

Six Keys to Being a Great Volunteer Firefighter

By Craig Dunkley

If you're looking for a way to serve your community in a unique, active, and sometimes exciting way, then you'd be hard-pressed to find a better choice than the fire service. Since you're reading this article, then you're probably thinking about it on some level. Maybe you're considering the fire service as a volunteer activity. Or perhaps you're thinking about someday making a full-time career out of it. Either way, there are some key things to keep in mind as you decide whether—and how—to get involved.

This article boils those things down into six “keys to success.” This is not an exhaustive overview, and other members of the fire service can probably offer more suggestions and ideas. Nevertheless, anyone that follows these six basic keys will do well. Now, let's dive in.

#1 – Do it for the right reasons.

There are many good reasons that someone might want to join the fire service. First and foremost is an honest desire to serve the community and help people who are quite possibly experiencing the worst day of their lives.

In addition to that, there's the camaraderie and teamwork that are woven throughout the fire service's culture. There's also the opportunity to learn about fire behavior, building construction, firefighting tools and techniques, personal protective equipment, automotive stabilization and extrication, lifesaving skills, and about a million other things. And, obviously, it can be a very exciting job when the time comes to put your skills into action. All of those are great and valid reasons for joining the fire service.

But what about the wrong reasons? Believe it or not, some people join because they like the *idea* of being a firefighter but aren't prepared for the reality of it. When those people see the commitment and hard work that are required, they often fade away. If you're motivated by bragging rights, cool t-shirts, first-responder discounts at the local coffee shop, and collecting photos for your Instagram account, then the fire service probably isn't for you.

On the other hand, if you have a real desire to serve your community and your crewmates, then welcome aboard.

#2 – Don't underestimate the job.

Looking at it from the outside, it can sometimes be easy to underestimate the fire service and what the job requires. It's basically just spraying water on fire, right? I mean, how hard can it be?

That misconception gets cleared up pretty quick the first time a new trainee puts on heavy turnout gear and an air pack with a blacked out mask (to simulate the zero-visibility environment that's common in a fire) and is asked to drag a charged hose line through a building while on one knee the whole time. Or maybe they're asked to search the building—again, in zero visibility—to find and

rescue a simulated victim, which is usually a 160-lb dummy. And that training example doesn't even factor in the adrenaline, heat, noise, and other hazards of an actual fire scene. Simply put, the job can be extremely physically demanding. The successful firefighter realizes that he or she must be an athlete to do the job well.

And it goes far beyond the physical. It's also mentally demanding. The fire service is a lot like an onion. As soon as you peel back one layer of things to learn about, there's always another layer beneath, just waiting for you. Thirty-year veterans will tell you that they never stopped learning.

Finally, it can be emotionally demanding. If you are active and you stay in long enough, you will see things in the fire service that you will never forget. Be aware that it can take an emotional toll.

The key is this: If you go into it realizing that it's not easy—that it can be physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding—then you'll be far better prepared to succeed than someone who doesn't grasp that reality.

#3 – Take your training seriously.

Training is critically important. Given the sheer volume of stuff there is to learn—and the fact that firefighting skills are perishable—it's vital to routinely practice the fundamentals while also adding in new things.

For new probationary members, it's especially important to take a proactive approach to training. Participating in the weekly training meetings is a good start, but it's only a start. To successfully get through the probationary process and earn their "black hat," probationary members should make it a point to be at the station several times a week and take a well-organized, deliberate approach to training. Don't be afraid to call the station and talk to the shift Captain about the training they are doing, the training you need, and how you might be able to meet some training goals while at the station with the crew. They'll appreciate the outreach and the initiative.

At the end of the day, good and consistent training is absolutely essential for everyone, even for highly experienced, long-time firefighters. Why? Because lives depend on it: your life, the lives of your fellow firefighters, and the lives of citizens in the community.

#4 – Focus on your fitness.

You'll recall that we've already covered how hard the job can be. To perform that job effectively, you'll need a high degree of physical fitness.

Obviously, this article is not the place for outlining a full fitness program for firefighting. There are plenty of other resources for that (along with the proper medical guidance). However, it's important to keep a couple of things in mind.

First, the job often puts firefighters in awkward physical positions, such as keeping low and crawling inside of a burning structure. It also requires them to carry a lot of additional weight including turnout gear, air packs, tools, charged hose lines, and more. To do the work, a firefighter must use

large muscle groups that burn energy very quickly and can drive him or her into an anaerobic state. What's the net result of all this? Well, unless the firefighter trains for this type of exertion, he will quickly become exhausted and be out of the fight, draining firefighting resources at the scene. It can happen in just a few minutes.

To avoid that, a firefighter must be very intentional about physical fitness, with a consistent and appropriate fitness regimen. Good workout routines should involve some level of high-intensity interval training (HIIT), cardiovascular conditioning, and strength training that emphasizes pushing and pulling capabilities, back and core strength, and large muscle groups (think squats, lunges, deadlifts, and so on).

Along with regular skills training, maintaining peak physical condition is the best way to avoid becoming a part of the problem on the fire scene. The two go hand-in-hand.

#5 – Be useful.

You can get a lot out of the fire service, and that's a great thing. But you should also put a lot into it. That's really what it's all about: keeping a service-oriented mindset front and center and always making sure you are a useful member of the team. But what does that look like in real life? How does a good firefighter make himself or herself useful? Well, here are a few examples:

- Make it a point to train and learn. If you don't have the necessary knowledge and skills, then it's difficult to be useful during a call.
- Once you're cleared to do so, perform night duty and be an active member of the crew. Go to the station and serve with a standby crew when needed. Help clean tools and gear and get trucks back in service after a working fire.
- Help your department on special occasions, such as open house events, July 4th parades, public safety days, and so on.
- Be proactive around the station. If you see something that needs to be done, then do it (assuming the Captain is OK with it). If you see other crew members working around the station, cleaning up, etc., then don't be the one who stands around without helping. Find a way to make the overall job easier. As the saying goes, "Many hands make light work."

Whenever you're on duty—whether at the station or on a call—do two things: 1.) Listen to your Captain and 2.) always ask yourself, "How can my presence here today make things easier, better, or safer for the crew?"

#6 – Be proud but humble.

At first, "Be proud but humble" might sound like you're being asked to be two mutually exclusive things. How can someone be proud and humble at the same time? In fact, they're not mutually exclusive, they're complementary to one another.

“Be proud” in this case means to carry a proper amount of self-respect and a respect for the fire service in general. As a firefighter, you will represent the fire service broadly—and your department in particular—to the community and to the other public servants that you interact with.

How does pride factor into that? It means that you should be too proud to ride around in dirty or poorly maintained trucks. You should be too proud to have a disorganized or poorly maintained station. You should be too proud to look sloppy while on duty or while representing the department in any way. You should be too proud to reflect poorly on the fire service or your department because it’s your job to carry on a reputation for excellence (which often takes many years to build). So, in this case, a little bit of pride is a good thing.

But pride alone is only half the story. It must be paired with a certain degree of humility. Without that, pride can slip over into arrogance. In this case, “humility” means being focused on service, both to the public and to your fellow firefighters, and never losing sight of the core reason that we do this job in the first place. It also means realizing that nobody is ever “too good” to clean a toilet or mop a floor around the station. It’s not all glamour, after all.

So, if you’re still interested in joining the fire service, then we’d be glad to welcome you. If you take these six keys seriously and apply them on a daily basis, then you’ll be well ahead of the curve, setting yourself up for success as a volunteer or as a full-time professional.