

HOW TO BEHAVE & WHY

Our work defines us, but it's how we treat our customers & each other that sets us apart.

BY NICK BRUNACINI

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Confinement and extinguishment. Plugging and diking. Show, throw, row, helo. Elevate, rotate and extend. Salvage and overhaul. CPR. Airway, breathing, circulation. Responding, supporting, attending, then leaving. Helping others. Preventing harm. Being nice. This is our work—our spiritual center and the common thread of DNA that unites all firefighters. It is the metaphor that defines us, and we are beloved for it. In our communities, we are as well-regarded as we are well-known. No matter the political or social turmoil, you never hear calls to defund the fire service. Even the President of the United States recognizes our influence, stopping short of designating firefighters as a third major political party.



Alan V. Brunacini spent the first three decades of his career obsessed with the safest, most effective approach to the structural firefighting aspect of our work. At the time, he commented that our customer was the fire, a force of nature that really doesn't give a shit that human beings exist. Fire is selfish in that it treats sentient life forms not as splendid blood-and-guts snowflakes but as fuel to be devoured and sprayed all over God's own acre.

After a profound transcendence, AVB spent the final 30 years of his life obsessing over the best way for Boss Smith to manage Firefighter Smith in delivering service to the customer, Mrs. Smith. His endless fascination with protecting our communities from various hazards nudged the fire service

into viewing Mrs. Smith not as an idea, but as a living, breathing human who deserves our best treatment.

AVB produced a pair of books that outlined how human firefighters and their bosses should deliver service to human customers. After his death in 2017, we kept discovering box after box packed with articles, handwritten notes and semesters-long leadership curricula that apply to being a boss and managing service delivery. All of this material got dusted off when Terry Garrison retired from his traveling fire chief gig in favor of tenure as a Senior B Shifter at the AVB Command Training Center. TG has organized these treasures into eight common organizational categories we will feature in a new program called Silverback Leadership.

Our work remains one of the few agreed-upon necessities of all time.


“I can think of no more stirring symbol of a man’s humanity to man than a fire engine.”

—Winston Niles Rumfoord in Kurt Vonnegut’s *“The Sirens Of Titan.”*



The first and most important category is *The Work*, which represents our nucleus and makes us who we are. Where much of the government exists to enforce (law enforcement, the IRS, the DMV, parking enforcement and, even more omnipresent, the building department), the fire service exists only to help make bad situations better. Unlike other government agencies, we leave the incident scene when our work is complete, allowing our customers to resume their lives.

Our most basic and authentic rules, regulations and employment practices exist to establish social order for performing our work and delivering service to the community. The most effective and easily practiced rules and standards are easy to understand and follow. For example, AVB’s rules for his department fit on one page. **(Click “Silverback Leadership,” right, to access the rules.)** They successfully established order and supported our response by creating a work environment that encouraged firefighters to treat the customer in the same positive manner we treated one another. Simply stated: Be nice.



Our mission is to Prevent Harm, Survive & Be Nice. The rules we use to manage, supervise and support one another provide a foundation for delivering exceptional customer service. This requires every member of the organization to be self-disciplined and to conduct themselves in a positive and productive manner. Treating one another with respect, patience and kindness inside the organization causes the same when delivering service to our customers. The following list outlines the standards of conduct that apply to each member of the department.

ALL MEMBERS SHALL:

- Follow policies, procedures and written directives.
- Use their training and capabilities to protect the public at all times, both on and off duty.
- Work competently in their positions to cause all department programs to operate effectively.
- Always conduct themselves to reflect credit on the Department.
- Supervisors will manage in an effective, considerate manner. Subordinates will follow instructions in a positive, cooperative manner.
- Always conduct themselves in a manner that creates good order inside the department.
- Keep themselves informed to do their jobs effectively.
- Be concerned and protective of each member's welfare.
- Operate safely and use good judgment.
- Keep themselves physically fit.
- Observe the work hours of their position.
- Obey the law.
- Be careful of Department equipment and property.

