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What is Your Re-Ability

All of us like to win. As a matter of fact, do any of you recall watching the movie "Patton?" There was at the very beginning of the movie, General Patton made a presentation. He said, "Americans love a winner!" And nobody likes to be number two or number three or come in last, or whatever the case may be.

We have in our language, in our vernacular in this day and age, many different terms and expressions that relate to being winners. I think last year was probably the classic example when we had the Olympics here in the United States. How many times did you guys hear the words "Go for the gold!" over a period of a couple of months? For a while I was beginning to get a little nervous. I thought they were talking about my chief's badge and that there was somebody back there trying to get it.

Going for the gold means that there is a kind of image out there of being a winner; there is a reward for being a winner and we have other terms for it - in fact the younger set has the term "Go for it!" It means, if you have something that you really want, then what you do is, you cock yourself back and set your sights on it and you try to achieve it - you go for it!

Well, the theme of my talk today is about that concept of "Going For It!" and how do you get it. I am not going to use a fire service story. I'm going to use a military analogy. I am going to talk about an organization for example that probably very few of you have ever hear of, although quite frankly, most of you have probably seen semblances of its background.

In World War II there was a small elite group of individuals who were assigned into North Africa and they were told to go out and do an insurmountable thing - they were to stop the German Army from completely mangling the British and American forces in North Africa. And they decided that they didn't have the power and the force of stopping this military juggernaut, so instead of creating a massive group of individuals, they took a very small and very elite group of individuals and they formed a group called SAS, which stands for Strategic Air Services. It's kind of an elitist commando type outfit.

They gave them this task - to go out with a couple of jeeps and a couple of machine guns and hold the Germans at bay until we could get the rest of our defensive forces and get on the offense and win in North Africa.

Well, this particular group came up with a motto and their motto was this: Who Dares, Wins. The person who takes the most risk under the most insurmountable sets of circumstances but is willing to take that risk is going to be the winner. Their emblem, for example, was a sword. A lot of you have seen military emblems, and so forth, and everybody likes to use the symbology of weaponry, and so on, but theirs



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was a little different kind of sword because it had a big jagged bolt of lightning through it. What they were trying to say was that they struck with the speed of lightning under circumstances where everybody else had thought they are going to lose and they won.

Now, this group, the Long Range Desert Group was what they were eventually called, the LRDG, subsequently kicked the rear of the German Army because they functioned behind the lines almost exclusively, and were tremendously successful. There were more forces that were diverted trying to keep these guys at bay than you can possibly imagine which of course did what? It blunted the onslaught for our military.

The reason I tell that particular story is that these guys had a certain frame of mind. And their frame of mind was that we can accomplish anything if we are willing to take the risk.

My favorite all-time story with these guys was that at one point in the campaign they drove down to a German air base and they shot up a bunch of airplanes with their fifty caliber machine guns. They went down to the other end and they drove off and as they drove off the whole German Army is following them, these two guys are talking. One guy said, "Guess what?" Other guy said, "What?" Guy says, "I'm an Ace." Other guy said, "What do you mean?" Guy says, "I just shot five airplanes." And the other guy says, "Naw, naw, you can't be an Ace. You gotta be in the air." The sergeant in the back says, "Anyhow, there were just four." Guy says, "Nope, there were five." Well, they're driving around and the argument gets bigger and they made a great big circle and came back and drove down the runway a second time to count the airplanes.

The German Army couldn't believe these guys were crazy enough to come back! But, that's the kind of attitude that they had.

Now, we have an updated version of the LRDG and I just want to use them once again as an analogy. A couple of years ago, about 1982, there were a bunch of hostages that were put into an embassy in England. And they had to go in and get those hostages out and there was a big debate as to who was going to go in and get them. Who do you think was elected? The SAS, the Strategic Air Services.

The Long Range Desert Group is still in existence in 1983. And guess what? They went in and, at insurmountable odd, took all the hostages out and were successful.

The reason that I use this military analogy is that there is a tendency sometimes in our organizations and in the fire services and even in some cases, individually, of being unwilling to take risks for fear of the consequences. And this very small elite organization had the basic attitude that there is no way you can be a winner unless you take risks. There is no way that you are going to get the goal unless you are willing to suffer the pain that it takes to achieve. Now, those of you who are so-called "with it" today,



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probably saw a movie called “Stripes” and there is a guy in there called Bill Murray. One of his line about the group he was in charge of, he was a supervisor, was that it was the “lean, mean fightin’ machine.” I don’t know how in the world he could look at John Tandy and make that expression.

But, it was the attitude again, a small group of elitist people who are willing to take risks, willing to go out on a limb. Willing to try something that has never been tried before and subsequently be a winner.

Well, I want to make a couple of points regarding this with respect to two different aspects of your job as a training officer. The first is that when we talk to people about taking risks, the implication is that it is physical. And it takes physical courage to be a firefighter. That is true. I have always been amazed at the mentality of firefighters who are going towards something that everybody else is running away from.

