

# Project Management and Firefighting: Are there Lessons to be Shared?

By

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*The very worst fire plan is no plan. The next worse is two plans. ~Author Unknown*

*Let no man's ghost return to say his training let him down. ~Firefighters Saying*

Soon after being accepted as a member of a fire department, cadets are typically enrolled into training classes. Their training regime may consist of basic classes, hazardous material teaching, awareness classes, and several others that are relevant to the challenging role of being a firefighter. New firefighters also are trained early in their career on communications protocols, the chain of command, and standard operating procedures. The need for a common communication language in the fire service is arguably more critical than many other professions, as the cost of a miscommunication can have serious consequences in an urgent situation. In most situations, there are procedures that every firefighter should know, and there are guidelines and processes that establish the chain of command. A system of protocols, chain of command, and standard operating procedures is needed so that, when called into duty, regardless of the department(s) or personnel responding, everyone knows what to do and who is accountable so that the teams can go straight into the “performing” stage of their activity. Being able to perform under the tightest of pressures does not occur by accident nor by luck. Many fire services, especially volunteer services, employ an almost continuous training model where as much as 50% or more of their scheduled meetings are dedicated to training. Career firefighters also spend an abundance of time training especially when first hired. Recent publications suggest on average 600 hours in formal training are required of new hires. These men and women are not just walking through motions in training exercises. To most, their motto is “train as you work” where every event is run as if it were a real live situation. When planning a response to a fire, the approach is to “Plan your work, and work your plan”.

So, how different is this from the approach we should take to project management? What lessons can be shared between project management and fire fighting?

For a project manager, regardless of the industry in which he or she works, many of the tasks in the early stages of a project are spent establishing the chain of command, project procedures, roles and responsibilities and “setting up the project for success”. A communication plan is developed and agreed on, implementation strategies will be developed and works planned prior to Execution. Project managers rely on organizational process assets (OPAs) to ensure they have appropriate project guidelines, which are often adapted to a project’s unique stakeholders. There is rarely a situation where every project

team member knows the exact responsibilities for the entire project, but as good stewards of project management, taking the time to ensure everyone is clear of everyone's role and responsibilities pays dividends, since studies have shown that most issues on a project can be traced back to misunderstanding and lack of communication at the right time.

Having every stakeholder fully aware of all expectations and the whole team quickly into the "performing" stages of a project would be a project manager's utopia. How successful this goal turns out to be is based on several factors, but primarily on the organizational structure in which the project manager works. A fire department is an example of a "projectized" organization. Every call-out is akin to a project, with varying external stakeholders based on the callers. Because of the need to ensure communications of the team are paramount, a central resource/team is generally responsible for stakeholder management on scene which allows the "core team" to perform the essential services required to tackle the problem. These people within the fire service are commonly referred to Incident Commanders, Site Managers or other similar titles. What is important to take note is that every team member responding to a call-out is aware of the expectations, which allows the core team to get straight into the "performing" position from the onset.



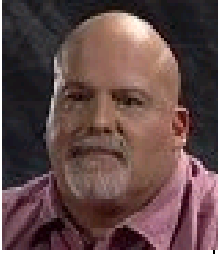
In conclusion, we believe there are some valuable lessons that can be shared between the way that a fire service deals with its situations and project management. We believe some approaches we should ensure are in place in project management include:

- 1) All new project team members should complete an "on-boarding session", where they learn about the project, the team, the standards and communications channels and the roles and responsibilities of everyone. The better prepared our project team members are, the less time they need to spend in the non-value stages of storming and conforming. The sooner a team member is performing, the less risk there is to the project.
- 2) Ensure that the project team adopts a team attitude from the word Go. Project members should have project-driven agendas and a modus operandi that are aligned to the success of the project.
- 3) Every project and every project member should be aware of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). If they are not, the SOP, Communication Plan, Chain of Command, etc. should be covered in appropriate detail in the project kick-off meeting and with all new team members thereafter.
- 4) Always match the team to required skills and training, and ensure they are given the best training to perform. Team assessments that help show team members how to maximize their effectiveness as individuals and as a team are critical to project success – invest the time to conduct them early. Allow team members who have skills gaps to learn from more experienced members on the team, even more so if the team is expected to work on projects together in the future.
- 5) Always apply the same level of rigor to training and the general project teamwork set-up. This approach should ingrain the concepts, processes, etc., and for a project manager these activities should be second nature at the start of all projects.

- 6) Approach every project with a plan. Be willing to recognize when the plan is not working to expectations and take appropriate corrective courses of action. Fires are like projects, in that no two are exactly alike and are apt to changes mid course. In order to be successful, you must be willing to modify your plan during the course of a project.

*Dedicated to all the men and women across the globe that freely gives of themselves to make a difference in the world. Special thanks to David Taylor of the Avoca Volunteer Fire Department. David is a 24 year fire service veteran; 18 of which he has served as chief.*

### **Biographies:**

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