

# THE EFFECTIVE POSTFIRE CRITIQUE

BY FRANK C. MONTAGNA

Firefighters, as all humans, make mistakes. When firefighters make a mistake on the job, however, it can be life-threatening to themselves, to their coworkers, and to the public they serve. Nonetheless, firefighters will continue to make mistakes and on occasion will repeat a mistake.

At any given fire, you can expect to make a mistake—sometimes several mistakes. They might include stretching the wrong size line, stretching to the wrong place, venting the wrong window, improperly placing a ladder, not calling for enough help soon enough, not completing a search, and a whole host of others. Their results may or may not be deadly.

Our goal should be to learn from each mistake and to try not to repeat it. We should also teach others not to make the same mistake we made. To do this, we have to admit our mistake publicly by telling others about it. This is not always easy to do.

If we do not perform our assigned task or perform it incorrectly, we might be able to hide that information and retain the esteem of our peers. If we were lucky enough not to have had devastating results occur because of our mistake, no one need know about the error or omission. So why tell others? So they can learn from the mistake and, in learning, not repeat it at a future fire.

## POSTFIRE CRITIQUE

One mechanism for turning a mistake into a lesson is the postfire critique. Much has been written about this important training tool, which may seem intimidating to some. It need not be. Some think it takes too much preparation, and they don't have the time. Nothing could be further from the truth.

At the fire scene or back in quarters, an officer can conduct an informal postfire critique with little preparation. Of course, I am assuming that the officer has a good knowledge of fire behavior and his department's firefighting tactics.

He can start the drill by asking the most inexperienced member what he did and saw at the fire and what he thought of his own actions. This information will help a new firefighter to correct his error and clear up any confusion he may have. If the inexperienced firefighter can pick up his own mistake and suggest an appropriate correction, it is not likely that he will make the same mistake again. If he can't correct the error or doesn't even see it, opening the discussion up to the other firefighters will allow them to correct their peer. This, too, will be a strong learning experience and will help

keep the rest of the team from making the same mistake.

The officer should go down the line, giving each firefighter—including the most experienced—a chance to tell what he saw and did and point out his errors with possible corrections. The discussion can be lively, but it must not be hostile. The officer must exercise control, smoothing ruffled feathers and keeping the discussion on track by correcting actions without attacking individuals.

The officer's view of the fire and an explanation of his actions—including mistakes and appropriate solutions—should be included in this "rap session." It is important that the officer include himself in the exercise. Once the firefighters know the officer will admit his mistakes, they more readily will admit theirs in future critiques. Listening to the officer's perspective of the fire, hearing his concerns, and following his thought patterns give each firefighter a better understanding of what is expected at a fire. It also helps firefighters prepare for promotion by exposing them to the officer's thought processes and concerns.

## A HYPOTHETICAL POSTFIRE CRITIQUE

The truck lieutenant is conducting an informal critique of a private-dwelling fire that did not go as well as it might have. He starts by asking Tom, his junior man, what he saw and did.

**Tom:** "I followed the officer to the front door. Then we forced the door, and I crawled into the building behind the officer. The door was easier to force than I had expected. I found the fire, and the officer

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told me to hold the fire in the room with my extinguisher. I didn't have it with me. I left it on the truck. I won't do that again. Then we began searching the rest of the first floor until the fire started to roll out the living room doorway and over our heads. We didn't get to search the entire floor. We had to back out.

"When the engine crew entered with the line, we followed them back into the building, searching behind them as they advanced on the fire. We found an elderly woman in the bathroom, pulled her out, and

started CPR. The ambulance crew relieved us. I don't know if she will make it. We would have gotten her sooner if I hadn't forgotten to bring the extinguisher in with me."

**Officer** (might interject here): "Always remember, we didn't start the fire and a victim might have died before we arrived on the scene. All we can do is try our best to reach a victim in time. This won't always be possible. Sure, you made a mistake; but you did a bunch of things right, too. You easily forced the door. You stayed right with me during the search. This was your first real

fire, and you remained calm, even when the fire was extending from the room. Leaving the extinguisher behind was a mistake, and you will make other mistakes. The important thing is that you not repeat the mistake again. As your officer, I should have noticed that you didn't have the can and told you to get it. By the way, I called the hospital. The ambulance crew revived the woman. She might make it."

When conducting these training sessions, the officer should incorporate what the firefighters did right and let everyone know about it. This is especially important if the firefighter made a mistake that had an adverse impact on the operation. Remember: The point is to correct and prevent mistakes, not to punish or embarrass those responsible for them.

The next firefighter to speak was Bill, who was assigned to vent from the exterior.

**Bill**: "I walked around the building and looked for trapped occupants. I saw none. I then located the fire room by the discoloration and crazing of the window glass. I didn't vent because the engine had not gotten the line in place yet. I heard you force entry into the building and still waited for the engine. I saw the engine stretch the line to the building and waited until I saw that the line was charged. Then I gave them a few seconds to get the line into position inside the house before I vented the window. After the fire room was vented, I vented the rest of the windows on the ground floor. Heavy smoke poured out of all the vented windows."

