

So, you want to become a firefighter? – Part 1: Achieving the dream

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This is the first installment of a series of articles intended to prepare the aspiring firefighter to be the best they can be.

On one hand, becoming a firefighter is not an easy task. On the other hand, it is not impossible or out of reach to become a firefighter, if you have properly prepared yourself. Remember, life is about choices. Only you can make the difference in your life and what you make of your life.

Becoming a firefighter is something that many people start out pursuing. Unfortunately the majority of those people probably never achieve their dream of becoming a full-time, paid firefighter. Why is that? I believe there are many reasons why people never achieve that dream, and I plan to discuss those reasons so that you can never find yourself in the position of saying, “If only I had tried harder, if only I had not done that stupid thing that prevented me from getting hired, if only I had better prepared myself; I might have become a firefighter.” The list goes on and on.

Why do some people that set out to become a firefighter, never achieve that dream? Here are the top 5 reasons I believe that keep people from obtaining their dream of becoming a firefighter:

1. It never truly is a dream
2. They do not take the hiring process seriously
3. They are unable to admit their own weaknesses or take constructive criticism
4. They continue to make excuses why they are not getting hired
5. They give up

Let me now go into some details on each of the above reasons, so that you can hopefully prevent yourself from being in that position someday.

Reason #1: It never truly is a dream.

To become a firefighter, nobody says that you have to have wanted to become one since you were a little child. While that makes for an interesting story during an oral interview, it is something that is almost unrealistic in the year 2002. I bet every department has excellent firefighters that only became interested in the career while they were in their adult years and learned of the position after hearing about what a firefighter does from a friend or relative, or from a firefighter at a recruitment drive. What I am getting at is that I believe it doesn't matter how long you have wanted to become a firefighter; what matters is how serious you are about becoming a firefighter, and how much you make that into a dream. Anyone that has a passion for something and is able to show their enthusiasm and sincerity, is going to have a better chance at succeeding than someone who is just going through the motions, or not taking every day as an opportunity to get closer to achieving their dream.

Reason #2: **They do not take the process seriously.**

Becoming a firefighter is not something you can expect to become when you only take a couple of tests per year, when you do not make the attempt at updating your resume at least once a month, or when you do not live, eat, and breathe the entire process. I believe it is a full-time job just getting a firefighter position. You truly need to be in it for the long haul. When candidates first start out, they usually appear to be very motivated. At some point, many of them get sidetracked and lose their focus. They find a significant other. Their significant other they presently have is not prepared for what they are actually getting themselves into, having to wait a few years for you to get hired. They find out it is not what they truly want to do. They get discouraged after taking a couple of tests and not doing so well. They find it difficult to get the necessary education and experience to succeed due to family commitments. The list goes on and on.

You must be continuously be thinking about creative ways to improve your resume on a monthly basis; whether it is obtaining another certificate, performing more volunteer community service hours, or completing another fire related class. Live, eat, and breathe the entire process. Those that take the process very seriously, and make a sincere and dedicated effort at becoming a firefighter, stand an excellent chance when compared to those that do not make the effort to learn everything they can about the field they want to get into and spend the rest of their lives doing.

Reason #3: **They are unable to admit their own weaknesses or take constructive criticism**

Irregardless of what your mother might tell you, we all have weaknesses (including yourself). That is why we are human beings. We are not perfect. As soon as you admit that and start becoming aware of your weaknesses and the areas that need improving, you are showing your maturity and ability to grow – both personally and professionally.

Start taking accountability and responsibility for yourself in everything you do, including when you are in the process of becoming a firefighter. This includes knowing and admitting to your weaknesses and shortcomings. If you always think you are the one that is correct and do not need to change the way you are doing something, approaching something, or interacting with someone, then you will limit yourself in regards to personal development and career development.

If you are not able to take constructive criticism during the hiring process, how are you going to succeed as a firefighter? Being a firefighter subjects someone to criticism their entire career; during the academy, during probation, during the promotional process, as a firefighter, as an officer, as a public servant, etc. Like it or not, we are in the public eye and are always subject to criticism. If you cannot take it now, and learn from your mistakes and correct your weaknesses, how are you ever going to grow, mature, and better yourself as a fire service professional?

