

Understanding a Culture of Extinguishment

10/01/2013

BY RAY McCORMACK

THERE IS BARELY A DEFINITION of a culture of extinguishment, never mind a standard. That being the case, let's try to define it, explain what it means to most of us, and look at what it is not. A culture of extinguishment is about commitment to the art of suppression and perseverance during suppression—two qualities firefighters need to employ to fulfill the department's mission to the community and the fire service itself. It is about the constant discovery and refinement of the suppression mission. It is about working to provide the best in suppression tactics and efficiency. It is not about some twisted sense of duty, risk-all mantra that many have tried to ascribe to it.

Extinguishment is accomplished with different approaches—line sizes and from both inside and outside of fire buildings. Where it has gotten messy is when people attach firefighter risk and injury to a culture of extinguishment. The premise is that firefighters will risk it all for a chance to be close to the action. Although that makes for a clever narrative and may happen on occasion, it is not a cultural fault. It is a training issue. Training, command, and control are part of the checks and balances that place firefighters in correct and corrected positions. If we look at root causes with an eye toward extinguishment, we will often see an undeveloped extinguishment training component.

A culture of extinguishment is something the fire service must have. To claim that a fire department's mission to preserve life and property from the ravages of fire should not foster a culture of extinguishment is farcical. Remember, the culture of extinguishment belongs to the fire service. We created it. If you do not like how some perform fire attack, then work to make it better. If you see only negative connotations ascribed to a culture of extinguishment, then maybe you need to ask yourself why that is. Extinguishment does not lead directly to firefighter deaths. In fact, extinguishment enhances firefighter survivability; however, a lack of quality extinguishment often leads to fatalities.

The culture of extinguishment is not some rigid attack doctrine akin to the "March of the Wooden Soldiers." It does not encourage blind allegiance to any form of firefighting. Our firefighting culture allows and uses all types of extinguishment strategies. We have first strike capability through the use of fixed suppression systems. We have legions of civilians capable of pulling a pin on strategically placed portable fire extinguishers to hit incipient fires. We have well-placed firehouses that can respond within minutes to protect communities with varied fire attack approaches.

If you do not understand why the fire service needs a strong culture of extinguishment, think back to what you thought the fire service was about when you started. If your thinking has changed over time, ask yourself why you wrestle with such a simple premise. It is alright to favor prevention, but suppression is what is needed when prevention falters. Do fire departments do more than just fight fires? They surely do. Are there operational concerns other than extinguishment? There surely are. Fire departments are all-hazard these days, but remember that despite name changes and high medical response rates, only firefighters put out a community's fires. If the fire service does not support a robust culture of extinguishment, then what is the community getting from us?

The fire service is the most valued of public service entities. Even in these difficult times of financial upheaval, firefighters are dependable. We are taught how to extinguish fires in a multitude of ways. We wear expensive gear to shield us from exposure to fire, and our communities place their faith in what we do and how we do it. The national fire service is shown examples of fire responses every day that have suffered from poor tactics and performance because somewhere along the line the commitment to suppression was minimized.

If you are a firefighter and believe that a culture of extinguishment is not important to you, your fellow firefighters, your department, and your community, you have been somehow led astray. The culture of extinguishment should define the crux of a firefighter's existence. If you are not reminded by seeing fire engines in your station or wearing your gear as you respond that we still put out fires, take a break and refocus. Suppression is the reason you exist no matter what your call volume is. Never forget that your skills on the fireground cannot be replaced by other emergency skills and that they must be kept sharp.

Although we have suffered from injury and death within our ranks and the need for improvement is always there, we must recognize that this is an inherently dangerous line of work. That being said, no one is looking to get hurt. Through the efforts of firefighters, we develop new methods of operating every day. Do firefighters make operational and tactical mistakes? Yes, they do, and they are made by firefighters of all ranks. Pushing suppression to the back burner of training increases injury rates. Training and knowledge improve our performance and collectively lower injury and death rates for both firefighters and the public.

The fire service needs to embrace its culture of extinguishment. There is widespread agreement that when the fire is quenched, things get better. How we extinguish our fires is a matter of choice and access, so forget all the negatives you may have heard and realize that the fire service without a

culture of extinguishment lacks a core and flounders on the fireground as a disorganized set of individuals instead of as a well-developed and coordinated attack group.

When we turn our back on our primary mission and our firefighting force, we really have an identity problem. Despite all the other things that may occupy a firefighter's day, we can never turn our back on why we exist, why we climb aboard that truck. There are many new skills and training topics that help us to stay as injury free as possible on the fireground. We want that. We need to understand that an extinguishment ethos is part of who we are and what we do. Understanding and fostering a culture of extinguishment that serves both the people we swore to protect and ourselves are currently challenges for many, although they should not be. A fire department that devalues its suppression capability is doing a disservice to itself and its community by not fully developing its culture of extinguishment.

Despite some rhetoric you may have heard, fire departments are well served with a strong culture of extinguishment. No other service provides extinguishment, so no other agency can lay claim to the life-saving and property-saving culture we possess. No one is asking for supreme sacrifice in the performance of your duties. In fact, you must fully protect yourself to the best of your ability so that you can deliver the best outcome and do it effectively over and over throughout your fire service career.

Most times, firefighters return home without injury, but sometimes they do not. Our operations on the fireground are often examined scientifically for suggested improvement and data; we must recognize potential improvements and incorporate them when possible. It is also important that we delve deeply into our delivery models and seek solutions regarding suppression capability in light of community development and population density.

Neither scientific data nor enhanced safety initiatives displace a culture of extinguishment; they supplement it. A culture of extinguishment looks at science and other disciplines for assistance and cooperation. The culture of extinguishment uses many forms of assistance, but extinguishment is the core. Other factors assist us with the mission; they do not replace it.

The culture of extinguishment is what a fire department stands for. Despite advances in prevention and technology, the ravages of fires are still with us. A fire department with all of its suppression capability is the foundation of a culture of extinguishment. Our service to the public comes in many forms. Fire suppression, when called for, should be done extremely well. If you see a fire department that does not perform extinguishment well, maybe it has yet to fully embrace its culture of extinguishment.

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