

## Beyond the Door, Risk Analysis

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Risk a lot to save a lot, Risk nothing to save nothing. It is spoken and printed on many hallways in the fire service and classrooms across the nation. Has this become just another motto put in place to alleviate the liabilities or is it actually occurring on the scene? As history marches along the pendulum swings back and forth creating change and leaving behind chaos. Too many emotions are being attached to decisions that are made in split seconds while standing in front of a burning building.

Risks can be managed by creating a culture and setting expectations. This is done before the emergency not at the scene. Since an engine company is a tool that works via action, answers must focus on what you can do, as opposed to what you not do. Are we spending time discussing, educating and training others on what actually occurs at the scene to determine how much risk we will take? How is it possible to stand outside of a jewelry store and determine the value of the jewelry in it? The Risk/Benefit Analysis is rooted in a good place but without someone tending the garden, it may be getting lost among the many weeds. It has been said by many a seasoned fire officer that your fireground size up begins on the outside and is confirmed on the inside.

Many articles are written and classes taught regarding the risk analysis. Most scholars seem to look at it from a "victims" perspective. Statements are used like, "They were dead already." "Who could survive that?" "No toys in the front yard or cars in the driveway, so nobody is home." Most of these sound more like an excuse or justification to not act focusing more on what not to do, as opposed to what to do. I have never found success in thinking or acting this way. I have no experience as a victim so I choose another way.

I look at the fireground from a capability perspective. I look at it from an awareness perspective. I remember clearly the path that led me to the fire service and the pride I felt when I raised my right hand and swore an oath to protect others. This is not an apology or a justification of why I operate the way I do, train the way I do or believe the way I believe. It is a candid open discussion about the realities of the front yard. That place where all your senses are attacked, the fog of war sets in and sometimes the very first 'punch in the nose' you get as a first arriving Company Officer. You see it is not about "cowboys versus cowards". It is about doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason. To be concise I will only be speaking on or making reference to single family dwelling fires. I appreciate your time.

Information is all around us in the fire service. We have studies, standard operating procedures, LODD reports, Near Miss reports, campaigns and passionate arguments designed around the way we should or should not be operating at dwelling fires. Some of the information is new, some is not and some is just packaged differently to help the end user relate it to the current playing field. With internet access, search engines, social media and blog posts there is a wealth of information instantly available. But, what filters are in place to ensure that the information is accurate? Are we seeking information that only supports

## Beyond the Door, Risk Analysis

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what we already believe and leaving behind anything that may challenge our current beliefs? If this is the case, you will come up short someday and you will fail. The dialogue that is occurring today on various social media sites is amazing, fast paced, passionate and dripping with knowledge. The downside is that a great many are not on social media for various reasons, work schedules, family, lifestyle, technological capabilities or simply fishing. I commend those who are brave enough to put their beliefs online or on paper and share them. I commend those who read those beliefs and then subsequently respond online, to editorials, etc. I also know there is a great many who simply read, watch, observe and wait. They are trying to make sense of all that is happening right now in the fire service.

The question is always raised about the best way to incorporate information into your operations. How do you take the most recent UL, NIST or any other agencies studies and engrain them into your firefighters and have their actions reflect it? First you have to read it. Read it all. That is right. I have heard so many times that we do not have the time to read. We will always go for the shortcuts. We constantly ask for the "bullet points". I understand that if you don't like to read it can suck. If you don't read it how can you then begin to make intelligent comments? If you don't engage in meaningful discussions with the members of the testing agencies how do you know what they are striving for? I personally have heard so many things from various sources tell me what "so and so" from 'insert agency name here' said only to actually talk with that person and find out otherwise. I have taken the time to ask the questions after the presentations by members of the various testing agencies and fire departments, sent emails, responded to posts to seek clarification. I have found them to be open and willing to dialogue. Do not sell them or yourself short by not engaging. On today's fireground; ***if you and your crews do not readily identify a ventilation controlled (limited) fire and take the appropriate actions you have failed before ever beginning.***

I fully understand that every fire department can be different with ranging capabilities. I do not believe in a one size fits all approach. I do believe in best practices that are known before the event. I believe every fire department should make it known to their employees and their customers what their beliefs are. Not the core values, mission statement or motto, their belief system. Does your department believe that residential dwellings are occupied or not? Start there and do not move on until you decide. For those who need the qualitative and quantitative data let us just say for arguments sake that 90% is the number. 90% of the time the house is not occupied, 10% of the time it is. Now your department may be more or may be less. Your fire department has to agree, from the top down and back up, what your belief is. Your approach before, at and after fire in single family homes should reflect that. Do you train for, deploy to and operate in a fashion that is more geared toward the 10% or the 90%? More simply put; do you believe single family dwellings are occupied until proven otherwise by the fire department?

