"Becoming" a Firefighter

Rodger E. Broome, *Utah Valley University*
We know that somewhere between the acceptance of a civilian into a fire training academy or education program and becoming a firefighter, a certain transformation has to occur within him or her. In philosophy and psychology, we study what “being” is or what it means to “be” in the most complete sense possible; the study of “being” is called ontology. I introduce the term ontology because so much of what it means to be a firefighter is taken for granted, largely because the way one “becomes” a firefighter is framed in the processes and mechanisms of training, education, and time on the job. I purposefully use the terms “acceptance, transformation, and being” because these are relational modes of existence that a person passes through (or not) in the journey of “becoming” a firefighter. No one “becomes” a firefighter simply through knowing the right things, or having the physical skills and capabilities to manipulate tools. “Becoming” a firefighter means that one must embody the identity of “firefighter”. Such an embodiment of this vocation extends to all promotions and assignments within our fire service community.

The probationary firefighter is given an opportunity to “become” a firefighter through the probationary period. Some newly hired fire service employees may believe they are “firefighters” due to certain achieved credentials, certifications, degrees, and so forth. But experiencing the fire service from the inside is the subjective (personal) perspective that makes it possible for one to “become” a firefighter. It is not the objective acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities, which are supposedly represented by certificates and diplomas. Certainly, these achievements are necessary prerequisites to becoming a firefighter. But a “firefighter” these do not make.

Some civilians enter the academy having had the advice from a veteran that the challenges in the academy are tough but “ya gotta learn to play the game.” Fire academy acculturation processes involve thinking, acting, feeling, and interacting within an artificial world that is contrived to replicate the real fire service, but with many controls in place to facilitate candidate success and safety. Nevertheless, the class discussions, exercises, and drills comprise no “game”, and navigating these successfully provides “experiences like fire fighting” but not fire fighting experience. As such, candidates may learn to see the world more as the fire service sees it, but it is not until he or she is occupying the position of firefighter that the embodiment of the firefighter identity can really be constituted within one’s person. Likewise, the first day on the job is not defined by “playing the game” but rather authentically working toward and demonstrating intentions of becoming a member of the tribe. Very analogous to an engineered truss system, the members may play different roles and have different functions, but are necessarily interdependent as a group; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. So the probationary firefighter has to become a dependable, capable, and functional member of the crew. If he or she does not do this through the interactive experience with the group, he or she cannot “become” a firefighter in the authentic sense.

The fundamental exercise of “becoming” a firefighter is the self and social identification as such. So the probationary firefighter is expected to answer the station telephone and front door at every opportunity. This is not because he or she is the station peasant, but because it says to others “hello, I am firefighter so-and-so” that he or she starts to realize the identity. Doing acts of service to one’s crewmembers demonstrates (embodies) one’s value of the members and interest in becoming a crewmember. Acts of respect, kindness, and interest in the veterans’ opinions is not playing a “game” but rather a legitimate communication of value for their vocation, which the probationary employee desires. Showing initiative to do the station chores embodies the initiative and willingness to “get dirty” which will certainly be required on the fire and emergency medical scenes. Of course, these are real tasks that need to be performed to sustain the health and hygiene of the crew, but viewing, or framing these as “a game” of subordination really robs these opportunities of their ontological value. One mops the floor of the fire station because that is one of the many things that a “firefighter” does in that role. It is not as if a certain number of lowly tasks completed “earns” someone the identity of firefighter. It is through the living-out of a firefighter’s role that one “becomes” a firefighter through these experiences. Likewise, the necessary living-out of one’s time on the nozzle, pulling ceiling, doing CPR, etc. means “being” a firefighter authentically and holistically. One’s mind, body, and soul must form a firefighter through living-it-out in the world.
The opportunity to “become” a firefighter is what each crew must provide and with which each probationary fire employee must engage. If this is not done interactively and collectively, the employee may never “become” a firefighter in the ontological sense. That does not mean he or she will be fired or quit, but it might mean that he or she exists in the state of an “imitation” firefighter. So the message to the crews is to provide every opportunity for your probationary fire service employee to perform all of the thinking, speaking, and acting as a firefighter as is possible in every shift. To probationary fire employees: engage fully in every task and situation as one whose desire it is to “become” an authentic firefighter. In reflecting on these concepts, one might see how one also “becomes” an engineer, captain, paramedic, battalion chief, etc. We all have experienced the difference between those who “become” and those who “imitate” each vocational position in our community.

INDIANANOLA VALLEY EXPRESSES GRATITUDE

by Graciela Torino Meyers, PIO, IVFD

The members of the Indianola Valley Fire Department extend a message of gratitude for the labor, creative ideas, and funding that resulted in the construction of Sanpete County’s Fire Station 18. Among the County officials to whom the department wishes to express appreciation are Commissioners Claudia Jarrett, Spencer Cox, Steven Frischknecht, Mark Anderson, Bruce Blackham, and Dwight Inouye. Leaders and staff of the organizations who also deserve recognition include Jason Justesen and Amy Ivie of the United States Department of Agriculture, Keith Burnett and Candace Powers of the Community Impact Board, Daryl Penrod of Ladlow Engineering, and Kelly Brown of Keller Construction. IVFD also recognizes Edna Wilde and Janice Taylor for their perseverance with the complexities of applying for grants. A very special thanks goes to Joe Bowler and his family who donated the land on which the Fire Station now stands. We also express our thanks to the property owners of the Indianola Valley for their support. In the words of Fire Chief Kent Higgins, “I think the time was right to build the station. With the community creating a larger base of infrastructure, growth in the area is just a matter of time. We live in a beautiful part of the county, yet to be discovered, and it will surely grow. The county is now ready for that growth when it comes. Therein lies the reason our gratitude to the Commission - for allowing the gates of progress to be opened and remain open.”

The IVFD members publicly extend their heartfelt gratitude to all the people mentioned, and to many unnamed others, for their unselfish contributions of time, treasure, talents, and encouragement. This is a legacy that our community can be proud of, knowing that it will remain long into the future - an investment for us all and those who follow.

Indianola Valley Fire Department
Kent Higgins, Fire Chief
(435) 427-3282
Email: higgins@cut.net

Graciela Torino Meyers, PIO
(435) 427-9802

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