

DO THE RIGHT THING



Combine old-school values and critical life experiences, add years of runs, and you get a chief who gets it!

There is an old saying and a song, "*Walk a Mile in my Shoes*," which essentially means that it's helpful to do and understand what "*they*" are doing before you comment about what "*they*" are doing. I remember as a young firefighter looking strangely at some of the chiefs I worked under and wondering (sometimes aloud) why they did what they did. In 1982, I moved up to become a chief officer and my world changed. But I'm not sure I realized it then, as we do—or should—today. I read a lot and from all ranges within our business, from probie to old-timer, so I can be as educated, informed, and appreciative as possible—especially about those who have done this stuff before us. Bottom line is when you operate as a firefighter you have task-level responsibility. When you are a company officer at a fire, you have responsibility to and for your crew. But when you become a chief and have command, you own it. Every person, action, and behavior on that fireground suddenly becomes yours. If it's a good outcome, your crew gets the deserved credit and when it's a bad outcome, no one is going to point at the crew.

Ricky has an excellent reputation as a firefighter, instructor, officer, and currently as a chief officer, but as he will tell you, it's been one heck of a climb up that ladder. When I think of the many good people I know, Ricky immediately comes to mind as one who understands and gained that understanding while earning a few scars along the way. I'm not sure one can be a good chief officer without some scars. Ask me to show you mine, sometime. Ricky spends a lot of time making sure others understand not just how serious this business is at every level but how much it changes you when you own it, whether you want to or not. Accepting his responsibility as a chief has made him no less of a good firefighter, but has made the training and fireground a more survivable place for those needing our help, and especially those under his command.

Currently division chief of operations in Clearwater, Florida, with an associate degree from Columbia Southern University, he's helped that department move through some pretty traumatic times, changes, and positive growth. They are now an ISO 1, a CPSE/CFAI accredited fire department with all their command officers Blue Card certified—among *many more* accomplishments. It's become a very different fire department in the 10 years he has been a part of that team and that's a good thing for the public, and the members of that fire department. He also served as a career firefighter in Fairfax County, Virginia, he's a past chief of the Kentland VFD in Prince George's County, Maryland, and president of a side business he runs called Traditions Training, where he and his partners *pass it on* regularly—as he now does for us in his contribution to this book.

—B.G.

When Chief Billy Goldfeder asked me to write a chapter for this book, I thought it would be an easy assignment. Like a lot of people in the fire service, I have my opinions and feelings about this career, a career that so many of us passionately cherish each and every day. I have a number of topics that I would like to pass on to the next generation of firefighters and officers, and out of all of them, I finally chose the topic “Do the Right Thing.”

These four simple words are easy to say. It is the correct thing to say when we are accomplishing our daily routine and how we should handle each incident. It is simple to write these words on a dry-erase board for daily inspiration or to give our firefighters a consistent expectation. But trust me, it is one of the hardest things that we have to do each day when we report to work or arrive at our volunteer firehouse. This is because it requires us to work harder and put others above ourselves.

Every day we need to focus on our ability to perform and this requires we work at our craft every chance that we get. The call for our service can come at any time of the day or night and we will need to be able to go from zero to 100 at a moment's notice. There is no magical light switch that we can turn on when the incident requires us to perform at our highest level. We need to be prepared each unpredictable minute to perform at the highest level possible all the time, every time. With that being said, as a firefighter or officer, you need to own your performance. You can't blame your lack of performance or inability to perform on someone or something else other than yourself.

We have to be honest with ourselves when we look in the mirror and ask . . . did I really perform at my best and what can I do to be better the next time? After 30-plus years in the fire service, I still look in the mirror after calls and ask that question to myself—and guess what? I still need to be better and I am not afraid to admit my mistakes, change my habits, and focus on being better.



