

FIREHOUSE®

Weekly Drill

DRILL #121: MENTORING

Introduction

It's not news; many of the youth in today's culture come from families and communities that are faced with serious challenges. Many struggle in school. However, many local businesses and organizations are finding it encouraging to become active partners with these schools through mentoring programs. And it is no wonder; studies prove that without positive guidance from adults, many of these children will fall by the wayside and self-destruct.

This is no different in our fire departments. Yes, we have drills and scheduled training, but what about those individual firefighters who need that little extra mentoring. Additionally, mentoring programs can and should be used to inspire and encourage our future leaders.

If your agency is like mine and many others, a newly hired recruit will spend upwards of 20 plus weeks going through an academy program. Once they graduate, some of them think they have all the skills and knowledge needed to do the job. I hate to bust your bubble, but you only have the tip of the iceberg and are going to need a great deal more of training. This training will never stop until the day you leave the fire service and then you may still not have reached your whole potential as there is so much a firefighter needs to know.

For mentoring to be effective, it has to be top down driven. In other words, a formal decision to invest in mentoring programs has to come from the chief! Once this takes place, the training academy staff must get involved and develop a formal mentoring program. This program needs to include: goals, objectives, material to be covered in the classes, the role of each mentor and some type of evaluation instrument to monitor the success of the students.

The main individual in this process is the mentor. To have any merit, the mentor needs to be someone who can be trusted to council, tutor, guide and, in many cases, coach the individual they are mentoring.

I mention coaching, because this is where individuals will gain the benefits from a good mentor. A coach works to help improve the team by assisting those who need additional help to improve their skills, knowledge



and abilities; both personally and professionally. The nice feature about the mentor being a coach is that they get to work on one specific characteristic of the job until the desired level is achieved.

In most cases, the mentor will find themselves in this coaching position without even knowing they are there. But there are those exceptions, in which case the mentor will have to perform in a professional manner calling upon their patience and self control. It's not always easy, but to be effective with the student being mentored it is a must. Keep in mind that coaching is an informational process that is used to help improve one's skills and abilities, which will also carry over into the knowledge.

An important feature the mentor must possess is the ability to understand that there are more ways than just one to get to the end results. In other words, you must have confidence, both in yourself and with the student, that you will be successful at reaching the objectives being set one way or another. This is accomplished by being flexible enough to realize when an alternate path needs to be taken.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick