

The “18 Watchout situations” for your Career

By Larry L. Pierson Jr



Swannanoa FF Rick Calvert holding his watch at the retirement gathering

What do you want to become? What do other people need you to become? How will you be remembered? How much time do you have and what do you want the gathering to be like on your retirement day?

If you intend to have a successful career, there are some tips and advice that will work for anyone, in any department, during any decade.

If this article means something to you, save it and read again in 5 and 10 years.

1. Career not scouted & sized up

What is the spacing between the rungs on your career ladder and do you know how to climb it? Remember, you must step up one rung before you can lock in to the lower one. Without sacrificing your current position’s expectations, prepare your self for one position higher while keeping an eye on the top of the ladder.

The top of the ladder or middle rung is not for everyone. If you are happy with your rung and don’t want to climb higher, you will at least be assigned new tasks to perform at the current level. You may be thrust into the next level out of staffing changes or other attrition issues.

Seek out individuals in your department and other local resources to help guide the efforts. We are blessed with a multitude of certification programs and opportunities for higher education specific to the fire service. Contact your local community college or university for programs offered.

The “18 Watchout Situations” for wildfire have been adapted for these tips. Try to memorize this list as you should for the “18 watchouts” for wildland fire operations.

1. Career not scouted & sized up
2. Performing job tasks not seen in daylight
3. Expectations & path to meet them not identified
4. Unfamiliar with FD culture and local factors influencing culture
5. Uninformed on strategy, tactics & hazards
6. Instructions & assignments not clear
7. No communication link with your crew members & supervisors
8. Constructing your career without a safe anchor point
9. Researching a personnel issue down the ranks with fire below
10. Attempting a frontal assault on an issue.
11. Unburned bridges between you and a fire
12. Cannot see the main issue, and not in contact with anyone who can
13. In a command structure where rolling information can ignite fuel below
14. Environment is getting hotter & drier
15. Wind increases or changes direction
16. Getting frequent spot fires across the ranks
17. Social structure & issues make escape to safety zones difficult
18. Taking a nap



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Keep your training records and resume current. Actually sit down with a piece of paper and plan what you will need to climb the ladder, follow the plan and rewrite when needed.

2. Performing job tasks not seen in daylight

We have all been put into a position we weren't 100% ready for. Managers have the responsibility to build development programs and help people avoid these unproductive changeovers.

If you have been assigned a task and are unsure if you can complete it, do the following: Have the expectations defined, ask for tools or training needed and be confident but honest with your deficiencies. If you communicate these issues, a good supervisor will help and support your needs. Look for the "experts" and partake of their knowledge.

3. Expectations & path to meet them not identified

This is the process that will help No. 2 and other "Watchout Situations". Give and expect "SMART" objectives and review them on every assignment;

Specific – Objectives should specify what is to be achieved.

Measurable – You should be able to measure whether you are meeting the objectives or not.

Achievable - Are the objectives you set, achievable and attainable?

Realistic – Can you realistically achieve the objectives with the resources you have?

Time – When do tasks and the entire project need to be complete by?

4. Unfamiliar with FD culture and local factors influencing culture

Culture - the attitudes and behavior that are characteristic of a particular social group or organization

"Fitting in", "standing out", adapting or "bucking the system". One quick way to loose your career path is to be oblivious to the day to day changes in ideas, beliefs or political undertones.

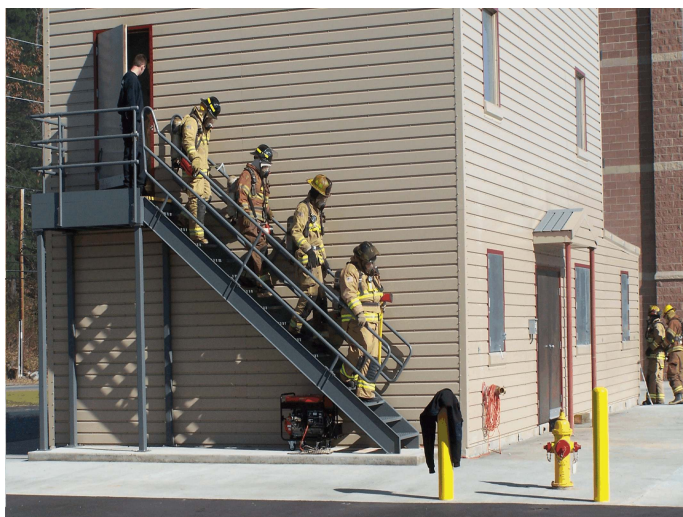
Given two scenarios with exact circumstances, different comments will be made depending on a member's perspective. When the member disagrees with a major change or promotion, they say "It's politics". Yet another individual agrees with the change and says "that was a great idea". Politics are used for good; How to get the needed turnout gear or change in a safety policy for the better.

If you see an area your department needs to change, remind yourself you may have to change the culture not just a written policy or procedure. Some of these culture issues may take one meeting or a decade to change.

Has anyone heard this sentence (*fill in the blanks*) "When I was a member of _____ department, we used to _____." We are lucky and she be open to gain experience of members from other areas. If you are bringing in information, carefully read how you can influence the matter. If someone is bringing the information to you, don't shut them out. Listen and if the issue is not valid or will not fit into the culture, explain why or give advice for how to make a good idea happen.

5. Uninformed on strategy, tactics & hazards

New response system for apparatus, FDC location at the new facility in town or how to use that new piece of equipment we just purchased. You must stay in tune with operational plans and function of emergency equipment. Training, training, training!



Practicing new search procedures at the SVFD training Facility

On the scene of a fire or rescue situation you must understand "The plan". Some tasks will already be set in place by policy & procedure but others may require creativity and ingenuity based on sound knowledge.

"The scene dictates the action". Beyond standard practice, each scene will challenge us with unique characteristics. The only way to successfully adapt is a systematic and all encompassing system of communication. If you don't know the plan, people will notice. If you don't give the plan, people will become frustrated. In either case people's lives may be on the line.

6. Instructions & assignments not clear

It's like playing lawn darts at night not productive and quite dangerous. The old saying "There is no such thing as a dumb question," is not 100% true but the intent of the saying's principal is. Ask questions and receive answers. Give answers before questions are asked. Operationally that is referred to as a properly filled out ICS-204 form.

Continually yelling, using expletives or "barking" out orders in a dictatorial manner does not make the instructions clearer. Poor approaches to communication issues on the fireground or during a training session may result in serious safety issues. If other members are focusing on how bad your approach was, then they are not focusing on the task at hand. Be direct and to the point in a courteous manner.

7. No communication link with your crew members & supervisors

Consider the following:

"93 percent of communication effectiveness is determined by nonverbal cues."⁽¹⁾

"Performance was determined 7% by the words used, 38% by voice quality, and 55 % by the nonverbal communication"⁽¹⁾

Given our advancements with radios, cell phones and other technology, should our communication effectiveness be rated by the device's capability or in combination with the person using it?

Every member of your department should have a radio. My first handheld had 4 controls; Volume, squelch, transmit and a toggle switch for F1 & F2. Now my radio has 22 visible controls and a few hundred underlying functions. Do we all know how to use these devices?

In a non-emergency setting, make sure you have a way to communicate with your supervisors and vice versa. A cell phone call, one-on-one and other meetings keep the flow of information moving.

⁽¹⁾ "Listen with your eyes" _Heathfield, [About.com](http://humanresources.about.com/od/interpersonalcommunication/a/nonverbal_com.htm). 14 February 2007 <http://humanresources.about.com/od/interpersonalcommunication/a/nonverbal_com.htm>.

8. Constructing your career without a safe anchor point

Yes, your career will take paths that were not on the little piece of paper where you drew a nice algorithm outlining your ladder climbing adventure. Sometimes you have to regroup.

Have a plan B and always know where you need to step back to in order to move forward again. If

you take a left turn and find a dead end road, go back to the intersection and find the next route. Keep driving down the same dead end road and that is where you will stay.

9. Researching a personnel issue down the ranks with fire below

A "hot" issue arises and you are assigned to a fact finding mission. As you ask questions to members you may inadvertently be releasing information that does not need to spread until facts are evaluated. Choose your words and actions wisely.

I cannot think of a member that likes to walk through the station door and hear how much trouble they are in from everyone they meet. Half-fact givers and rumor spreaders may end up in more trouble than the person who originally had a problem.

Be professional, document and leave personal opinion at home. We will all come to conclusions once facts are gathered but they must be based on real data.

10. Attempting a frontal assault on an issue.

The time has come. Confrontation is at hand and none of us like to do it. Whether you are bringing forth a complaint about your supervisor or having the "closed door meeting" with your crew, be ready. Anticipate responses, have facts and only allow truth.

Be ready for the consequences of an ill prepared or unsuccessful attempt.