This was the first time Tom (the inexperienced firefighter) heard an account of what the outside vent firefighter does.

**Tom**: "Why wait for the engine? "Why not vent right away?"

**Officer**: "It is easier and safer for the engine crew to push into a fire that is vented in front of them. Applying water on a fire in an unvented room, especially if using a fog stream, creates a lot of steam that will have no way of escape and will burn the advancing engine company firefighters." He might add: "Venting a room too soon can accelerate the fire's development and even cause flashover as well as pull the fire toward the open window." (With emphasis) "Waiting to vent until the engine gets into position with a charged line avoids these problems."

Tom can relate to this explanation because he was at the fire. He felt the conditions change as the building was vented. Hearing what the outside vent firefighter did and why he did it will prepare him for assignment to the outside vent position.

It is crucial that a firefighter know why

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he is performing a specific action at a fire. If he does not, he can't be expected to make the right decision when faced with a choice. He must know why he is venting, what to vent, and what will happen when he vents and if he doesn't vent. Without this knowledge and understanding, all he can do is follow orders. Just following orders is not adequate in the rapidly changing environment of a fire.

The officer assigned Joe and John, experienced firefighters, to enter the second floor of the home from ground ladders to search and vent above the fire. Joe was the apparatus operator, and John operated remote from the officer in a hazardous position.

**Joe:** "I couldn't use the aerial ladder because of the way the house was set back from the road and because the trees were blocking me out. Instead, we went around the back of the building with a ground ladder."

**John:** "We grabbed a 20-foot extension ladder and put it alongside the window to the second-floor rear bedroom. Joe climbed the ladder, vented the window, and cleared it of the shade and curtains. He broke the sash to allow himself easy entry. After letting the smoke vent for a few seconds, he then stepped off the ladder and onto the windowsill. When he entered the room, I repositioned the ladder level with and against the sill so he could easily get back onto the ladder."

**Tom:** "Why did the ladder need repositioning?"

**Joe:** "It is easy to vent the window if the ladder is positioned alongside the window. I positioned the ladder so the wind was at my back, blowing the smoke away from me and allowing me to operate in clean air. If the ladder was at the sill when I broke the glass, the glass would have fallen down on me. It is easy for a firefighter to step from the ladder and enter the window from a position alongside the window. It is not so easy to get a civilian to step out of the window and onto the ladder if it is alongside the window or for you to step on that ladder if you are carrying a victim; it is dangerous. It is much easier to talk a victim onto a ladder positioned at the sill. It is also easier to carry a victim out the window or to pass him to another firefighter if the ladder is at the sill."

**Officer:** "When you place the ladder at the sill, don't let the ladder beams stick up into the window. Let the tip of the beams rest on the sill. The more the ladder projects into the window, the less room you will have to get in and out of the window."

**Joe** (explaining what he did once inside the window): "There was a lot of smoke but not too much heat coming from the window. I stepped onto the windowsill and from there into the room. Once inside, I crouched down and went to the bedroom door and closed it. This shielded me from the heat and smoke and gave me some time to search the room. I vented the room's other window; and as the smoke cleared, I searched the room. I made sure to check under the beds, in the closet, and under the curtains, which I had dropped onto the floor when I vented the window. My search completed, I felt the door. It wasn't too hot, so I reopened it and started to the window to make my exit. Suddenly, the smoke became hot and flames started to vent out the upper portion of the window. To get out, I had to stay low in the window. By the way, that is another reason to reposition the ladder at the sill. I was able to slither over the sill and onto the ladder. That ladder position enabled me stay below the flames venting out the top of the window."

**Officer:** "Did you check the hallway before you closed the door?"

**Joe:** "No, I forgot." (Even an experienced firefighter like Joe might forget to check the hall.)

**Officer:** "If the hall were too hot to enter, probing with a tool might lead to the discovery of a victim who could be rescued. It is important to search an area while it is available. Fire conditions might soon make it impossible to search that area later. Once the flames got out of the burning room and went up the stairs, the hall became unsearchable until the fire was knocked down."

**Tom:** "Why did you open the door again before you left? It put you in danger."

**Joe:** "By opening the door, I vented the top floor of the building. This allows the engine crew and the officer to advance up the stairs to search."

**John:** "After Joe came back down the ladder, we repositioned it to another second-floor room. This time, I went up the ladder and searched the room. We take turns making the search. This gives each of us a chance to rest while the other searches. While I was searching, the engine knocked down the fire; and I was able to get out to search the hall and the second-floor bathroom. The bathroom door wouldn't open fully. I thought someone was behind it, so I reached around and felt behind the door. It turned out to be just a pile of laundry. I moved it and searched the bathroom, including the tub."

**Tom:** "Why search the tub?"

**John:** "People try to escape fire by going into the tub and filling it with water. This doesn't help them much, though. The smoke still gets them."

