

Firefighter Safety  
Mistakes & Best Practices

Dr. Richard B. Gasaway  
Chief Scientist  
Public Safety Laboratory  
St. Paul, Minnesota

[www.SAMatters.com](http://www.SAMatters.com)  
[www.RichGasaway.com](http://www.RichGasaway.com)  
612-548-4424

Copyright 2013. All Rights Reserved.

# Mistakes

## 1. Performing high-risk activities without proper staffing and equipment.

When firefighters died... It often happened in the first 12 minutes and there were less than eight members on the scene.

## 2. The person in-charge performing hands-on activities.

When firefighters died... The person who was supposed to be in charge was performing firefighting duties instead.

## 3. No one was in-charge.

When firefighters died... Oftentimes there was no one person in-charge coordinating all of the activities.

## 4. Failing to conduct a 360-degree size-up.

When firefighters died... The first-arriving crew often failed to completely walk around the structure and they missed seeing critical clues.

## 5. Failing to know when to be defensive.

When firefighters died... Firefighters were often engaged in offensive (interior fire attack) when the strategy should have been defensive (exterior fire attack).

## 6. Trying to fight a large fire without enough water.

When firefighters died... They often did not have an adequate supply of water or the size of their hose lines were too small to overwhelm the fire.

## 7. Missed communications or misunderstood communications.

When firefighters died... Often times their updates and maydays were not heard the first time communicated or their communications were misunderstood.

Copyright 2013. All Rights Reserved.

8. No Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) or Standard Operating Guidelines (SOGs).

When firefighters died... Many times the department did not have a common set of procedures to guide operations. They had no play book. They were flying by the seats of their pants.

9. Short cuts in training

When firefighters died... It was often attributed to inadequate training or the department officers had taken shortcuts when leading training sessions.

10. Failing to learn from near-misses and injury events (error creep).

When firefighters died... The catastrophe was linked to persistent mistakes the department had been making for a long period of time (and were getting away with it).

# Best Practices

1. Ensure you have the proper amount of help responding immediately to the call.

Implement an automatic aid program – ensuring you have 15-20 firefighters responding to structure fires (immediately), 24-hours-a-day.

2. The person in-charge should remain far enough back from the action to maintain a big-picture view of the incident.

Command from a vehicle or from a location remote enough to see the big picture scene.

3. Conduct a complete size-up to ensure an understanding of what is happening.

Walk all the way around the building and look for cues and clues that tell you what is happening.

4. Match the strategy and tactics based on the size of the enemy. Overwhelm the fire.

Big fires require large hose lines and lots of water. Don't fight big fires like you fight the small fires.

5. Train firefighters to conduct a risk-benefit assessment.

Not every fire is an offensive (interior attack) fire. Sometimes victims are not savable. Discuss and practice (in advance) what a "No Go!" situation is.

6. Have a clearly defined commander.

The person in-charge must have command presence and the ability to set the strategy, make decisions, and coordinate the fireground activities.

Copyright 2013. All Rights Reserved.

7. Develop and use common radio terminology and radio discipline.

Communications must be clear, concise, commonly understood, controlled... and practiced! Full communications loop!

8. Conduct your training based on Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and your Standard Operating Guidelines (SOGs).

Training is learning and practice based on a plan. Train with your mutual aid partners.

9. Conduct training that is realistic and repetitive.

Training should be as real as safely possible and repetitive to build brain and muscle memory.

10. Perform pre-incident and post-incident evaluations.

Correcting flaws before they turn into catastrophes. Even when things go well (no injuries), there are opportunities to learn from minor mistakes.

Copyright 2013. All Rights Reserved.