MEMBERS SHALL NOT:

- Engage in any activity that is detrimental to the Department.
- Engage in a conflict of interest to the Department or use their position with the Department for personal gain or influence.
- Fight.
- Abuse their sick leave.
- Steal.
- Use alcoholic beverages, debilitating drugs, or any substance which could impair their physical or mental capacities while on duty.
- Engage in any sexual activity while on duty.

Everyone is our customer. All we require is notification—a simple 911 call. We confirm the customer's location and need, then we respond. We don't ask for your Social Security number, run a credit check or demand payment. Many fire departments will respond if your family pet has a medical emergency. Others will help you install a car seat in your personal vehicle. Some fire stations have signs out front indicating they will take unwanted children. Our work is to prevent harm.

For emergency services to be effective, they must be delivered within minutes. Our deployment capability is defined by how quickly we can respond throughout the community, as well as the amount, level and variety of services we can provide to the people, places and situations requiring them. The ideal response time for responding to medical emergencies is between 4 and 6 minutes. No other service organization in the world can deliver a crew of highly trained EMS professionals to a patient fast enough to save a life.

Sometimes preventing harm takes place inside an IDLH hazard zone. Firefighters are drawn to this type of work (it is its own reward), which explains how the fire service began in the first place, with able-bodied volunteers rushing toward danger to keep the town from burning down. Hundreds of years later, this is still our work. Fighting a structure fire is probably the most thrilling and exhausting occupational endeavor there is, and it requires a certain level of fitness and physical capability. You can do it, or you can't.

Our deployment capability also includes responding to fires in a variety of structures. Current NFPA standards call for 17 firefighters within 10 minutes to conduct structural firefighting operations in a 2,000-square-foot, two-story house. These numbers increase in relationship to a structure's size and the increased life hazard.

Fire departments not only protect the people and property in their communities, they also respond to any emergency that threatens a community's essential infrastructure. These incident responses include hazmat, technical rescue and urban search and rescue events.

The Work can also be used as a cleaver to chop through any superfluous bullshit we use to distract ourselves or to develop a false sense of pride and confidence. Competence is developed and demonstrated in training and evaluated in real life. As a battalion chief, I found after-action reviews to be a much more effective and accepted management tool than annual employee evaluations. More importantly, every other member on the task, tactical and strategic level utilized a similar method when evaluating our members, equipment, evolutions, tactics and service delivery/incident operations. The AAR provides the most authentic validation because it is



rooted in our accepted practices. AARs also serve as a litmus test when applying our task-level SOPs and practices against the critical factors we routinely face, providing a template for making the most effective, efficient changes to our current operations. Refining things that work while abandoning ones that don't based on our actual work is another major reason the firefighting occupation is among the most fabulous.

Our work has accurately been described as vital, essential, heartbreaking, joyous, patience-testing and deeply satisfying. The ultimate benchmark for being a qualified firefighter is other firefighters. When asking who they want responding to their loved one's emergency, firefighters will typically cite the same set of names repeatedly. Place these individuals in your mind's eye because they establish the standard we should default to when evaluating performance.

Firefighting/emergency response will remain a beloved occupation because we respond quickly, professionally manage the emergency and we're nice. If you are not on board for that, you should not pursue a career in the fire service. Our goal is to be that firefighter we see in our mind's eye—competent and professional when performing our work in the dying light of hope. Doing the last best thing ramps up one's karma, protects our well-being and harmonizes the workforce—and it all starts with the work. **BS**



Nick Brunacini joined the Phoenix Fire Department (PFD) in 1980. He served seven years as a firefighter on different engine companies before promoting to captain and working nine years on a ladder company. Nick served as a battalion chief for five years before promoting to shift commander in 2001. He then spent the following five years developing and teaching the Blue Card curriculum at the PFD's Command Training Center. His last assignment with the PFD was South Shift commander. Nick retired from the PFD in 2009 after spending the first 26 years of his fire-department career as a B-shifter and the last three on C Shift. Nick is the author of "B-Shifter—A Firefighter's Memoir." He also co-wrote "Command Safety."