We have a great deal of physical courage and when I talk to you guys about daring, being willing to take risks, you say hey, I take risks every day of my life! I put my life on the line! That’s not the kind of risks that we are talking about. The different kind of risks that I am going to discuss or the daring that I am talking about has to do with moral courage. A cerebral exercise, as it were, to make things different by being willing to think differently, or to try to approach a problem in a little different fashion.

I am going to leave you with a couple of buzzwords kinds of things. When it come to courage, there is a statement that is very appropriate. That is this: The greater the risk, the greater the reward. You show me something that is easy to achieve and it has very little relevancy. It has very little value.

In your context, as a fire officer, and especially as a training officer, if you come into my office, for example, and say, “Hey, Chief, I got this program. Cheap. Bought it for \$39.95 and it’s going to - we’re not going to have to invest much in it. Everybody is going to love it, cause it is real easy to do and the Captain’s not going to have to think because we are going to give it to them as a packaged program and so forth.” That’s not taking a risk. That’s easy. That’s the easy way out.

And in your capacity as a training officer, you have to be willing to do something that challenges your people. Now, I mentioned about the ‘lean mean fighting machine’ mentality and I am being very candid when I say that is a lot of cases, we have done just the opposite with our organizations. We have turned them into corpulent, inefficient groups of people by giving them the easy way out on a lot of our problems.

That is not a criticism of you personally, nor of your fire department personally, but it is a criticism of where we are going today because people are now beginning to challenge us and say ‘Can’t you do this better, faster, quicker, less expensively, and so forth’ and we are facing a challenge.



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I started this analogy off by using the Long Range Desert Group as a military group because they were fighting a war. So are we. We are involved in a war. Not a war against fire, say, but a war against complacency, a war against apathy, a war against mediocrity. It is one of the challenges that you take as a fire officer is to go out and do something about those things. To be willing to take risks, break the patter, break the mold, and make things different.

The theme of this conference is “Making Things Better.” I like that. It is a positive work. Because if I say “make something” I am implying that you physically do something. Take action. For example, you could have said - your theme conference here could be “Wishing Things Were Better.” We have a lot of people who do that. Go, I wish things would get better!

I can tell you there are a lot of jokes about what you can do with wishes and so forth. But, the fact is wishing is an internal exercise that does not bring about anything. Secondly, I could say, “I hope things get better.” But, that is not what this conference is about. It’s making things better, which literally means involvement and commitment. I don’t know how many of you have heard the joke about the difference between involvement and commitment. But, there is an old saying about when you’ve had breakfast in the morning and you have ham and eggs. The chicken was involved, but the hog was committed.

Now, I know you guys are still hypnotized.

That’s what we are here to do. That’s why we are here and what this conference is all about, making things better. And what I would like to share with you is a different approach to that concept of making things better, not of just stealing ideas.

I love coming to Training Officers’ conferences for two reasons. One is to watch the dynamics and the other is to watch the skullduggery as things are stolen from each other. You guys all go back with business cards with little things written on the back and then your Xerox machines are almost burned out during the month of June and July. Slide duplicators work overtime. We do a real good job at that sort of thing.

I want to talk about a little different approach.

You guys remember a couple of years ago when the joke was going around about the tuit? The round tuit? Everybody said - they had these little wooden nickels and they said, “As soon as I get a round tuit, I’ll do something.” So some guy came up with a little thing called a tuit and he’d give it to people and say, “Here, you’ve got your tuit, now go do it.”

Okay. I’d like to ask you to take a look at another concept and it’s called “Be-ability.” Be-ability.



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When we use the term “ability,” ability we are talking about the ability to perform something. For example, we say this guy has the ability to do hydraulics. This guy has the ability to do fire ground tactics and strategy. He has the ability to lay hose and so forth. But, that is not the ‘bility’ that I am talking about, because ability has to do with performance.

Be-ability has to do with goals. Let me tell you what I am talking about. When we use the word ability in the sense of a person doing a physical job, we can visualize that. But there are other kinds of “bility’s” that are part of our vocabulary that have to do with the way we think about ourselves. For example, I coined a word coming up here called “Makeability.” Makeability means making something happen rather than just talking about it. There are lots of words that end in bility that have positive connotations that each and every one of you can take on as your Be-ability. Let me just give some of them to you.

One of them is “accountability.” Accountability. Taking risks for being able to go out and say yes, I will be accountable for certain things. I will measure what I do. I will measure things like performance standards. You are going to have to. Chief Bruescini is going to talk about Standards. I think Hank Gilligan is going to talk about performance standards. What about the Be-ability to be accountable.

There is another type of ability--responsibility. Responsibility means willingness to stand up and take risks and say “We made a mistake. Let’s try it all over again.” Responsibility means with the willingness to step forward when everyone else is standing up or backing up from a problem. Responsibility means stepping forward and attacking that particular problem.

There is another one. It’s called Believability. Believability means achieving a certain status in the community for what you say being true and relevant rather than just being the party line. And one of the aspects of the fire service of today--one of our biggest challenges--is Believability.

