

FIREHOUSE®

Weekly Drill

DRILL #124: THE LISTENING PROCESS

Introduction

Over the many years of my career there has been one aspect of the job that has always been somewhat of an issue...listening. This is a very common issue in the fire service and can work both ways: up the chain of command and down the chain of command.

For any communication to have an effect it must contain four elements: a sender; a message; a receiver; and some form of feedback. That doesn't sound very difficult, but when we look at the process (and some of the barriers) it becomes clear that listening is the number one problem in communication. On the fire scene, the main barrier that effects listening is the environment around us. The general noise of any fireground (windows being broken, pumps revving up and people shouting) can effect our ability to listen.

Barriers come in all forms; there are physical barriers, personal barriers and, in some situations, semantic barriers. The physical barriers are pretty easy to identify and will hinder the ability for us to communicate. Items such as walls, doors, distance or other background noises competing with ours are some of the more common ones.

The personal barriers are less obvious, but still have a direct effect. Some of these barriers are individual emotions, judgments or egos. We have a tendency to be selective with our hearing and only hear what we want to hear. This can have some very negative effects on the operation and could possibly cause harm to others. Be very careful around individuals possessing these personal barriers.

Language barriers, also known as semantic barriers, are becoming more common as fire departments continue to diversify. Another area of semantics that can have profound results is the many different meanings words have today. I hear firefighters using the term good to mean bad and bad meaning good! Even at the National Fire Academy they have stop using the terminology "flip charts" to be more politically correct.

As a company officer, listening becomes very important. All single company runs will require you to gather information upon arrival at the scene. In order to put



your strategy together you need accurate and precise information – which you will only get by listening to the individual(s) who meets with you.

Start by focusing your attention on the individual speaking to you and be receptive to the message by showing genuine interest. The signs of a good listener are being alert and having good posture. Should the message become uncertain or not clear and understandable, as the listener you need to ask questions. By asking the individual these questions you are showing your interest and concern while also looking for further clarity. Try not to ask too many questions or interrupt the person, as this could indicate your impatience, but keep in mind that time is not on our side at most incidents and we need to gather as much information as quickly as possible.

Remember, listening is a very important part of this job and having good listening skills will only make it easier. A way to monitor your listening skills is by identifying whether you: actively hear what is being stated; find that you are able to remember more of what was said; and are showing respect to the individual sending the message.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick