



Leadership

Pedro Caceres: Common Principles of Firefighting

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By Pedro Caceres

Firefighting often differs from one department to another, from one region of the country to another, and definitely from one country to another. At the same time, several principles are constant for all good-quality firefighting. In the United States, Peru, Mexico, or anywhere else we are called upon to serve, a few basic concepts can make a great difference. Physical fitness, training, teamwork, command presence, and situational awareness are all factors that can improve the fire service regardless of its location.

Fires vary under an infinite number of factors and conditions, which makes every fire unique. First, every fire department is different. Different staffing levels, experience, training, budgets, and available equipment affect how operations are conducted. Structure size, type of construction or terrain, and use, combined with available fuels, fire cause, and environmental conditions can produce many types of fires—large fires, small fires, difficult fires, bread-and-butter fires, and inconspicuously deadly fires.

Regardless of the type of fire, firefighters answer the call without hesitation every day in every corner of the world. Many of the hazards are the same: structure collapses, getting lost, getting disoriented, losing water, getting trapped, and falling ill because of the stress can also be found at many incidents regardless of the location and type of fire; therefore, a methodical approach and use of known successful strategies can lead to safer, more productive firefighting.

Fitness and Wellness

According to the United States Fire Administration (USFA), approximately 100 firefighters die in the line of duty each year in the United States. Of these, just more than half of them die as the result of stress/overexertion. Several studies, including one by the University of Maryland and one by Indiana University, show the great demands that firefighting exerts on the human body. The additional weight of the protective fire gear, the heat stress created by the gear, the physical requirements of the tasks, the environment in which we work, and the work schedule have great impact on firefighters. These studies clearly illustrate the need for good physical fitness, which would improve our ability to manage the overload on the body.

Many of these studies make several recommendations, including having a yearly physical exam, developing workout programs for all members of the department, educating peer fitness trainers, providing good nutrition information to members of the fire department, providing education on the effects of the firefighting gear, and many others. Being physically fit enhances your ability to perform physically, and it also allows you to think and to make better decisions under stressful conditions. When it matters the most, firefighting is a physical job. Physical fitness, I believe, is the foundation for all other activities in the fire service regardless of your position or assignment.

Firefighting is a team effort. It requires a lot of training and practice. Skills must be mastered. Teamwork needs to be flawless. Training enhances performance and improves decision-making skills by allowing tasks to become intuitive. Realistic training also

improves decision making by building “slides” or experiences that allow the brain to make decisions more efficiently and accurately. Training is most important factor during fireground emergencies or other stressful situations. During these times, our mind relies mostly on our “instinct” and executes tasks according to our training. The mind looks for the “slides” most relevant to the situation and uses them as the basis for determining which actions to take during the emergency.

A team owes its strength to its diversity. The members’ different backgrounds, training, abilities, knowledge all come together for a better performing team. Members of each team also need to understand their role within the team. The repetitive nature of training allows for team work to develop. It allows for an understanding of the team members’ roles and responsibilities. Teams that train and work together consistently develop the ability to compensate better for unforeseen circumstances and for temporary deficiencies within the team. For instance, if a team member is sick, did not sleep well, or is injure, the remaining team members will be able to compensate for the deficiency and perform as expected.

Good physical fitness, training, and teamwork also lead to high levels of confidence. When all individuals understand the strength they have developed, their confidence in each other and themselves also grows. Knowing that the teams are physically fit and well-trained instills confidence in the incident commander as well, helps establish a good command presence.

Command presence is necessary on the fireground to ensure the safety of all firefighters and to manage the incident efficiently. Good command presence instills confidence in those following and performing tasks. It reduces hesitations and second guessing and eliminates freelancing. Lack of command presence can lead to confusion and missed assignments that can lead to dangerous conditions, firefighter injuries or firefighter fatalities.