If you are a 10% fire department then your first alarm should have an Offensive mindset before the bell ever hits. You EXPECT fire. You EXPECT rescues. Your education, training and

## Beyond the Door, Risk Analysis

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drills should reflect this. Your Standard Operating Procedures should reflect this. Your 'charge' set forth by the Chief and Operations Chief should reflect that. Your first alarm should know that you expect them to operate tactically in a fashion that reflects someone being in the building.

If you are a 90% fire department then your education, training and drills should reflect this. Your SOP's, and 'charge' from the Chiefs should reflect this. You should have a more defensive mindset before the bell ever hits. Your first alarm should know that you expect them to operate tactically in a fashion that does not reflect someone being in the building. It is your way. You EXPECT fire but DO NOT expect rescues. Your citizens should be informed of this fact and it usually ties directly into how much money comes from the public in regard to fire department staffing. Doing anything less provides for a dysfunctional mindset of your first alarm. Yet, the fire service seems to enjoy putting the *FUN* in *dysFUN*ctional.

I am blessed to work for a fire department who has taken these steps. We have agreed that in our response area residential dwellings are occupied until proven otherwise by the fire department. So our education, training and drills reflect this. Our written SOP's and Incident Action Plans reflect this. Our first alarm is built around finding someone in the dwelling, removing them, treating and transporting them and extinguishing the fire. Things were not always like this. I won't go into detail on how we got here, because the journey is worth another time. With this in place our discussions are based around this fact and we now have the framework laid for every discussion, tactical application and "what if" that can be thrown out there.

As we conduct our succession planning and training we spend time with our Battalion Chiefs, Acting Battalion Chiefs, Company Officers, Acting Company Officers and Firefighters going over the expectations, concepts and the operational links to expectations at single family dwelling fires. We have three modes, all written with tool and job assignments: Rescue, Offensive and Defensive.

One topic that always delivers some great discussion, passionate arguments (yes arguing is actually good and can produce some great results so do not be afraid of it) and many questions is how do I, a First Due Company Officer actually make a risk assessment at a fire? These questions caused me to really think about it as I simply wanted to explain that it is a "gut feeling" decision that I make based on building construction, fire behavior and areas of opportunity. I was asked, "How do I know if someone can survive "in there?". I was asked to explain how I actually begin to assign 'value' to things under the stress and pressure of the developing fireground. It was then that I realized that I don't. I don't start with wondering if somebody could survive the inside of an environment that is not yet known to me. I have no experience as a fire victim. I do have experience, education and training as a firefighter and as a fire officer. So this is how I really begin to develop the situation and communicate it to the incoming first alarm.

## Beyond the Door, Risk Analysis

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When I arrive to a hazardous situation, specifically a single family dwelling fire, I begin to observe and formulate thoughts. These thoughts revolve around my crew and our capabilities. For these are the only things that I had control over before I arrived here. You see we arrived ready. These thoughts are based on our own education, training, experience and capabilities. I observe the building and the conditions that are presenting. Is the location of the fire in a room with a door compartmentalized from the rest of the house? Is the location of the fire in a common area that is all connected and as soon as we open the front door the clock is running until the fire progresses? Is the fire below us? The 360 walk around helps to confirm this and it may not always be a full 360. It may be a look at the side I have not seen. In some conditions it also may not happen, acknowledging that I am increasing the risk of missing the fire below. I gauge the speed of the event against the men and women who have arrived on scene. Is it faster than we are and we are behind? Can we begin to control the event? I ask myself "can we be in there?" If we can- we go. We will be Offensive as this indicates a series of expected actions to all incoming units. We will deploy in a fashion that we have prepared mentally and physically for. We will execute the basic things that will support a good outcome. We will "run the play".

