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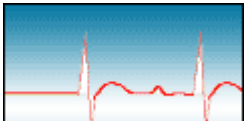
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## From The Officer's Seat: Training Techniques

**John G. Riker**

*Firehouse Magazine*

No matter what type of fire department you have - volunteer or paid, big or small - training of your personnel is essential to your success. Whether it's the chief training officer detailing a new procedure or the veteran showing the rookie how to break a line, training takes place every day on all levels. No matter who is doing the training, they must have a professional attitude and use sound techniques.

The following information is a strategic approach designed to assist the instructor in the delivering of fire courses.

- **Planning.** Know what you want to accomplish. Is it giving information, teaching a skill or selling a procedure? The reason I say selling a procedure is that veteran firefighters usually have to be sold on accepting change.
- **Have a goal.** You must have an idea of how much the students will learn and in how much time.
- **Formats.** Know in advance what type of format you will use in delivering your presentation. Will it be recited from memory; will it be delivered word for word from a written document (the potential to be the most boring format); will it be impromptu, speaking without physical prompts, using a simple mental outline; or will the instructor speak with the aid of a written outline and use visual aids and prompts? I believe in the majority of training this last method will be the most successful.
- **Preparation.** Know your subject. A good instructor is thoroughly knowledgeable in the subject being taught. Study your material and rehearse your presentation. Anticipate and rehearse answers and actions to questions that might arise. Prepare the work area before the students arrive. Have all equipment ready, such as computers, slides and props. Ensure comfortable seating and try not to overcrowd. Have proper lighting, especially when using slides and handouts. Set comfortable temperatures because a room too hot will put people to sleep.
- **Application.** Start by welcoming the people who have taken the time to come and see you. Take a few minutes to mingle and talk before you start to teach. Introduce yourself; tell the class who you are, describe your experience and your qualifications. Be proud of your accomplishments, but don't brag. Convey an attitude of patience, effort and goodwill. Break the ice with a story or tasteful joke. Make sure everyone can see and hear you. Tell the students what the subject is and what they will learn about it. Explain the nature of the



Photo by Glen E. Ellman

**Having each student perform the task being taught is important to the learning process.**

work, the hazards to avoid, and the value of the procedure, equipment or product. Give an introductory picture of the work. Tell the students about the "harms." Harms are what happens if you don't know, don't do and don't learn. Get them interested. Tell them something exciting about the subject. Relate it to your or their experience. Motivate and put them in the action. Tell the students how the subject will make them better and improve their safety.

State the lesson; tell the students what they will learn, how they will be taught and what they will have to do. Find out what they know and what training and experience they have on the subject.

- **Sequence.** Break down the subject or task into instructional factors. Arrange the factors in a logical learning sequence. Relate the material to the everyday. Start with something the student is familiar with. Begin with the simple and progress to the complex. Tell what it is. Show what it is. Illustrate how to use it. One step at a time. Demonstrate the why and how of each operation. Demonstrate in general at a normal speed. Demonstrate in detail at a slow speed. Place the students in a proper position. When demonstrating equipment or procedures, the students should see the operation as the instructor sees it. Do not mirror the student. Keep materials and teaching aids out of sight until they are ready to be used. A new, exciting piece of equipment left on the table can be distracting to the class. Safety: stress safety, to you and to others. The instructor should explain all the safety rules and regulations of the department and the practices designed to protect the students. Explain all the safety warnings of the equipment. Read and review all of the manufactures warning labels. YELL for safety. Stop any unsafe practice immediately. Raising your voice is preferable to injury. Explain to the class prior to the operations that it's better to holler than be hurt. Emphasize how proper care and maintenance of tools and equipment can affect safety. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Say it until they know it. Encourage questions. Keep the questions to the material you are covering. Don't jump ahead. If you are coming to that question, say, "That's a good question, we will cover that later in the program." Are the students paying attention? Do they follow you around the room? Are they talking back or are they sleeping? Can the students answer your questions? If the class is lost, go back and find them. Find the point where you lost them and start over from there. Ask questions by working your way backward through the material. Do this often during the program. Ask open-ended questions and encourage the students to respond. Application on the part of the student helps them to remember. Involve everyone. Provide feedback because students want to know where they stand. This can be formal, in front of the whole class, or informal, during the coffee break. When the feedback is negative be corrective not punishing. Be understanding; students have different educational and experience levels. Expect learning plateaus.
- **Testing.** Have the students explain the important facts. Have them note the safety factors. Have them perform the job, slowly at first, then at normal speed.
- **Encouragement.** The student is given every opportunity to develop and should be encouraged at every step. Correction should be carried out by suggestion and demonstration. Start on a good note and correct from there.
- **Follow up.** Set a follow-up date for further learning on the subject. Note where the student can go for additional help. Encourage the students to practice, practice, practice. It's not just the way to Carnegie Hall - it's the secret to all success.
- **Humor.** A little lightheartedness won't hurt, but keep it professional and don't embarrass anyone.

### What To Avoid

Instructors should avoid smoking or chewing gum; getting angry or swearing; poor appearance; and playing with pencils or chalk. Don't admit your nervousness to the class. Do not apologize for events out of your control. If something goes wrong, don't panic - take a short break and fix it or go to plan B.

Do not pace back and forth with your arms crossed. Never rush your information. Many instructors have a fear of failing, inadequacy, embarrassment or being poorly evaluated. Their nervousness is brought on by a lack of confidence because they have failed to plan and prepare for the class. The number-one mistake made by instructors is winging it.

Good instructors make proper eye contact with the students and use gestures properly. They understand the body language of the class. They pause and change pace to avoid monotony. They take breaks at the appropriate times.

**A Professional Presentation** When delivering your presentation, take your time, speak clearly and modulate your voice. Try to keep your sense of humor. At the end, ask if there are any questions. Explain again if you have too. State the next lesson and above all thank the students. Not everyone can be nor wants to be an instructor. Whenever a supervisor delegates a person to perform a task, check to see whether the person is qualified to carry out the assignment. The lead or head instructor must make sure all assistants are using sound methods when helping with a presentation.

There have been far too many horror stories of students being injured or even killed because unsafe practices were used. On-the-job training means you learn during working hours at your training academy. Training takes place under controlled conditions with a qualified instructor by your side, not on the fireground.

Expecting a student to learn under fireground conditions is wrong and dangerous. Learn in the classroom, then practice under safe, simulated conditions.

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*John G. Riker, a 33-year veteran of the fire service, is captain of Newark, NJ, Fire Department Truck 1. He is a New Jersey state-certified instructor, and a member of the instructional staff of the Newark Fire Department Division of Training and the Passaic County Fire Training Academy. Riker is a general partner in Emergency Training Associates, LLC, a fire service consulting firm.*



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