Ricky Riley

What scares me is the firefighter or officer who does not ask this question and believes they are doing everything right. Your and your department's focus should not be what is easiest or how can we get by doing the least amount of effort to achieve our goals. Rather the emphasis should be on the delivery of high quality service to our citizens. We have to change the mentality of how we treat our day-to-day operations and training and focus on the best possible fire service delivery. When you walk into the firehouse for your shift or respond to a call, you have to be prepared, follow best practices, engage in constant training, and follow safety policies. This is what a professional firefighter and fire department do, regardless if you are a career firefighter or a volunteer.

One of the things that drives me to *do the right thing* and to be a better incident commander and a better officer is an incident that occurred on January 12, 1992. I will say up front that I was not on the fire scene, but I was listening to the call from my firehouse in Kentland, as it was a fire in my old stomping grounds of Morningside, Maryland. Morningside is a place I hold close to my heart due to the fact that I started learning my firefighting and extrication skills there, from some of the best career shiftmen that the PGFD had to offer. I ran calls with firefighters there who I still call my friends to this

day. As a young volunteer officer, I had the good fortune to help train this cocky, young 16-year-old kid named Kenny Hedrick. Talk about a kid with no confidence problems! He always wanted to be the best, wanted to train, take fire classes, and develop his firefighting craft any chance he could get. He wanted to do the right thing each and every time he went out the door.

On this particular morning in January, the incident they were dispatched to demanded the best from everyone. There was a working house fire with confirmed children trapped. As the units went to work, an all-out effort was made to get a line in service and start the search for the trapped children. With the assistance of another firefighter, Kenny was able to make a push to the bedrooms under intense heat and zero visibility to rescue a young child. They brought the child out front to EMS personnel and, without delay, went back into the house to complete the search for the other child still trapped. The fire was still consuming the house and making the interior untenable on the first floor and in the basement. During the efforts to find the second child and knock down the fire, Kenny became lost and disoriented after falling into the basement.



Kenny Hedrick

Unfortunately, Kenny succumbed to his injuries after being unaccounted for on the fire scene. The report that followed the fire was an uncomfortable experience for everyone involved and the fire service in general. The fire department failed Kenny that night in 1992; it also failed his mother Cathy and his father Les. As emotional and tragic as this fire was, when we look at the findings of the after action reports, we find a series of mistakes that were made that night and that are *still being repeated today in 2015*.

- Lack of command and control
- Fireground strategy not defined
- Uncoordinated tactics
- Lack of safety officer
- Company continuity
- Ineffective communications
- No adherence to accountability procedures

We cannot keep doing this! The fire service must do better to *do the right thing* even when it is not popular or easy. This requires us to constantly *evaluate each and every call* regardless if it is a working incident or not. The calls outside of the working incident set the stage for how we are going to operate when we arrive with fire or smoke showing. Regardless if it is food on the stove or a snot-slinging basement job, a constant evaluation of every aspect of the call must be done, done honestly, and without respect to feelings or pride. If we do not honestly and openly identify how to be better, then we will fail to correct any of our actions, thus drifting us into setting ourselves up for failure in the future. Do not settle for what you have always done. We must challenge ourselves to look outside our department or company to ensure that we are keeping up with this rapidly changing fire service and following national best practices.

Adherence and enforcement of department operational policies and procedures is a crucial step in the process to *do the right thing* and not just the convenient or easy ones. This is where it gets hard for us and takes personal commitment to perform flawlessly on our fire scenes. This commitment comes with a lot of sweat and a lot of repetitions of our tasks. Today's fire service demands that each one of us be the best and most prepared firefighter or officer that we can be.

For the last couple of years, the Clearwater Fire and Rescue recruit classes have been given copies of Chief Billy Goldfeder's book *Pass it On*. The recruits are instructed to go to page 201 and read the story of Kenny Hedrick. His story

is a reminder that we have to always strive and work to be at our best 24/7 because our citizens, families, friends, mothers, and fathers are counting us to *Do the Right Thing Without Fail.*