If I evaluate the conditions presenting against our crews capabilities and determine that we cannot be inside, then we do not go and we make the building behave. Our first arriving crews can cool it with exterior streams; tactically ventilate it to create an environment that we can be in. If I determine that the building is no longer structurally safe to be in we will operate in a defensive manner because the building has suffered damage to the structural components.

If I have determined that we cannot be in there and subsequently receive a report of a person trapped then I will look at the building again; this time even closer looking for areas of refuge and alternate entry points via ground ladders. I understand that I must risk my own well being to help and possibly save someone who is in need of my abilities. I understand the dire situation that is in front of me and I seek to provide the best solution without further adding to the chaos. I also understand that if my actions are not appropriate that I can seal the fate of anyone who is in that building awaiting the rescue. I have choices to make quickly. Those choices have consequences. Do I make the rescue, control the fire or can I do both?

If I choose to make the rescue without controlling the fire then the tactical actions and tasks must reflect that. My strategic mode will be "Rescue" mode and by announcing it on the tactical frequency I will kick off a list of actions that will support what is happening. Our SOP supports this and is designed for this very situation. Everyone knows that I am operating at the task level and my situational awareness is limited. My Battalion Chief knows that I may even establish command out of sheer habit from doing it time and again at offensive fires because we use a working command concept. Everyone knows that even though I uttered the

## Beyond the Door, Risk Analysis

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words regarding command that I am not operating at the strategic level, I am eyes deep in doing. We will provide no intake by closing and controlling the door behind us as we enter with our tools and water extinguisher (CAN) to ensure no additional air is added, knowing that a ventilation controlled (limited) fire just needs more air to become worse.

I know that I am operating in a high risk environment with many variables that are beyond my control operating against my success. I know that if a window or door fails that my plan might fail. My choices and actions may lead to a Mayday. I know that if I cause a Mayday then I have sealed the fate of the very person whom I am willing to risk my life to save. Nothing about our gear, our abilities, and our decisions got better. Nothing about the fire conditions or building layout got better. So am I really placing their life above mine?

I had better be right because the first alarm will not recover from the Mayday and focus on the trapped civilian. Sometimes this exact operational link gets left out when we discuss what to do when faced with trapped occupants. It is easy to say that we would "make the grab" but have we really discussed and played out the entire series of events that will occur? Remember nobody rises to the occasion; you only default to what is reasonable and customary. Make sure you discuss this at your fire department at length; causing a Mayday does not increase the survivability of a trapped occupant.

If I choose to control the fire then we will rapidly deploy an attack line thru the front door as we have done at many other single family dwelling fires. We will be operating in a "Rescue" mode which allows us to *not* provide the initial two out team. The difference between our Offensive and Rescue modes is simply the position and assignment of the first in Officer. By keeping it similar it eliminates chaos during chaotic times. The attack crew will control the fire and the Officer will be inside trying to coordinate the next arriving units search location. The mission of the fire attack crew is to locate, confine and extinguish the fire. They will not be worried about water damage. They will push hard and flow long. They will be single mission focused because only one tool can control the heat and they own that responsibility. They will know that someone is in the building and they will be drawn to the desire to find them. They will be distracted and may lose focus on the fire. We all must know this before hand and plan for it. It must not surprise me if this happens. They must get a line on the fire and control it.

Can I do both if I have the resources on scene? If I choose to control the fire as described above and I can locate and identify the bedrooms then I have the ability to begin rescue operations at the same time. The attack crew is controlling the heat and is moving in. They are on point and they are aware that they must play their position because everyone is relying on them. VES (Vent, Enter, *close the door*, Search) occurs in bedrooms and it is effective because the crews understand confinement. They understand that you must control the door to control the air track regardless of your entry being a window or a door.

## Beyond the Door, Risk Analysis

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If I choose both then I increase the likelihood of finding the victim in a known area of refuge, a room with a door. If I choose both then I lessen the likelihood of a Mayday getting activated due to rapid fire progression as a window fails, or a door is unintentionally forced providing the fire with enough air to progress itself. If I have the education from the books and the studies, the training from the blood, sweat and tears on the drill ground and express 'charge' laid forth by my Chief, and the experience of operating this way at dwelling fires then I can change the life of another human being. I can be safe, efficient and effective.