A couple of phrases come to mind when evaluating whether to make a frontal assault:

"Choose your battles wisely"

"That is not a hill I'm ready to die on"

11. Unburned bridges between you and a fire

Unburned bridges are the way you get to point B,value them. It may be a long way down river to find the next bridge to cross. While we may have to dismiss, fire, deny an application or disagree with someone, the way you handle the situation can either burn the bridge or leave it for future travel.

Even with your best efforts, you will experience someone that decides to pore gasoline and strike a match when they get to the other side of the bridge. He or she will either keep walking or stand on the other bank making sure you see their smirks and other unusual facial expressions.

Paying attention to these "watchout situations" will keep more members from burning bridges between you or the department.

12. Cannot see the main issue, and not in contact with anyone who can

Ostrich with it's head in the sand or the captain of a vessel without his compass. If an issue is not brought to my office, I can't see too much from behind my desk. I have been reminded a couple of times from close friends that I need to get out of the office and spend time with the troops. Focus on "people work" more than paperwork.

13. In a command structure where rolling information can ignite fuel below

Confidentiality is essential and in some cases legally mandated. While I tend to preach many sermons about the flow of information, there are times when certain information needs to be limited. Some members really do not want to hear the "That is above my pay grade" issues.

What if you were denied a promotion but heard about the denial from a member of another department? As a supervisor, if you ever let that happen you may as well imagine a firefighter holding a can of gasoline, a match and pointing towards the bridge. Again, these are difficult discussions with members but they must take place.

14. Environment is getting hotter & drier

Keep checking the pulse of your department. If an issue is brewing, try to solve it as quickly as possible. By "drier", I mean the humor is gone, the fun has disappeared and life at the station has become dull. Either implement some fun or adventurous ideas into training or have a function that is just for fun..... no FD business.

I am reminded of times during my own career. If you are going through a tough time in career or life, it is hard to hide the body language. You show signs of stress and remain tucked in a corner. Other members may come by and ask how you are doing but eventually you are just creating stress on their environment as well. When you "wake up" one day and decide to get back what you had, all it takes is a smile.

People avoid those who frown and navigate towards those who are happy. Happy people give and receive more information.



FF Jason McIntosh - "Does this body language appear approachable?"

15. Wind increases or changes direction

By wind, I mean those who speaketh way too much. These are the rumor spreaders, gossipers or the one who "has all the information about anything you could ever want to know" about what is going on in the department.

Spreading inaccurate information on a frequent basis will trade in your 35' career ladder for a milk crate. For this type person, they will still swear to know "anything about everything" but from 1 foot off the ground.

16. Getting frequent spot fires across the ranks

You solve one problem and here comes another, and another, and another. If you find yourself continually swatting out spot fires, find the main fire and put it out. If you are the one creating the spot fires, eventually someone will figure out which direction the "wind" is coming from.

17. Social structure & issues make escape to safety zones difficult

We are a family. We say it many times and are proud to tell other people just how much of a family we are. That is what makes it so frustrating when friendships go awry within the department.

While growing up (*If I actually did*), I had been known to have a fight with my brother or sister. My mother recalls a bit of sassy behavior but she had ways to deal with me. Being a family isn't about being perfect, it's about taking care of one another and being there when someone in the family needs help. It's about growing up and growing together.

The fire service is filled with passion and becomes easily addictive for many. Pursue your career but don't leave your blood family in staging. They will be there with you and for the many years after your FD retirement.

Difficulties arise when bridging the gap between the responsibilities of friendship and work. If you are not focusing on both, you are really missing out on what the "Sister" and "Brotherhood" are all about. If poor social settings are negatively effecting a reasonable career or quality of life, change the setting.

18. Taking a nap

Literally speaking, go ahead and gain the reputation as the one who falls asleep in training classes and meetings. Be the one who when someone asks “Where is mr. _____” and another member chuckles “Have you checked the recliner in the dayroom”. Of course there are days when a hard worker deserves some rest but a poor consistent pattern, especially compared to what you accomplish will lead to a negative impact on your future.

Summary

You have a lot of control over your future. Don't spend your career blaming everyone else and remain humble enough to self-evaluate. On a wildfire, one watchout situation may or may not be enough to get you killed or injured. In your career, one watchout situation may or may not be enough to get your fired/dismissed or miss out on a promotion. Start adding them up and in either case your looking at disaster.

You have a duty for the future of the fire service to become the one you look up to now or something better.



Battalion Chief Doug Gregory, FF Jeremy Ramsey speaking with Braeden Slater. “The future of the fire service is watching”



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