



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

CODE of HONOR: CODE OF PRACTICE

There is probably nothing that can get you into trouble faster than to question the code of honor that has been adopted by the fire service. That is why I'm going to approach this subject very delicately. I do want to get into too much trouble with my friends who are subscribers to the belief that the minute we put our hand down after swearing an oath to the fire service, we are already an American hero. But, I do believe that we need to question whether or not the price we are paying for being an American hero is not too high for our families and our communities.

What provoked this thought was a research project I am just now completing on fire safety while buildings are under construction. I don't think too many of us think of carpenters, plumbers, drywallers, or electricians as being part of the hero class. Yet, while conversing with them about fire safety I found out that many of our peers have adopted an attitude that you might resonate with many of us. Simply stated, they all want to go home at the end of the workday. Does that sound familiar?

What I found dissimilar in their approach however is dedication to making the workplace is safe as they possibly can for as many people as they possibly can. They have no doubt a dangerous place to carry out their trade. I thought it might be interesting to look at statistics. The Census of fatal occupational injuries summary for the year 2013 reveals that there was a preliminary total of 4405 fatal work injuries recorded in the United States in 2013. This was lower than the fatal work injuries reported in 2012. They also revealed that the rate of fatal work injuries for US workers in 2013 was 3.2 for talent these per 100,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) workers. I personally found it interesting that they did cite the fact that the number of fatal work injuries among firefighters was considerably higher in 2013, primarily as a result of the Yarnell Hill wildfires in Arizona, which claimed the lives of 19 firefighters.

The report goes on to note that the number of fatal work injuries among protective service occupations was higher by 7% in 2013. Citing two incidents alone accounted for over half of the 53 fatal injuries involving firefighters; the report belies the fact that OSHA has significantly raised the bar on safety over the last couple of decades. Sort of makes me wonder what safety would look like if OSHA had never come into its own. We all know that an injury and illness prevention program is a proactive process to help employees find and fix workplace hazards before workers are hurt. We also know that this type of activity can reduce illnesses injuries and fatalities.

If that's all true, then I would still ask the question of where is our version of the code of safe practices that are required of every other industry? I typed in the word code of safe practices and received a large number of hits. Not a one of them was related to the fire service. There were documents related to construction workers, clerical workers, maintenance workers, cargo storage regarding merchant marine vessels, and even a performing arts center. But no fire service.



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Don't get me wrong. I believe we have lots of safe practices in existence. What seems to be lacking however is an accountability system to assure that firefighters believe in those practices and can be held accountable for following them up to the day that they retire.

So, I thought I would take a swipe at developing what could be a codes safe practice for the fire service that is generic and yet at the same time focuses on the very reasons why firefighters dying in the line of duty. I may miss the mark. But, on the other hand, this code of safe practice might contain some behaviors that could reduce our line of duty deaths significantly. They are as follows:

1. Always wear the appropriate protective clothing for the task you are undertaking.
2. Never freelance at the scene of an emergency, regardless of the size or complexity of the event.
3. Always wear your seatbelt, not just when responding to emergency incidents.
4. Never enter a burning building by yourself or without a hose-line to protect you.
5. Always report any unsafe condition or malfunctioning equipment to your immediate supervisor.
6. Never assume that you know the answer to every question that you will be confronted with.
7. Always keep yourself in top physical condition by remaining physically strong and mentally alert
8. Never risk your life just to save a piece of vacant property or a burning vehicle.
9. Always be responsible for your own actions, decisions, and exercising of judgment.
10. Continually ask questions about anything that you are asked to do that you have never been trained to do.

Well, there's my code of safe practice. I spent a lot of time reading NIOSH reports, especially those involving what could be considered as "accidents". Having been injured a couple times myself I have come to the belief that there are no accidents only circumstances that could've been avoided if I would have only been paying attention.

The culture of the fire service seems to accept fatality as a given in our industry. I'm not sure how far that goes in explaining the thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of injuries and near misses that accompany the process of firefighting. Now that we have adopted the mantra of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation-" everyone goes home" perhaps it is time for us to also adopt a code of safe



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practice that is personal, not organizational. If you want to make a name for yourself as a leader in the fire service perhaps you can do so by changing the culture of the fire service in a way that leads to the crowds at Emmetsburg growing smaller every year.