**Officer:** "Tom, it is important to always check behind any door you open or encounter in your search. Check even behind a door that seems to open all the way. A small child can be lying on the floor behind the door, and the door still will open completely. If you don't check as you pass through the doorway, the child won't be found until much later in the operation. Another thing to check for behind an open door is the presence of another doorway. Sometimes when a door opens, it blocks off the rest of an apartment or hides a bathroom entrance. You've got to check for it."

**Dave** (an experienced firefighter, explaining his function at the fire): "On a flat roof building, I might have tried to get to the roof to vent it, but not on a peaked-roof building like this one. Since the back of the building already was covered by Joe and John, I grabbed a 12-foot ground ladder and placed it to the front porch roof. From here, I had access to the two windows of the front bedroom. I climbed to the porch roof and vented

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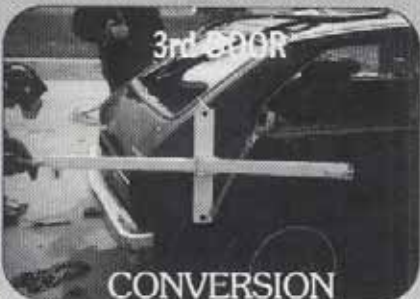
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the window farthest from my ladder first. Then, I vented the other window. I entered and searched the room in the same way the others searched from the rear. I did check the hallway."

**Tom:** "Why did you vent the farthest window first, and why didn't you try to vent the roof of this building? I thought vertical ventilation was good at a fire."

**Dave:** "I vented the farthest window first because if I vented the closest one and flames blew out of it, I wouldn't be able to reach the second one. The way I did it, I was sure to get both. I didn't go to the roof because for the most part it would have been a waste of time."

**Officer** (explaining why venting the building's peaked roof would not have much effect): "If the peaked roof is vented, all that gets vented is the attic. It is time-consuming to vent a peaked roof, and doing so will not have much effect on the fire or smoke at a first-floor fire. That time is better spent searching one of the bedrooms. If the fire were in the attic or even on the top floor, then we might consider venting the roof. If the roof is vented and the attic has a floor, it won't vent much on the lower floors. If it has no floor, we can push the gypsum board second-floor ceiling down and vent the second floor. In any case, I would rather the second truck cut the roof. We have our hands full searching."

**Officer** (presenting his perspective of the fire and what he did): "As we pulled up, I transmitted the signal for a working fire, including a brief size-up. This lets everyone responding know what to expect. Once we got into the building, I saw that we had one room fire and figured we needed help searching the building. I called for an additional truck. I also called for an additional engine, in case the first two engines ran into any problems. I should have told our junior man to bring the extinguisher, but I assumed he would bring it. I guess I am used to working with more experienced firefighters. If he had held the fire in the room with the car, I could have completed the primary search of the first floor. If the room had a door, we could have closed it, containing the fire inside until the engine was in position. In either case, having finished our first-floor search, we then could have gone up the stairs to search as the engine extinguished the fire. Instead, we had to back out and search behind the advancing engine."

"One thing no one has mentioned was that each firefighter radioed me when he

entered a room to search it and when he left and told me what the result of each search was. This is good for two reasons. It lets me know where the firefighters are and what has been searched. If they get in trouble or need help, I know where to direct my rescue efforts and what rooms still need to be searched. That is the reason everyone operating remote from me needs a radio. It is the only way I can keep track of everyone. I relay this information to the chief. He is in the position to assign additional firefighters to search, if necessary. By the time the second truck arrived on the scene of this fire, the fire was out; and we had finished our searches. The chief directed the firefighters to make a secondary search of the building."

**Tom** (puzzled): "Why? We already searched it."

**Officer:** "We make the primary search under hazardous conditions—some of the search was done before the fire was extinguished, and all of it was done under a heavy smoke condition. The secondary search is much more thorough and is made under conditions that are less demanding. Any victims we miss will be picked up by the secondary search. If the search is complicated by collapse or a very cluttered room or if there is a report of a missing occupant, the chief might require additional searches. He uses different firefighters to make each search. This gives each search a fresh perspective and decreases the chances of a firefighter's making the same mistake twice."

From here the officer can go on to any aspect of the fire he thinks needs work. Since the fire is fresh in his mind, he doesn't need a lesson plan. His preparation time is minimal. Everyone can benefit from this drill, and it can be done after every fire or emergency. It will improve your next operation by cutting down on repeated errors and training each member of the firefighting team in all the jobs of the truck company. The critique works for engine companies as well. Including an engine company in the truck drill will give each company a better understanding of the functions and needs of the other. Taking the time to hold a critique will result in a better trained and better coordinated firefighting team.

Don't use this training tool only at fires at which things went wrong. It is just as useful at fires at which your operation worked like clockwork. Less experienced firefighters still can learn from the more experienced ones. It also provides a chance for your firefighters to brag about a job well done. Let them. They earned it. ■