

Successfully Making The Transition From Company Officer To Battalion Chief

Fire-Rescue International
August 14, 2008 – Denver, CO

Steve Prziborowski – Battalion Chief
Santa Clara County (CA) Fire Department

Objectives

- Identify traits of an effective Battalion Chief
- Determine how you will present yourself once promoted to Battalion Chief
- Create personnel expectations for your Company Officers and their crews
- Develop an action plan to successfully transition from Company Officer to Battalion Chief

Congratulations On Wanting To Become A Battalion Chief!

- I hope you're aware that this is probably one of the most drastic leaps in rank within the fire service.....
- Instead of going from "Buddy to Boss," you're going from "Boss to the Dark Side!"
- There are also some differences from when you were a company officer

As A Battalion Chief, You're In A Different Vehicle.....



As A Battalion Chief, You're Using Different Tools.....



**Regardless Of The
Differences, As A Battalion
Chief, You Have The
Obligation To Be The Best
You Can Be.....**

Why? Because our personnel, our
department, and our community
deserves and expects us to be!

**What Are Some Qualities You
Have Liked About Battalion
Chiefs You Have Worked Under?**

**What Are Some Qualities You
Have Disliked About Battalion
Chiefs You Have Worked Under?**

Think about this.....

- Of all the Battalion Chiefs you have ever worked under:
 - Are there more good ones than bad ones?
 - Were any of them perfect?
 - Can you take something (good or not-so-good) from each of them to use when you are a Battalion Chief?

Traits Of An Effective Battalion Chief

An Effective Battalion Chief: Someone who.....

- Has life experience
- Has fire service experience
- Is educated and trained in the fire service
- Has command presence
- Is organized
- Is credible
- Has planning skills
- Is a good listener
- Is a great oral communicator
- Has the ability and desire to build and maintain effective working relationships
- Is politically aware
- Is politically sensitive

An Effective Battalion Chief: Someone who.....

- Likes people
- Understands customer service
- Does not forget where they came from
- Can make a decision
- Respects others
- Is a leader
- Is a mentor
- Understands they are the designated adult
- Holds their personnel accountable
- Holds themselves accountable
- Is ethical
- Practices succession planning

An Effective Battalion Chief: Someone who.....

- Is progressive
- Understands tradition, but is not tied to it
- Takes care of their personnel
- Has the ability to modify the status quo as needed
- Sees the big picture
- Can say "I am wrong" or "I made a mistake"
- Is responsible
- Is dependable
- Is passionate about the fire service
- Can be firm, fair, and impartial

An Effective Battalion Chief: Someone who.....

- Understands progressive discipline
- Praises in public, disciplines in private
- Realizes they support their suppression personnel as well as their administration personnel
- Doesn't let their ego get in the way
- Realizes they cannot please everybody, but want to do the greatest good for the greatest number
- Is flexible
- Is ethical

An Effective Battalion Chief: Someone who.....

- Does not micromanage
- Supports their personnel
- Keeps their supervisor(s) in the loop as appropriate
- Talks the talk and walks the walk
- Doesn't accept mediocrity
- Understands the fire service is a full-service organization
- Makes safety a top priority
- Is accessible to their personnel
- Is respected

An Effective Battalion Chief: Someone who.....

- Is able to balance quality time with personnel and administrative duties
- Is passionate about their personnel, their department, their community and the people they serve
- Is a good time manager
- Has compassion
- Know anyone that meets all of those standards?
- Doesn't mean you can't strive to meet those standards!
- Anything else?????????

**Developing Your Action
Plan To Successfully
Transition From Company
Officer To Battalion Chief**

Your Action Plan: How You Plan To Present Yourself

- Hopefully this is done well in advance of your promotion to Battalion Chief
- Write out a list of all of the things you have liked and disliked about other chief officers you have worked for or have heard or read about.
- Promise yourself to never do the negative things others have done

Your Action Plan: How You Plan To Present Yourself

- Talk to chiefs currently in the position, asking them their opinions on how you can successfully transition from Company Officer to Battalion Chief
- Hopefully they can share their successes and failures
- Don't just limit yourself to your own department (create a network)

Your Action Plan: How To Build Credibility & Respect

- Put together a to-do list, and use it as a check-list to evaluate your performance on a regular basis
- Include education, training, experience, as well as knowledge, skills, and abilities you would like to obtain

Your Action Plan:

Personnel Expectations

- As a Company Officer, you should have already established personnel expectations.
- If you have not, it's never too late to start.
- As a Battalion Chief, failing to have personnel expectations is a recipe for failure!