The key is to place value on things before the fire. Build it into your culture. Do you expect life in the single family dwelling fires? Does life have value? Do possessions have value, including the very building that the fire is occurring in? We also started to talk with our homeowners after the fires. Turns out they were not getting "bulldozed next week". Turns out that the insurance company recognized we kept it out of the structural elements by extinguishing and tactically ventilating. Turns out they hire a salvage company to remove sheetrock, seal and clean the house and then rebuild a lot more than often that we ever thought. So we decided to not give up on people, not write off people's possessions and property. We decided to focus on our capabilities and perform within our abilities. We describe what is inside our capabilities and what extends beyond them. We feel good about asking our citizens for tax money because we deliver the service that many fire departments only advertize.

It might be time for some honest discussions about what your fire department is actually doing at fires as opposed to what they advertize when the ballots hit the mailboxes. When people ask why we deploy in a rapid fashion and lay lines at a small kitchen fire, we are proud to say that it is our way. We are also developing the slide show of every Firefighter, Company Officer and Battalion Chief to use in the future as they make these first arriving decisions. We read the studies, LODD's, near misses and we took the time to weigh out the potential pros and cons of adjusting our approach. We considered other options and recognized that some of those options might provide a higher threshold of safety during offensive operations. We also recognized that by operating in that manner during offensive fires we would have to completely change our approach if someone was reported in the building. We recognized that the most dangerous approach we can take is one of chaos, stress and pressure that relies completely on verbal and radio communications to be safe, effective and almost impossible to be efficient.

When our firefighters take a line inside a building to support the rescue we absolutely could not have that be one of the few times they actually made entry. We saw value in the risk of going inside. We saw value in developing a very basic skill set that will be called into action when lives and property are on the line. We agreed that the value outweighed the risk. We focused more on education, training and drill that reflects the actual expectations at a fire than creating a risk mitigation process that may fall apart under stress. We wanted to harden the abilities of the first alarm to include live fire training in which they deploy into fires

## Beyond the Door, Risk Analysis

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operating in rescue and offensive modes. I personally have spoken to our first alarm after a fatal fire about how they felt at the time of dispatch. Unanimously they replied, "This is what we were ready for, this is what we expected." They looked for opportunities to act to make a difference. The end result was the trapped occupant perished, sadly. This was not viewed as a negative or a loss although it is sad to lose any of our citizens. There was not the 'what if' conversations or the 'only if I would have' statements. We had expectations before the incident that were executed with audacity at the incident.

I work hard to not attach emotions to my abilities. I acknowledge that under stress I do not rise to the occasion. I default to what I am trained and capable of doing. I look for opportunities for success and positive outcomes for those individuals who by luck, bad judgment or ill will of others have come to find themselves in a hazardous situation. I enjoy doing this and I put time, energy and desire into being good at my job (not to be confused with great....I think that I am good). I do not try to justify why I fail. I do not try to justify why I should not do my duty. I do not try to estimate how long someone could or could not survive in an environment that is not yet known to me. I do not start off with a failure mindset. I do not start off with a victim mindset.

There has been a great deal of energy, passion and money placed into reducing firefighter injuries and Line of Duty Deaths. The cause is a noble one. The goal is often stated as zero or nobody dies. Maybe it is time to change the name to "Everyone is Competent". If we all, including the public, already know what should be done when someone is trapped in a fire maybe we should focus on who should be doing it.

In general can we finally all agree that if you are weak, cannot swim, have a medical condition, a weak spirit, lack of education, lack of training, lack of ability then you should not put yourself in a hazardous situation and become a victim. You should also not choose a profession (paid or volunteer) in which you find yourself being summoned to the scene of an emergency. I would not expect a plumber, dentist, lawyer, school teacher, lawn maintenance technician, massage therapist, life coach or spiritual advisor to engage and help solve a life and death problem. I would expect them to call 911. The reason I mention all of the above professions is because there are example of these individuals showing up and out of sheer honor, love for others and compassion they have in fact done things they were not expected to do, not trained to do, not educated to do. But in fact they did them and saved lives.

Do we have a duty to die? No. Do we have a duty to be ready? I believe so. Remember this job can get real, real quick!!

**Scott Corrigan** is an Engine Company Officer in Pierce County Washington. He has 15 years experience in the fire service. He gives credit to all those who have taught him either directly or indirectly. He gives praise to all the committed instructors who give selflessly so that others may continue to hone their skills.