

Volunteer Academies, Changing Outcomes by Challenging New Members

By Dan Miller

As firefighters, most of us can identify with wanting to be on a select team, and not the B-team, or scout team, right? If you are going to do something like sign up for a fire department, there is at least some expectation that it will be physically demanding, enthralling, life affirming, and bring you some kind of personal change that you've been seeking.

Those who sign up to be on a volunteer fire department want to be a part of something bigger. This typically involves wanting to be a part of a group – a fraternity of some sort. Maybe there were relatives or friends who are or were members and role models, or outright encouraged membership based on their positive experiences as volunteer firefighters. In any case, being a firefighter is a calling that takes you to a “next-level” experience, if you accept it.

Most volunteer firefighter recruit indoctrination (probationary) period models look something like the following examples:

1. Sign up, get voted on, get a key and a pager, and start showing up to training, meetings, calls, fundraisers, etc. No definite acceptance or indoctrination period. Certification training is often available as desired, but not required. In this model it may take years before a member demonstrates qualification and belonging, and is fully accepted as a team member, other than on paper. The process is very open ended and ambiguous to the new member, sometimes on purpose.
2. Applicants are tentatively accepted by a vote, and a defined probationary process of 6 – 18 months ensues, of which the member undergoes initial training and is expected to attend meetings, drills, and activities. However, they also respond to emergency calls as soon as they are issued personal protective equipment and are blessed to do so by an internal process. The process may be very undocumented, or based on a task or training list of internal origin. They are encouraged to get certification training as an EMT or Firefighter at some point within their first 1 - 3 years. This at least puts some expectations on the new member, but leaves them without validated, performance-based, certification-based, training while still answering calls in potentially life-threatening circumstances, with little or no decision-making model or validated background education.
3. Following the vote, a new member is sent immediately to a certification course in a third-party location, using third-party equipment, and comes back with a piece of paper saying he or she is a certified firefighter. While they are in class, they are expected to do little in the way of participation with their own department. When they return, some combination of examples 1 and 2 takes place. In this model, the member may have been indoctrinated, at least partially, to an ambiguous fire department model while in class. If there is no intense follow-on to bring these members up to local expectations and acceptance, they can feel very left out. They can also assume some home-town procedures aren't up to snuff with what

they just learned in class. There is a disconnect that must be mended, and often is not.

As the years go by, and leadership changes, the previous model processes are often intermingled, depending on who is in charge and how badly new members are needed.

As recruit members involved in a process such as the three previous examples, there is typically dissatisfaction on the part of the probationary member, the department itself, and even their family. With the aforementioned models, one or more of the three (acceptance, indoctrination, and baseline expected certification training) are left out. In many cases, it takes 3 – 5 years for a volunteer firefighter to gain all three. This is a long time to wait, and frequently results in attrition of new members.

More than anything, new members are disillusioned by being undertrained and underutilized. It results in new members leaving for something more connected and fulfilling, with higher expectations and faster results.

The fire department is left with a partial member until they are accepted, indoctrinated, and trained to some certification-based level that is acceptable to the other members and citizens. The citizens are paying for and supporting the operation, and they expect certified, capable, high-performance teams of experts to show up and solve their problem when 911 is called, whether paid or not. They have a right to some expectations. Being firefighters and members of an elite team, most of us want to meet or exceed public expectations, and are constantly striving to do so.

Fire departments spend in the range of \$8,000 – 10,000 per firefighter to outfit, equip, and train each new volunteer member.

So, how do volunteer fire departments get better, faster, performance results from new members, and at the same time leave the new member with a sense of intense belonging, accomplishment, and connection?

The solution contained within didn't come easy. Over many years as a part-time state fire instructor, volunteer fire officer, and career firefighter and instructor, I was brought into the paradigm of being kinder and gentler to the volunteer firefighter rookies. After all, they are precious and we don't want to lose them. They are generally in short supply.

What this resulted in was a generation of mashed potatoes – Low expectation, poor performing, half-committed, undertrained members. Meanwhile, senior members complained about declining membership and the lack of adequate numbers of trained personnel. I never believed this narrative myself, but have been constantly bombarded with it, even to this day. For years I was looking for a way to break that cycle of self-defeat.

Along came my position in the training division of a large metropolitan fire department. In this position, running the career firefighter academy, my fellow team members and I saw signs of the same affliction in our career members and their mindset – Low

performance, dissatisfaction, lack of indoctrination and acceptance, and even some attrition. We had high expectations but weren't delivering courses that were highly physically and technically challenging.

It was our team's chance to change the outcome. We immediately set out to return to highly challenging daily physical expectations of years past, but with more science behind the controlled chaos, and a connection to high level firefighting skills, team mindset, and mental fortitude development. We didn't make training and certification easier. We made it harder. We took on a Navy Seal approach to changing up physical aspects of the academy, and as a result, the internal survival beliefs of each recruit firefighter.

