

## Teach! Don't Preach! Captain Erik Wood

Officers from the very beginning have been taught that you don't and shouldn't lead from behind. You lead from up front. Effective leaders are those that when the situation permits are getting dirty and doing the hard work with their crew. Effective leaders are also great teachers. They provide the hands-on life experience teaching that cannot occur in the classroom or on the training ground. It can only occur on real calls in real time. The reverse is also true. Great teachers are also great leaders. They provide the base knowledge and keep that link with students so that the information sticks. They care about the knowledge they are trying to impart. By default, a great teacher becomes a leader in the student's quest to be the best they can be. The best teachers I have had do not just stand in front of the room or on the training ground and talk. They lead and they communicate. They become teachers who impart knowledge without preaching. These same teachers are also the ones that consistently garner positive feedback.

You have probably noticed that within the first paragraph not once did I use the title "Instructor". Instructor is the common title given to the person who is responsible for teaching a class. In fact, the definition from Merriam-Webster is: "A person who teaches a subject or skill". However the title has some negative connotation. For some, "instructor" creates an image of a person reciting information by rote, demanding attention, and demanding the students learn even if the particular form of instruction doesn't suit the students' needs. Unfortunately because of the current culture as it relates to training that image is our fault as instructors. A teacher, in the truest meaning of the word, imparts knowledge using effective

activities and ensures that the knowledge is used and applied correctly. I prefer the word teacher over instructor for this very reason.

When we talk **about changing the training culture** we cannot leave out how the instructor facilitates a class. Instructors have to be engaging, well-educated on the topic at hand, and most importantly, they have to have the ability to teach. Talking to a room, reading from a book, or explaining how to do something don't necessarily make a teacher. It takes a certain type of person to be able to transfer knowledge. How each individual does a task effectively is different. The needs of some classes are different than the needs of others. A teacher has to be aware of the current needs for the current students. A class syllabus may work for five years and then suddenly you find yourself faced with a crowd that cannot absorb the information. A teacher shines in these moments by adapting and developing until the light of understanding goes on in the students' faces.

There is a disease in training which is fairly new. It can strike in any class, at any time. It kills slowly in a dim room: PowerPoint. Excessive use of PowerPoint is one of the many things that kill a training presentation. Many agencies that create training for departments over use it. My state provides certified instructors with the material for IFSAC FF1 and FF2 certification courses. Some of the PowerPoint material has chapters with an excess of 150 slides. 150! That's about 75 slides too long (and that is being generous). Most of that information is stock information. There can be a fair amount unrelated to department policy or is simply un-useful information. It's not hard to understand why eyes glaze over when faced with this kind of PowerPoint. Attention to the class comes second to just trying to stay awake.



Whether you are preparing the information or using information provided by another source one of the best things you can do for your class is make it real and make it your own. PowerPoint is a good tool when used correctly; there are hundreds of articles out there about how to use it and different tricks of the trade I couldn't possibly list them all here. Remember first that PowerPoint is changeable. When possible include pictures of your department, use videos from your prior training, and make the training real for them. Explain how the information is relative to their job and use prior calls as an example. This is not the time for war stories. It's a time for demonstrating how the information you are currently teaching was used effectively in the past and why it's still relevant or in some cases explaining why this training is needed. Never forget that your PowerPoint is a changing document. You should be constantly updating the information, or at least checking for updates, prior to any class. You can add all the pictures and video you want to PowerPoint and it won't help you unless you follow this advice:

### **KNOW YOUR TOPIC AND KNOW YOUR PRESENTATION!**

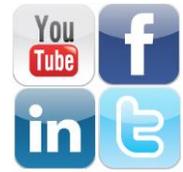
The common formula for success is 3 hours of preparation for every 1 hour of instruction. Depending on the topic, you may need a lot more time to prepare. Knowledge of your topic does not stop at technical proficiency. It just starts there. As we know in our profession they are usually 3 or 4 ways to do a task and get basically the same result. If you are teaching a class on a topic like this you should know and be proficient in those three or four most common ways. Know the pros and cons of all of them and have a good working knowledge of newest and latest trends. Doing this extra homework allows you to give the students a broader knowledge base of allowable options for completing a task, best

suited to that person or that job. Since every call is different knowing different methods is best for students and the department. This extra information allows them to have those tools in the toolbox, ready and waiting.

Before a white helmet smacks me upside the head, remember that your department has policies on how certain tasks are to be done. When you teach, you need to teach what the policy says and how to meet the policy and why it's important to follow the policy (and "because the Chief said so" is not the appropriate answer). Understand which methods are not allowed by department policy and do yourself a favor: don't teach methods that aren't allowed.

Inevitably if you are teaching only one way there is at least one other person in the room who was taught a different way and will want to demonstrate why they are right and you are wrong or will just want to throw it out there and ask why the way you are teaching is better. Knowing as much as you can prepares you for this. In general you should know this information without having to refer to a book or look it up. Don't be known as the teacher that has to constantly look answers up. If you do have to research an answer always follow-up and pass that information on.