Any of you guys ever hear the expression that is being bandied about among City Manger types and politicians about what we call the Burning Baby Speech? You guys know what the Burning Baby Speech is? It’s when people attempt to sell programs on the basis of “If you don’t let me do this we are going to burn the town down and kill all the kids.” And pretty soon people are going to say, “Wait a minute. I don’t believe that.” Son one of our Be-abilities is to be believable, have Believability.

Another of them is Affordability. Affordability means taking risks and being responsible for the cost factors and attacking the problems of productivity and attacking the problems of the economics of modern fire protection.

You guys may not even think about this in these terms, but I will go do so for you for just a matter of a few minutes. Do you realize what it is costing the taxpayers of the State of California to conduct this



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seminar for one week with eight hundred people here? If you want to play a little cerebral game, start adding up all those numbers in your head and bear in mind that some of you are here on your own time and some of you are paying your own expenses, and I am well aware of that, but look at the amount of money, for example, that is being invested in this particular process. If we don't take what comes out of these things and go back home and do something with the, then in fact we are not generating affordability.

Oh, there are a lot of other abilities that I could keep laying on you. We have one called Predictability. We have one - Possibility. We have one called Credibility. You see all these little pins that people have on and so forth, and as I said before, we had Round Tuits. I would like all of you to think that you are wearing a pin when you leave this thing and I want you to put what your Ability - your Be-ability is on that pin. What are you going to take a risk in? What particular direction or thrust are you going to take back to your department that is going to make things better?

By the way, there's a big difference between making things different and making things better. Difference means throwing out the baby with the bathwater and just doing something new and unique because you know about it. Making things better implies a net outcome that is more satisfactory than what you have been doing previously. And there is a tendency sometimes to engage in measuring differences, instead of measuring outcomes.

Bottom line on all this is - you have two choices. You can do these kinds of things or you can ignore these kinds of things. You can come here and have a good time, collect all your information, go back home and say, "I can't do this because the Chief won't let me." "I can't do this because the troops aren't going to like it." "I can't do this because the City says we can't afford it." "I can't do this because we tried that once before and it didn't work."

The sign of most risk-takers is that they are willing to accept failure over and over again until they achieve success. For a classic example, you can always look at one of the most innovative men in the history of this country. Thomas Alva Edison failed hundreds of times before he achieved the electric light bulb. We have a syndrome sometimes of being unwilling to risk for fear that we are going to be criticized for failure. One of the challenges that you face is to go back and take risks, accept failure, and still get something out of that. Move the system a little bit further down the road.

I say, in the context of winners, that the price you pay for mediocrity, the price you pay for complacency, is anonymity. The price you pay for doing none of these things is to remain a nameless and faceless individual or organization. I have a couple of abilities that go along with that, one of them is called Vulnerability, and the other is Invisibility.



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So make your choice in terms of risking and taking on new challenges. Do you want to become a person who is making things happen or do you want to become a person who watches things happen, or do you want to become a person who wondered what happened. The choice is actually very strongly an individual one. The greatest tragedy that could happen to any of you from a personal point of view as a training officer is to have been there and to have had the opportunity and ultimately to have made no difference whatsoever.

The greatest tragedy could be to have been given the opportunity to make a change, and instead of making the change, accept the status quo.

As I indicated at the outset of the presentation, we started off with a military metaphor. And as I indicated we are more or less in some kind of warfare ourselves. The warfare is between us and our enemy the fire; it's between us and the competition between us and all other elements that are competing for the same dollars and cents in City Hall; and it is also between us ourselves. It's between us as organizations; it's between us as training officers and so forth.

When you were a kid, I'll almost bet you that at least one or two times in your life you had some guy, usually this happens when you are between the ages of about seven and a half and eight and a half or nine years old, who walks up to you and says "I dare you" to do something. "I double dare you" to do something. I broke my leg one time because of that. Guy dared me to make a parachute out of a pillowslip...

I heard one of your previous speakers talk about packing parachutes...and I made the serious error of packing my own. I jumped off the top of the barn and...there are certain advantages to compost piles...but I still suffered the consequences of it.

But, I am going to ask that you take a dare right now. I dare you to go back and do something that nobody expects you to do. I dare you to take something back from this conference that is going to challenge the people that you work with. I dare you to go back with something that you think has the possibility of failure but at the same time has the possibility of contributing to the betterment of your organization.

That is the dare that I would like to challenge you with. And I will leave you with two other challenges. That when an individual decides that he is going to reach out and achieve something that is non-acceptable or is not the status quo, it has to be based on internal courage, moral courage, intellectual courage, rather than the physical side of it.

I have no doubt in my mind that in this particular group here we have enough physical courage to accomplish anything in the world. But, I have my doubts as to how much emphasis on how much effort



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we place on making sure that we exhibit moral courage at the same time. I would like you to go back home upon completion of this workshop and challenge yourself to take a risk.