Remember, if something isn't working the first time, how many times do you have to do the same thing over and over again before you realize you might need to move on to plan b, or plan c? I know it is one thing to try something that doesn't work the first time, and then try it a second time. After about the third time, you need to step back, regroup and look at some

alternatives. I am amazed at the people that just keep on doing the same things (without trying something different), and then wonder why they are not getting hired. “If it isn’t broken, don’t fix it,” is a phrase you should be thinking of. If you’re not getting hired, then you need to fix something or change something, or just try something different (because something is broken)!

Reason #4: They continue to make excuses why they are not getting hired.

While on vacation this year down in Southern California, I met a guy who was working at this fire museum as a volunteer while also working as a paid-call firefighter and trying to become a full-time paid firefighter. We started talking about the local big-city department. I had asked him if he worked for that department since he was working in their museum. He told me no. After a little conversation, he started making excuses about why he had not been hired there. He started going into how the department had “lowered their standards,” had hired “unqualified individuals who didn’t deserve to be hired,” and then went on how he was “getting passed over and discriminated against because he was a white male.” Out of curiosity, I asked him why he thought he was better than those candidates who had been hired. He went on to say how he was a Firefighter-1, he was an EMT, he had been a volunteer and paid-call firefighter for almost six years, that he had paid his dues, and so on.

Now ten years ago, I might have actually had some sympathy for him. Instead, I asked him, “Have you thought of going to paramedic school?” He said he shouldn’t have to. I then asked him if he had a two-year degree or a four-year degree. He said no, and that the “fire departments aren’t looking for college kids.” I then asked him if he spoke a second language. He said no. I then asked him what he had done volunteering in his community besides firefighting. He said nothing. I asked him what his short range, medium range, and long range goals were in regards to becoming a firefighter, of which he answered “I’ll keep on plugging away until I get the job, somebody will eventually hire me.” Now I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to go through life without a specific game plan of what to do or a road map of how to get there. Will he ever get hired? Good question. Maybe he will get lucky; maybe he will never achieve that dream. Until he changes his way of thinking and stops making excuses for what he cannot do as opposed to making plans for what he can do, he will probably not get too far.

Reason #5: They give up.

Remember, once you give up at something – you never have the chance to find out if you ever could have accomplished what you originally set out to accomplish. How long does it take to become a firefighter? There is no set formula or time frame. What works for one person, might not work for another. I truly believe there is a firefighter position for everyone out there who does not give up at obtaining their dream. Some might get the badge on the first test while others might have to take 50 to 100 tests. Some might only spend less than a year at the process, while others might take 3 to 7 years to become a firefighter. If you put 100% into becoming a firefighter, and make it a full time process by living, eating, and breathing your dream, then your odds get better and you might have a chance of obtaining that badge in 2 to 5 years (which I think is about the average time frame it takes to get hired in today’s job market – assuming you are putting everything you have into becoming a firefighter).

A friend of mine was recently hired by a neighboring department. He had been testing for 13 years! Could he have been hired earlier? Of course he could have. He had just fallen into the trap of feeling sorry for himself, not believing in himself, and committing some of the other nine reasons why people never achieve their dream. While he got his dream job, had he stuck to a plan and maybe been more serious about the overall process, he would have obtained his badge many years ago and not had to deal with all of the stress of not achieving his dream.

Candidates ask me what are their chances of actually getting hired. I tell them it is not a simple answer. No one can guarantee their getting hired. However, if they never give up and they continue preparing themselves in every possible way, continue improving their knowledge, skills, and abilities every chance they have, and keep focused, they stand a really good chance at getting hired. Does everyone get hired? No. But those that stick it out stand the best chance. I've know many people that have been hired after having tested for over ten years. I've never known anyone to get hired once they gave up their dream and stopped trying to become a firefighter.

If you truly believe that becoming a firefighter is a dream of yours, then by all means pursuit that dream! Many people talk the talk, but how many actually walk the walk? It is not easy becoming a firefighter. However, if you realize that you must be in this for the long haul, that it might take you a few years, that it is a full-time job just becoming a firefighter, and that you need to not find yourself falling into one of the top 5 reasons why people never achieve their dream of becoming a firefighter, I sincerely believe you will be on your way to achieving your dream!