

Don't Hand Them Your Expectations on Day One

One of the first pieces of advice a newly promoted company officer receives is, "Make sure you sit your crew down and go over your expectations." On the surface, it sounds like good advice. In fact, you could find countless examples of "Company Expectations" online if you wanted to. Some are a single page, while others stretch on for several pages. Some outline everything from station chores to response expectations. Cell phones, kitchen etiquette, and conduct all wrapped into one beautiful document.

The intent is usually good. But the execution often misses the mark. I think it's because new company officers feel pressure to have these conversations on the very first day. They believe they need to establish themselves immediately and set the tone. Yes, setting expectations is certainly part of being a company officer, but the timing and approach matter. Here is the truth: your firefighters already know you're the captain. If you work in a small department, everyone will see the promotion announcement. If you work in a larger department, everyone is going to know you are the new captain the moment you walk through the app bay doors. No one walks into the firehouse wondering who the officer is.

Instead of walking into your first shift feeling like you need to prove you're the captain, change your mindset, and walk in assuming you're joining a company of professionals. Assume you're working with firefighters who care about the job. Assume they want to perform well. Assume they take pride in serving their community and supporting one another. But if you begin with the mindset that everyone needs to be managed, corrected, or reminded of who's in charge, you may create a problem that never existed in the first place.

I think one of the biggest mistakes a new company officer can make is believing they have to define the relationship before they've taken the time to understand it.

Stop for a second and imagine you're a poker player sitting down at a new table. An experienced poker player doesn't immediately play every hand. They observe. They watch how people bet, who takes risks, who stays disciplined, and who lets emotions influence their decisions. Only after gathering information do they begin making calculated decisions. The firehouse is no different. Before deciding how you're going to lead your company, spend time learning your company. Observe how they communicate with one another. Watch how they solve problems. Notice who naturally mentors others, who quietly gets work done without recognition, who takes initiative, and who may need additional support. Learn the rhythms, strengths, and personalities of the crew before trying to change them. This doesn't mean silence. Quite the opposite. Introduce yourself. Tell your crew you're excited to work with them. Share your commitment to safety, professionalism, and continuous improvement. Let them know your goal is to build a strong company together. That's very different from reading through a five-page list of rules.

Does this mean you ignore obvious issues or avoid addressing significant concerns? Absolutely not. If you observe an unsafe act, a policy violation, or a behavior that requires immediate correction, address it. That is part of your responsibility as a company officer. Leadership isn't about avoiding difficult conversations; it is about having meaningful ones. What this article challenges is the belief that every new captain needs to arrive on **Day One** with a lengthy list of expectations simply because they're the new officer.

Please don't weaponize your expectations. Before trying to shape the culture, take time to understand it. Every company already has strengths, traditions, personalities, and informal leaders. Some of those things should be reinforced. Others may need to change. But you can't know the difference until you've spent time observing. Leadership isn't just influencing people. It's first understanding the people you're trying to influence.

Ironically, your firefighters won't remember much about the expectations document you handed them during your first shift. I don't remember mine. But you know what they will remember: your first fire together. How you handled yourself. They will remember how you responded when someone made a mistake. They will remember whether you listened before you judged. They will remember whether your actions matched your words. And they will remember whether you consistently lived the standards you expected from everyone else. The strongest company expectations are rarely delivered in a single meeting. They're demonstrated every shift. Your firefighters will learn what you expect by watching what you consistently reinforce, what you tolerate, what you correct, and how you carry yourself as their company officer.