

# Fire Service Networking & Building Relationships

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Have you ever heard the saying, "it's who you know?" Well that saying is alive and well in the fire service. I don't mean that in a negative way, as you may imagine.

Unfortunately when some people hear that saying, they immediately think of nepotism. Nepotism, which does still exist across the country, is not as prevalent as it used to be. Now, don't get me wrong. In some ways, I think nepotism (if done properly) is not a bad thing. Why? Because if you have done your homework and have gotten to know someone over the years (such as the son or daughter of a firefighter or fire chief), you know what you're getting.

The problem exists when someone gets hired strictly because of who they are and everyone (except the person they are related to) knows this individual is useless or going to be a liability not an asset. While nepotism has produced some excellent candidates, it has also produced some not-so-excellent candidates.

Personally, the majority of relatives that were hired into the fire service through what could be perceived as nepotism, that I have encountered, have made excellent (or above average firefighters). Why? It could be a number of factors, including the fact that they knew what they were getting into and they also grew up around the fire department so they in some ways, had a leg up because they knew how to act or react in various situations. On the flip side, I do know some relatives of firefighters that were hired that should have probably not been hired (in my opinion). That's the great thing about opinions - we all have them.

## **Building Relationships**

Let's get back to networking, or better yet - building relationships (if done properly). Networking to me is making contacts with people who can assist me in some capacity. Just remember that it is a two-way street. You have to also be willing to help them out in some capacity at some point, or at least show your appreciation for all of their time and effort they provide to you.

Networking means making contacts at all ranks and in many different departments. You never know when someone will be able to help you out in some form or fashion. I suggest many different departments because you don't want to put all of your eggs into one basket. You want to leave yourself options and choices. I suggest making contacts with folks of all ranks because you will probably learn something different from each of them, based on their knowledge and interpretation of things.

How do I start out networking and building up a contact base? Here are some suggestions:

1. By visiting fire stations to ask them about becoming a firefighter. Odds are that you will hit it off with various firefighters (obviously not all), and may even develop a rapport that you can turn into a long-term relationship. Even if you never get hired by that department, you will still have a contact that can maybe lead to a friendship, or be someone you can always turn to for advice and suggestions, even after you get hired. I still make an effort today to keep in contact with various ranks of firefighters that assisted me in getting hired as a firefighter, almost 10 years ago. You never know when you might need their assistance in the future.
2. By letting your friends, family members, and co-workers know you want to become a firefighter. Odds are, almost everyone knows at least one firefighter they would be happy to put you in contact with. Take advantage of the opportunity to get to meet firefighters in various ranks on various departments. Every firefighter knows another firefighter in another rank or department that may be of assistance, especially if you demonstrate yourself to be a quality candidate.
3. By taking fire technology classes at a junior college or attending fire-related seminars. Chances are that the instructor will be a fire service professional and that there will be firefighters in the class that work in different departments. Instructors teaching fire technology classes are usually highly motivated and respected firefighters within their own department if not the fire service in general. They can provide a wealth of information to assist you in becoming a firefighter.
4. Don't forget to keep in touch with your contacts every now and then, even if it is to just say hi and keep them posted on your progress. Also, don't hesitate to thank them for their time and to keep them on your holiday greeting card list. Keep your name out there and fresh in people's minds. As the Janet Jackson song goes, "what have you done for me lately?" Remember that when you are networking and building relationships
5. Some final thoughts to remember about those professionals you are networking with: keep in touch; don't overburden them or be a pest; don't ask them to do anything unethical, illegal, or immoral; and do not wear out your welcome!

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