It worked. The results were relatively quick and sustained over a three-year period with over 100 new career members trained to the new expectations. The satisfaction among the recruits was high as well as among the field training officers who were receiving these candidates following the academy.

While looking for a way to transfer this success to volunteer firefighter certification courses, I came up with a general methodology that I have found success with. In my experience what I call the "Volunteer Academy" has reduced attrition, sped up adoption of department culture, developed members into street-ready and trustworthy, certified firefighters, much sooner than traditional models, and filtered applicants that were not ready to be fully involved.

In general, the process involves the following steps:

1. Accept applications over a period of time, but hold applications until you are ready to begin a new academy class for a group (preferably 6 or more rookies), or conduct a short-term membership drive and be prepared to start training that group as soon as the membership drive is complete. If necessary, work with a neighboring department and conduct a joint academy, agreeing on common rules. The rules to be followed for the recruits MUST to be rock solid. It is also vital to have a start date set prior to accepting the applications. The quickest way to disappoint and disillusion a new applicant is to be wishy-washy on a start date. Let them know you are a legit program by sticking to your calendar.
2. Establish who the lead instructor is, or if necessary hire one. The lead instructor must be certified to the level he or she is teaching, as well as Instructor-I, and must work with the State agency to coordinate curriculum and documentation. The lead will spend the most time with the recruits and will become the face of stability and trust. Address all rules up front, and then give the lead instructor the reigns. The lead instructor must have complete authority to enforce the rules within a legal and reasonable framework of fair play to be spelled out in advance. If the recruits believe that the instructor does not have complete authority to remove them from class, set rules, or provide discipline, they will push the bounds. It is extremely important to have a person as a lead instructor who has a flawless record of fair treatment of others. If there is a question, don't use them. If

- the recruits question the stability of the lead instructor, or your trust in them, the rules go out the window, and so does your reputation as a program.
3. Complete all preliminary medical clearances and PPE checkouts in advance of the first class session. All recruits must be 100% ready to participate in PPE training on day one, minute one.
 4. Establish SOPs to be followed, house rules, uniform rules, before and after class cleanup duties, and expectations of assisting instructors. Establish a rule with the host organization that lets everyone know that the academy participants will be under the control of the academy instructors, and that participants will be told to address current members and officers only as necessary and courteous, and only by their titles and last names. Recruits will be expected to stand aside when meeting current members and officers in common areas, and will be expected to stand when any non-class member or officer enters the classroom.
 5. On day one, assemble the members, in the agreed upon uniform, in military formation (explain exactly how you want this to look every time so they know). This will be their first inspection. Go student by student, and address hygiene and safety issues, such as jewelry, facial hair standards, what to do with long hair, how to wear the uniform, etc. Stick to the rules. If you give an inch, they will disrespect you. A work uniform (department T-shirt) is usually adequate for hands-on training, along with the agreed upon pants and footwear. DO NOT accept inadequate footwear. Many injuries occur just preparing or cleaning up because of improper footwear. One of the major goals here is to build identity as a firefighter and team member, as well as professionalism. Additionally, to build pride in the uniform, the instructor(s) must be diligent about their own uniform, cleanliness and readiness, hygiene, etc. Discuss this with assistants ahead of time.
 6. Establish ritual, such as saying the Pledge of Allegiance in formation at the beginning of each class. Build good citizens and firefighters. It's up to us. These are usually young people, who don't necessarily know what it means. By the end of the academy, they will take great pride in saying the Pledge with their fellow firefighters, and will proudly pass on this tradition.



Figure 1: Candidates recite the Pledge of Allegiance daily at the beginning of class.

7. Establish a daily and weekly routine for recruits to follow. For example: *Be ready 15 minutes before class start. Have all PPE and SCBA checks complete prior to class start. Don't be the one who holds up class or their will be discipline.* As the academy progresses, lump on additional responsibilities for equipment and apparatus checks after they are taught how by you. Checking apparatus and equipment before every class is an opportunity to provide training on policy, what to do with broken equipment, and it establishes “expectations” for acceptable work habits. At the end of every session, expect recruits to leave the station and equipment better than they found it. This is how good members are “built.” Provide such expectations in writing at the beginning of the academy.



Figure 2: Recruits drill on PPE donning, first for accuracy, then for time.

8. As the course progresses, proceed through the Firefighter-I, Hazmat Operations, NIMS, and BLS curricula as required. Provide adequate time for chapter reviews in class, but expect the recruits to study on their own time. Use slide presentations mostly just for review, until you get to the technical stuff. Spend approximately 70% of your time with students doing hands-on training in this hands-on job.