Situational awareness is a critical factor in maintaining a positive command presence. Well-trained firefighters in good physical shape who work together consistently allow

the incident commander to concentrate more on the incident and make quicker decisions on where the incident will be instead of where it is. Situational awareness is more than paying attention. It involves the ability to observe and understand the clues before you. The better you can understand the clues, the more efficiently you can determine where things are going and what steps to take to control the incident. Good situational awareness necessitates good management of the many distractions often

found on the fireground and good understanding of the critical information that will make a difference for all involved or affected by the incident.

Fires vary. They are affected by many variables and are not always predictable. Physical fitness, training, teamwork, command presence, and situational awareness are all factors that can improve the outcome of any fire. These essentials may not eliminate all incidents on the fireground completely, but they can significantly decrease the likelihood of mistakes that could lead to injuries or fatalities. Firefighting is an ever-changing process. We must continue to improve our skills and knowledge as well as our ability to perform. We must remain committed to this end.

Pedro Caceres began his career with the Wayne Township (IN) Fire Department (WTFD) a little more than 20 years ago. He has been a lead instructor for the WTFD and the Central Indiana Fire Academy, where he served as director in 2008. Beginning in 2009, he served as the division chief of support services for one year and then as division chief of training and safety for two years. After three years of service with the administrative staff, he returned to the companies and his merit rank of captain. He is assigned to Engine 82. He is a rescue officer for IN-TF1. He is an adjunct instructor for Advanced Rescue Solutions. He completed the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. He has an associate degree in fire science from Ivy Tech State College and bachelor's degrees in architecture degree and environmental design from Ball State University.

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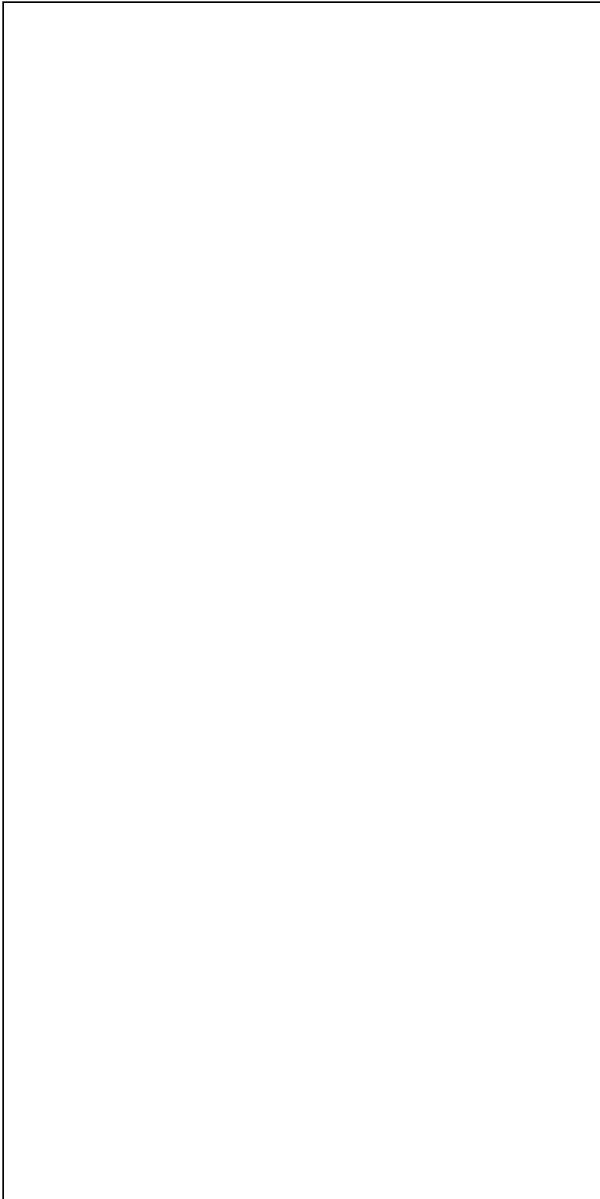


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