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As you look at your “boots,” what do you see? Are they brand new, never seen action, and so shiny they are almost irritating? For a moment, you may have allowed me to lead you into thinking this would be a commentary about uniform and equipment policy. But I am really talking about a more important type of “boot;” the rookie firefighter.

Changes in the fire service are inevitable. But maintaining and sustaining certain important, and sometimes lifesaving values, is of great interest for those of us with many years on the job. My late grandfather was a Bountiful firefighter for decades and I recall some of the things I heard him say over the years about the “newer generation.” Many of the youngsters in his day were smart and very energetic, but also a little too big for their “bunkers.” We all have noticed the “top dog” we just hired from the latest recruit academy class that knows every detail of each skill, can recite some NFPA standards like Scripture, and even have some new and more efficient ways to perform some of the skills that we may have gotten a little rusty at ourselves. What we see these “boots” lacking is the cracks, creases, and scuff marks showing the true experience of having been out in the field a while. What are we going to do with this new generation?

At this point in time, I can look to one side of me at those who were in the service for more than a decade before me. I can look to the other side and see others whose music, interests, and values, I cannot say I completely understand. So it is not as though “we” are all one generation and “they” are the new or “other” generation. We are a collection of people from diverse backgrounds that gather around a unified mission to serve our communities through fire, emergency medical, and rescue services. Within our population is a subculture that binds us together and sees us through many challenging and sometimes horrific crises; that’s where the cracks, creases, and scuffs come from. But not yet having experienced the same “life-world” that we have, many of our “boots” do not fully appreciate the intuitive wisdom that is acquired call after call. Bertrand Russell said, “The young man knows all the rules, the old man knows all the exceptions.” Drills build skills, but expertise grows through ongoing experience. So how can we provide the needed experience to our “boots” to wear them in and not damage their fabric?

The new generation of firefighter has largely lived in a different world than many of us. The viral email (a phrase which in and of itself would mean nothing a decade ago) that has been passed, lists the technological changes like vinyl records, 8-tracks, telephone busy signals, and so forth, that many of our new guys have only read about. Text, chat, mp3, .com, and a score of other aspects of modern technologies mark the sociological shifts that occurred in the last one or two decades. And yet, there are “old salts” on the job that cannot “keyboard” which incidentally, is the new term for typing since the obsolescence of the typewriter. What the “boot” can do on a smart-phone with two thumbs in less than 30-seconds would take many veterans 20 minutes to do on a word processing program with a full-scale keyboard. I personally have used my Blackberry smart phone to online order a book recommended by a person giving a presentation, while the presentation was still being given. I can within minutes, check my debit card account on the same device, to see the balance drop the price of the book. Incredible technology, but what kind of psychosocial implications has such things had on the way we interact as people; as fellow firefighters?

Let me suggest to you that one of the implications we have to our social interactions is the expectations that “all are equal.” The advent of social media like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter (to name a few) provide a virtual environment wherein anyone can be whatever they are capable of constructing electronically. Some psychologists note that these are virtual venues where young teens can become “celebrities” in a half-hour or less, with several hundred groupies called “friends,” photo spreads, blogs, video streaming, and other things. In fact, there have been public safety professionals and academy recruits dismissed from duty based upon the inappropriate content of their “MySpace” webpage. But on “MySpace,” everyone is a star and everyone has an international voice. The reigning ethos is “be yourself!”
In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a young man who fell in love with his own reflection and died as a result of not being able to pull himself away from his own image. There is a Narcissism that has grown strong in our country, and while social media may only be one part of the contribution, the stark American individualism of our nation’s founders (which assumed personal responsibility too) has become a blatant “all about me-ness” with excuses and justifications residing in the mind where responsibility once had its home. Entitlement is a word I hear out of the mouths of veteran firefighters, more and more in fire stations all over the state. “What’s in it for me?” At its worst extreme, the investment of some in a self-sponsored firefighting academy makes some “boots” believe they are now “free-agent” pros that are looking for the department offering the largest pay and benefits package.

Now, I do not want everyone to get the idea that I believe all of our youth are a mess, nor that I am trying to vilify social media venues on the Internet. But the new generation presents the fire service with new challenges to mentor and acculturate our “boots” into our culture; our shared values of altruism, initiative, responsibility, respect for authority, loyalty, and honesty. In the traditions of the fire service, many of us “came correct” through social disciplining like ridicule, criticism, name-calling, insult, and a long list of “should haves” shift after shift. We tolerated it for the love of the calling: being a firefighter. Not everyone was worthy of the honor bestowed upon us by our communities. But we are now in an era of the “self-made” firefighter who bought and paid for his or her way through training and expects an equal share at the fire station kitchen table. Conflict may arise when the “old salt” is not quite as impressed with the “boot” as the youngster expects. The verbal and non-verbal communication can be one of “power-thrusting” versus “ego-protecting” and the company officer now has a whole different skill set needed to manage and lead his or her people.

Abraham Maslow said, “If all you have is a hammer, you tend to see everything as a nail.” What this means, in our context is that the same old tools for correcting and shaping young firefighters are no longer as effective as once was believed to be. Autocratic styles of leadership, that serve quite well in a crisis, are too directive and lack the necessary clarity to really teach the lessons we need our “boots” to learn in the fire station. To play any game, what is fair is to first clearly explain the rules to the people expected to abide by them. When the “boot” comes right off of the shelf from the local fire academy, where skills were “excellent” by time and written test scores are the measure of one’s knowledge (often times confused with intellect), our “shooting star” quickly becomes the mat on which every veteran on the crew wipes his or her feet. We do this to them for their own good, right?

There are interpersonal communication skills and teaching methods that every company officer can develop so that the “boots” are broken in well. The streets are tough and will put enough scars on our youngsters in due time. But we must watch the way in which we can be drawn to socially isolate, ridicule, insult, and so forth, based upon notions that “hammering” the young ones “hardens their steel.”