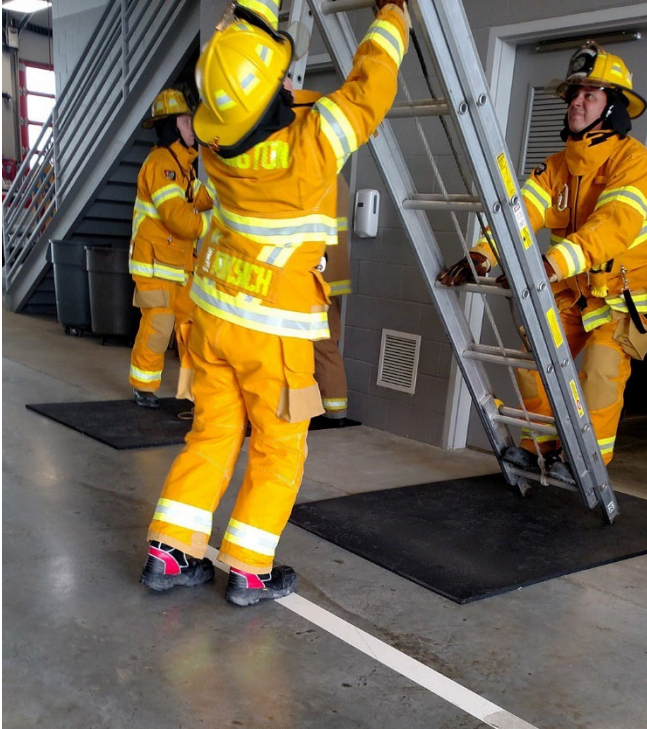


Figure 3: 70% of the course should be hands-on skills practice.

9. As the course progresses, turn up the heat in new areas, while acknowledging their progress in other areas, and moving on. Maintain decorum and discipline throughout. Expect high performance, but work with members who struggle. Often people with learning disabilities and a total lack of knowledge of mechanical equipment will turn out to be your best members. This is your job as an instructor.

Your goal is to appear as though you use this academy process every time. Avoid letting anyone get the feeling this is the first time you have done it.

Avoid letting any current members get in the heads of the rookies. Avoid letting any current members start training rookies. If rookies have previous training, let them know this is a fresh start with new rules, and that they are to participate fully with the instructor or risk removal from class. If they question procedures because they learned differently in previous training, they can address it with the instructor/staff respectfully following class.

Don't be afraid to let people go who aren't ready. If they have a valid reason, other than just something that can be coached away, focus on the ones who stay. Build a select team, not a junior varsity. With the volunteer academy approach, it has been my experience that we will lose 10% of the recruits within the first two weeks, but then seldom lose another. This is a good thing. Those 10% are likely pre-occupied with life consuming priorities that will prevent them from being successful, and they know it. Practically speaking, this is usually before you have spent ton of money on new fitted PPE and other expensive items for them.

In comparison to the old method of teaching firefighter certification courses in a less demanding, presentation-heavy class, without tough expectations and behaviors, over a 4 – 6 month period, the results of this method are faster, better, and more satisfying to all involved. With the old method, the attrition rate during a Firefighter-I class was often as high as 30 – 35%.

The benefit to the department and the taxpayers comes in the form of return on investment. Within 4 months of their start date, recruit members are certified to Firefighter-I, Hazardous Materials Operations Level, NIMS 700, and Basic Life Support per NFPA 1001 Firefighter Professional Qualifications. With supervision, they become very useful on scene within a short period of time. It is short, intense, and the department will have most of the answers it needs about the probationary member.

The benefit to the member and their family is that they are now trained to recognize and survive the environment in which they are expected to work – on highways, in IDLH atmospheres, zero visibility, under life-threatening conditions. They are trained how to call for help, and how to help their fellow members survive. It establishes a baseline of life safety skills. When members are allowed to respond to life-threatening incidents without training, the department is grossly negligent. Why? Because they know the consequences and choose to ignore it.

At this point, they can begin responding to calls. It is the carrot and the stick method. No calls until certified. Again, this is a hard and fast rule to experience success.

Lastly, throw a graduation party. The intensity of the experience of an academy is celebrated by a graduation party where family and friends can share in the success of their loved one. A graduation party facilitates the buy-in of the member's family to the sacrifices that have been made and will be made for years to come.

In academy-style firefighter training, students are not only introduced to NFPA standards, objectives, and job performance requirements. In academy style learning, the concepts of honor, pride, and commitment are instilled and constantly evaluated. The mind and body are trained to work together to perform essential firefighter skills without fail. The results are brotherhood, respect for rank and seniority, excellent skill performance, and a high level of commitment to the department. It's not just a class. It's an experience.

Bio:

Dan Miller is the Fire Chief of the City of Columbus, Nebraska with 37 years of firefighting experience. He is a retired Battalion Chief and former Academy Commander at Omaha, Nebraska. He is a retired part-time instructor for the Nebraska State Fire Marshal Training Division. He is CEO of Training Under Fire, LLC.