THE NOZZLE FORWARD

The rediscovery of the Engine Company and nozzle-work as a craft

By

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I believe in aggressive interior fire attack, that is not an apology.

Within the fire service suppression provides the backbone for job success. Suppression is the product of several factors; most important are fire behavior and the use of hose and water application in context to the fire. As firefighters we must understand the capacity of our tools, we must be at competent with our skills, and we must possess an understanding of our environment. These things provide us the platform to be successful on the fire ground and allow us to do good work.

The old adages “the fire goes as the first line goes,” and “a safe fire is a tapped fire,” are as true today as they were when they were first uttered. The building is on fire, it will not get any safer for anyone until the fire goes out.

For today’s nozzle-person, the art of hose and fire suppression often has been obscured and put to the side in favor of other “hot topic” training. How to attack fire and move the line has been ignored and forgotten by many engine companies.

This loss of a skill set is partially to blame on training departments who put those things like hose, which many consider mundane, on the back shelf. The blame also falls upon new firefighters for not listening more than they talk. It falls upon senior firefighters for not making sure the new guys “got it,” while continuing to drill and refine their own skills.

I will submit that a well trained, experienced attack line deep inside a fire building creates a safer fire ground than a coffee-klatch on the A/B corner spraying water who-knows-where and debating if there is a life safety risk.
I will also submit that tactics are determined by the success or failure of tasks.

A smooth and efficient operating engine company is the core to a successful fire event. Starting with a rig placed where it needs to be. A tailboard that can not only figure the appropriate line to be pulled, but can estimate the stretch, lay hose tactically, move it efficiently, and finally extinguish the fire. An officer freed by the competency of their crew to act in their capacity, directing tactics, incoming units, and assisting the line if need be. Fires always go out, but they don’t always go out well.

“The Nozzle Forward” as a class is the product of many hours of both fire ground and drill experience combined with copious amounts of sweat equity. Its goal is to help craft more efficient Engine Companies by increasing the individuals’ competency with their tools and expanding on the conceptual aspects of the fire environment. It is not a skill set based around a theory; it is based around success on the fire-ground around the country. The skills taught in the Nozzle Forward are blue collar, practical skills that are an adaptable system for fire line management and fire attack.

The course will integrate the three major components of engine company work; fire behavior, hose management and fire attack, and engine company tactics. Too often in the fire service we train like we did in the skill acquisition phase of drill school. Working on individual skills, often independent of their intended context and mimicking the drill to check a box.

This class is concerned with integration of skills and problem solving we must always be able to answer the question “why.” It is a class focused on what we should do.

Despite the pop culture’s generalization of a generation gap, the fire service has always been a “why” not just “what” trade. If we are simply mimics we have skills that exist only in the context to which they were learned. If we understand not only the “what,” but the “why” we have tools which we can employ to face the obstacles presented by our situation.
In order to pursue an aggressive interior attack a firefighter must be able to read the environment, using benchmarks and quantifiable knowledge to determine the best course of action.

Today we give lip service to the idea that “fires today burn hotter than ever before.” The understanding of what this really means and how we can combat the hostile fire environment will provide the backbone regarding an engine company’s decisions. It also supports the idea that the hose-line placement, efficient use, and rapid extinguishment are critical.

With this class is an overview of Engine Company tactics. For the record, this is not a “my way or the highway” section, or class for that matter. This is instead, a review of the basic operational tactics and benchmarks of the engine, with a heavy focus on the first and second due rig.

Despite a variety of operational guidelines based around staffing, response times, equipment, etc, the basic foundation of engine company work is one with very little variation; best practices are universal, despite the differences between agencies. In this class we will explore options on achieving these benchmarks while operating under a variety of guidelines and policies.

I want to be very clear. I am number three, the pipeman, on a four person engine company. I am not a company officer, though on occasion I have been forced to act like one. (Don’t tell anybody it ruins my street cred!) The tactics portion of this class revolves around the idea that everyone on the rig knowing where the crew is moving tactically and the general order of events. Through an understanding of the “game plan” it enables each individual on the crew to do better work more efficiently.

In truth, having a pre-plan allows for more freedom on the fire-ground not
less. If fire crews understand what is expected of them and the likely chain of events on any event, it allows for the greater success when there is a deviation stemming from a clearly defined and understood starting point.

I dislike sport analogies, but in this case it is the clearest way to make the point. If we all come to the line of scrimmage in the right formation and knowing the intended play, when an audible is called before the snap we all adjust our roles and responsibilities instantly. (Don’t worry at no point will you hear the mathematically impossible “110%” saying from me.)

Theory is great, but at some point the rubber needs to meet the road, or more to the point in this case, the cotton or canvas meets the road. One of the biggest goals of “The Nozzle Forward” is increasing the efficiency of hose use, no matter the size.

On the drill ground we will practice deploying, operating, and moving both 1 ¾ and 2 ½ hand-lines. There is an emphasis on selecting the right line for the job and time spent discussing variations in line configuration with regards to line size and nozzle selection. In addition, we work toward the use of simple, functional hose beds, that don’t take a Master’s Degree in origami to deploy and reload.

We will drill multiple methods of hose manipulation focusing on gaining bio-mechanical advantage of these lines. If the nozzle-team is struggling with their line they will not be as effective in their task accomplishment. You cannot fire and fire-hose at the same time. We must remember that “hose” is the tool, protecting life and extinguishment is what we are doing. Line use must be second nature.
The measuring stick of competency for an engine company is their abilities with an interior offensive attack. It is also one of the things that as an industry we must ensure everyone is good at. It is not an option, it is our job.

The class breaks line use down into three phases; rig to door, door to seat, and fire-room operations. There is a focus on the individual roles on the line, as well as attack line/backup line roles. We will explore hose lay options and build skills that will increase your function with the lines.

Nothing is new, history teaches humility and it is with an understanding of the efforts and insights to those that have pulled hose before me, that I offer this class. I have not, nor will I forget what my mentors have given me. I will continue to refine my skills, and I will ensure that what you have freely given me, I will pass along.

I would like to offer my thanks to first and foremost my father, Lee Fields. I have been lucky enough to get to know as a child, an adult, and firefighter. It speaks volumes about who you are Dad that both of your kids not only followed you into the fire service, but also followed you into the 5th Battalion.

The Nozzle Forward Crew a better bunch of heretics and heralds could not be mustered anywhere.

The following folks have greatly contributed to my development. Some know me well; some not, regardless each of them brought something to the table they were willing to share. Many thanks, Andy Fredericks, Jeff Schupe, Jay Comella, Tim Klett, Meg Jones, Tim Linke, Phil Jose, Ted Corporandy, Jason Vestal, Jim McCormack, Dave McGrail, Tom Norton, Ralph Ashmore, John Tanaka

Now let’s go have some fun. If you are ever in question to where to find me, just go to the end of the line, I got the pipe.