"We Don't Need No Education!" Really?

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As firefighters, we know that training and education are a never-ending part of our career. Not only is it required of us to remain in top physical condition, our occupation is one that requires us to stay abreast of current trends in the fire service and maintain ongoing training.

The fire service is more than fighting fires, so it is vitally important for us to continue to improve ourselves through higher education. This is where Utah Valley University comes in. With online classes in Emergency Management, to use just one example, there is no excuse for anyone not to obtain a degree. Classes are practically paced and can easily fit into anyone’s busy schedule.

I am a year away from completing my bachelor’s degree at UVU and it has been a very rewarding experience. I will be able to apply this education to my career in the fire service for a lifetime.

Greg Orloski
Firefighter
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“We don’t need no education” is a popular phrase from rock music’s Pink Floyd. Essentially, the song is about the power politics between teachers and students reflecting the feelings of oppression students feel in compulsory education. As the emergency services evolve and their managers become increasingly in need of professional skills, many among our ranks cry out in a similar vein as expressed by the famous rock anthem. Many feel compelled to get a degree, but too many in our professions believe that on-the-job experience is sufficient for developing professional managers and leaders. We will address the importance of a balance between work experience and education in order to achieve the most success in your career.

Experience

The word “experience” is used in various ways but essentially deals with one’s interaction with his or her environment, other people, and states of affairs as a result of living through events. For the sake of pay rate scales, experience is often defined as “years of service” which really means “time in years having been employed.” The point being, not everyone’s work experience involves the same quality and quantity of “experiences” that translate into valuable and applicable lessons learned. So the way that I am using “experience” means a person’s actual engagement in emergency services work through a variety of emergency and non-emergency events; not just years of employment. In order for one to have experiences, he or she must not only be present but actually participate in a given event. What this means is that the one who rolls up his or her sleeves and gets into the mix is often the same person to come out of the event with a valuable experience, who truly learned from his or her training. The quality of an emergency responder’s work experience then is contingent upon his or her actual engaged participation in workplace affairs; emergency and non-emergency.

The following is a common challenge to education made by veterans of the emergency services, “I value education, but isn’t there a level of work experience that is equivalent to having a degree?” Let me re-phrase the question, “I value work experience, but isn’t there a level of academic experience that is equivalent to having done the job?” As you can see, the term “equivalent” does not even fit our
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scenario. The purpose of higher education is two-fold: to (1) build one’s knowledge base about the world, and (2) acquire and build academic skills. Both of these objectives are intended to be met through the student participating in and having academic experiences. Again, the academic experience is entirely a different thing than on-the-job experience. But together, these two different experiential programs can create and develop a more comprehensive and capable emergency service manager. If we require our academy recruits to pursue excellence, make rigorous demands for performance of our rookies, and require our line people to serve with precision in their jobs, why do we not ask ourselves how we can promote and develop excellence in our management and leadership?

Education and Diplomas

An assumption about college is that a person with a diploma necessarily has an education. The diploma “should” represent the education acquired by the recipient. However, we can find exceptions to this even in the same way that we can see “certified” cops and firefighters who lack competence in their skills sets. But they have met the “minimum requirements” and thereby are accepted and retained in the workplace. Academics are no exception to this dynamic. We try to hold to standards and encourage students to fully engage and participate, but we end up graduating those who have just kept their heads above the waters enough not to sink and drown. This is truly unfortunate. On the other hand, students who fully engage themselves and participate in the academic process will challenge themselves to go deeper into issues or think critically about things that are readily accepted as fact, but really based on tradition. Not only do they exercise their intellectual faculties, sharpen their critical thinking and communications skills, they also build networks with fellow students that can serve them as resources and support in their careers. Academia is a place where ideas are exchanged and human relationships can be formed for the betterment of our industry. Personal and professional growth can be found in academic exercises and events that require intellectual exchanges between people in various forms of dialog. Through this process, a more efficacious manager, leader, and decision maker can be formed -- if an education is acquired.

Let us stop arguing the idea of the “educated idiot” who is the person with the diploma but no ability to apply what he/she knows to the real world. Instead, let us consider how an education can enhance and empower those among our ranks who have some real talents and enthusiasm about being professional emergency managers and leaders. Let us develop our intellectual abilities so that we have a greater and more powerful voice in our communities instead of simply relying on our “hero” status to garner support from our citizens and politicians. If you are already an effective supervisor or command officer, but lack an education, think about what you might become by challenging yourself to join us at Utah Valley University. An education cannot promise more pay, more prestige, or greater competence, but increases in these are all associated with a college education.

“We don’t need no education.” We needed training and experience to become good police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical professionals, why would we not need a formal college education to become the best managers and leaders we can be for our people? If you are one of those compelled to pursue an education, then please look at the opportunities available to you. An education will give you the cutting edge advantage to achieve excellence in performance and leadership in the communities in which you work.

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