Just knowing the content is not enough when presenting. Develop a logical order to the presentation and activities. Technology fails, and plans change. Be able to adapt and move things around if the situation dictates. Creating a flowing presentation and knowing it inside and out allows you to easily transition and adapt as circumstances dictate. As most of us can attest to, class disruptions happen. Between weather, a call or some other uncontrollable circumstance, classes get put on pause. By the knowing your presentation and your material you allow for a smooth and easy transition.



The training room is not, and should not, be your only means of delivering training. Our profession is a hands-on profession. For example, if you are teaching extrication some basic classroom knowledge needs to be imparted, but after that head to the bay or somewhere you can cut up some cars. I would venture to say that our entire job as firefighters is a hands-on skill. Very little of our day to day work is book-based. It's almost all practical skill. This makes blending the classroom with the apparatus bay or other prop very important. Not only will this keep the attention of those in the class, but it aids you in imparting the knowledge and making it sure its sticking. Hands-on training gets the students sweating, dirty, and has the bonus of letting them run power tools, and tear things apart. Students love it and they learn to work together as a team. This blended format is vitally important for volunteer departments that do not run multiple calls a day or who don't run many calls in general. Volunteer departments have the disadvantage of running the same calls a full time department does, but they do it with less training, in some cases less and older equipment and less man power. By its nature that means that one firefighter on the department can go 6 months or longer without even having to look at the extrication tools on a call, while another uses them 10 times in the same time period. Murphy, who is a friend to all firefighters, will make sure that on the next big accident the one who hasn't touched the tools in 6 months will be the one on the call. This is one of the many reasons why routine, hands on practice should be a requirement. ***Practice, Practice, Practice....and in case I forgot to mention it....PRACTICE!*** As an instructor, it's very important to give everybody the hands-on practice. Even if you don't have a car to cut up operate the tools, hook them up, and make sure everybody is proficient at it. Another good option for extrication is to mock cut up a car, look at the posts, walk around the

car, look where the hood latch is relative to the hood and grill of the car etc.

Here is where attendees and instructors meet. In order for the instructor to be able to impart the knowledge, regardless of how good they are, the culture in the department needs to view training as important. Attendees need to take training seriously and contribute to its success. The senior guys and company officers in the house **must** contribute to this change in culture. In order for that culture to be present the person(s) delivering the vast majority of the training must be good at teaching and making training worth attending. Know your audience, the topic, and your presentation. Blend your training, continually work to improve it, and constantly read and study all of the new information that is available. Combine a well-prepared trainer with attendees ready to learn and it's a recipe for success.

Most departments make a yearly training calendar and then throw in the ad-hoc stuff when needed. There are some classes that are required every year or multiple times a year. The class you gave on Safety & Accountability in January can't be the same class, word for word, slide for slide, and skill for skill, as the class you give on Safety & Accountability in June. Do not use the same presentation year to year or month to month. Change it up. I have a flash drive full of presentations and presentation material that I have used in the last 10 years. When I deliver training on a routine topic I try to use parts of everything I have done in the past with the addition of some new stuff and start the presentation with the new stuff. This will hopefully ensure that they realize this isn't the same presentation and will keep their attention. Part of a successful training program is constant evaluation. Most departments have a standard form for evaluation for each class that rates the instructor, the material and the presentation.



There are several issues with the paper evaluations. At the end of class you'll usually find them blank, lying on the table. Those that are filled out, are usually not that accurate. They just line thru the "yes" or "excellent" column and leave. If I teach a class and my buddy Mike is in the class he is not that likely to say he hated it in a paper version that he knows I will read. He'll just leave that piece of paper on the table, untouched. A training committee may be more useful. This committee is not made up of the instructors or department administration, but is generally the line firefighters and company officers. They are more likely to come up with and pass on constructive criticism of the training program in a group setting. As an instructor or as the department training officer, take what they have to say seriously but not personally. It's not a personal attack on you. Very often committees like this will ask for training on topics you didn't know they felt uncomfortable with and you can develop targeted classes from their suggestions. They can give you information that will help improve the effectiveness of your job performance. As an instructor, good job performance is vital to the success of the department.

Department administrators need to be very selective in personnel that provide training. This individual has a very important responsibility. They are imparting knowledge that can save lives, keep crews safe, and give better outcomes to the public. All these things are very important whether you are an instructor, officer or probie. Just because somebody wants to teach does not mean that they will be good or should be doing it. As administrators, you should be constantly evaluating and watching your instructors, make sure the training is going well, and lead. Lead by letting the house see your presence, see your attentiveness to the topic, and see your

dedication to training. That will go a long way to improving the culture.....that sounds familiar. Keep the brotherhood alive, keep yourself, your crew and your brothers/sisters alive. One way to help do that? For firefighters and company officers: Go to training, take it seriously and take it seriously because your life depends on it. For Instructors: Give training, give good quality training and give it like your life depends on it, because it does!  
Stay safe!