Your Action Plan:

Personnel Expectations

- Write them out in advance, ensure they are reasonable, obtainable, legal, ethical, and appropriate for your situation
- Share them with your Company Officers to share with their crews
- Encourage your Company Officers to share their expectations with their personnel
- Hold your Company Officers accountable!

Once You're A Battalion Chief.....

- Enjoy the journey, it will go fast.
- Realize the higher up the chain of command you rise, the less people will "like you."
- Don't try to be "liked" or "everyone's best friend." Instead, try to be "respected" by your peers and/or superiors.

Once You're A Battalion Chief.....

- Don't forget: it's the position or rank they dislike.
- Realize, you're more in the spotlight now than you ever were.
- One wrong word out of your mouth can doom your career or reputation.
- One wrong word documented can also doom your career or reputation.

Once You're A Battalion Chief.....

- You're no longer "one of the guys or gals" (hopefully you realized that when you got promoted to Company Officer).
- You're probably going to have to give oral presentations, so learn to be a good public speaker.
- You're probably going to have administrative duties, so learn how to create and manage budgets and programs

Once You're A Battalion Chief.....

- You're now "one of them" (administration). Get used to it.
- If there was ever a time to be calm, cool and collect, at everything you do – now is it!
- I hope you realize the liability, the commitment, and the responsibility you have to your personnel, your community and your department.

The Bottom Line:

You had a great deal of responsibility as a Company Officer. As a Battalion Chief, you have even more responsibility!

Your Job Is To Not Let This Happen On Your Watch



How Can You Ensure This Doesn't Happen On Your Watch?

- Do your job.....and do it well!
- Share lessons learned and other training or safety bulletins/news items with your personnel:
 - www.firefighterclosecalls.com
 - www.emsclosecalls.com
 - www.firefighternearmiss.com
 - www.everyonegoeshome.com

How Can You Ensure This Doesn't Happen On Your Watch?

- Don't allow or settle for mediocrity
- Continuously raise the bar
- Make every moment a training opportunity
- Train like your life or someone else's life depends on it – it does!!
- Ensure that safety is not limited to lip service

How Can You Ensure This Doesn't Happen On Your Watch?

- Treat training like the real thing (practice like you play)
- Correct unsafe behaviors immediately
- Learn from past firefighter fatalities, injuries, and/or near-misses
- If we fail to learn from history, we are doomed to allowing history to repeat itself!

When Making Decisions.....

- Don't forget to use the *Headline Test*:
 - Is it the right thing for our personnel?
 - Is it the right thing for our department?
 - Is it the right thing for our community?
 - Would you mind reading about it in the morning newspaper?
 - If you can answer a positive yes to all 4: GO FOR IT!

Closing Thoughts

Lastly, I Would Be Remiss If I Didn't Mention The Following:

- A Battalion Chief can truly feel stuck in the middle – between line and staff, because you have two primarily loyalties.
- You have to be loyal to your subordinates and your superiors, not to mention your peers

Lastly, I Would Be Remiss If I Didn't Mention The Following:

- It's not "us versus them" anymore: it's "all of us are in this together" to do what is best for the personnel and communities we serve
- Make sure you keep your supervisor in the loop, and know what they expect of you

Lastly, I Would Be Remiss If I Didn't Mention The Following:

- Don't be part of the problem, be part of the solution
- Don't allow your personnel to come with you with problems, without having thought of at least 2 solutions
- You may not agree with the decisions made above your head; however, once a decision has been made, accept it like it was your own decision.

Lastly, I Would Be Remiss If I Didn't Mention The Following:

- Very few of your decisions require immediate action
- When making a decision, ask yourself – can I justify it to the public, the department, the union, and to my family?
- One wrong decision or choice of words can doom your career and level of respect.

Questions?

**Thank you very much for
your time and for allowing
me to spend some time
with you!**

=====

Good luck in successfully making
the transition from Company
Officer to Battalion Chief!

Presenter Contact Info:

- Steve Prziborowski
- (408) 205-9006 – cellular phone
- sprziborowski@aol.com
- www.chabotfire.com