

Fire Engineering

[Close](#)

Tailboard Talk: Do Firefighters Talk Too Much or Not Enough?

By Dane Carley and Craig Nelson

Firefighters (and we mean that as a general term across the ranks) are hard-working, positive-thinking, and honest people. Our "can do" attitude that often helps us accomplish difficult tasks can get us into trouble, however. On occasion, often unintentionally, we may try to put a positive spin on something we say or do to help us complete a difficult task, impress our supervisors, or to appear more capable in front of the rest of the crew. What we do is tell most of the truth. It is not about lying, but more about putting a positive spin on a situation.

In many departments, company officers complete a certain number of objectives each year. The objectives may be achieving a specific number of training hours, inspections, or preplan drawings. The company officer may try explaining how busy the company has been during the year when one of the objectives is not met. It is true that the company has been busy, but was every minute of every day used for business? There's a good chance that there were days the company could have done one more inspection, but members chose to do something else. It is not a lie that the company was busy, but it is easy to forget that there were days when the company could have done one more thing. Now, it is true that the company often fills those times with training and training discussions, but these items are not measurable in an objective-based system. The company officer is not lying to his supervisor, but maybe he is not telling the whole truth, either. This is just one example of a communication barrier that seems harmless but may be happening more often than we think. Whether it is in the station, on the fireground, or during training, firefighters, as people, try to put our best foot forward with our supervisors and peers - it is a normal part of communication. However, we need to be aware that it can have a negative effect on the outcome of a situation.

[Our previous article](#) introduced situational awareness, the first of the eight reliability-oriented employee behaviors (ROEBs) developed by Jeff Ericksen and Lee Dyer of Cornell University (2004). This article looks at the second of these important employee behaviors, communication. For us in the fire service, this simply means that fire personnel who are good at providing diverse and constant communication have one of the eight behaviors that makes them good at their job. When others get the chance to work with these types of fire personnel, *good communication is more likely to become a cultural norm* (a normal firefighter behavior). Basically, encouraging differing views and constant communication helps

make us more reliable as emergency responders. A firefighter, captain, or chief with a constant, diverse communication behavior builds reliability into crew operations by providing and receiving more useful and timely information. This information can then be used to make more informed decisions both at emergency scenes and during daily operations. Fostering this environment reduces the possibility of communication barriers such as the following:

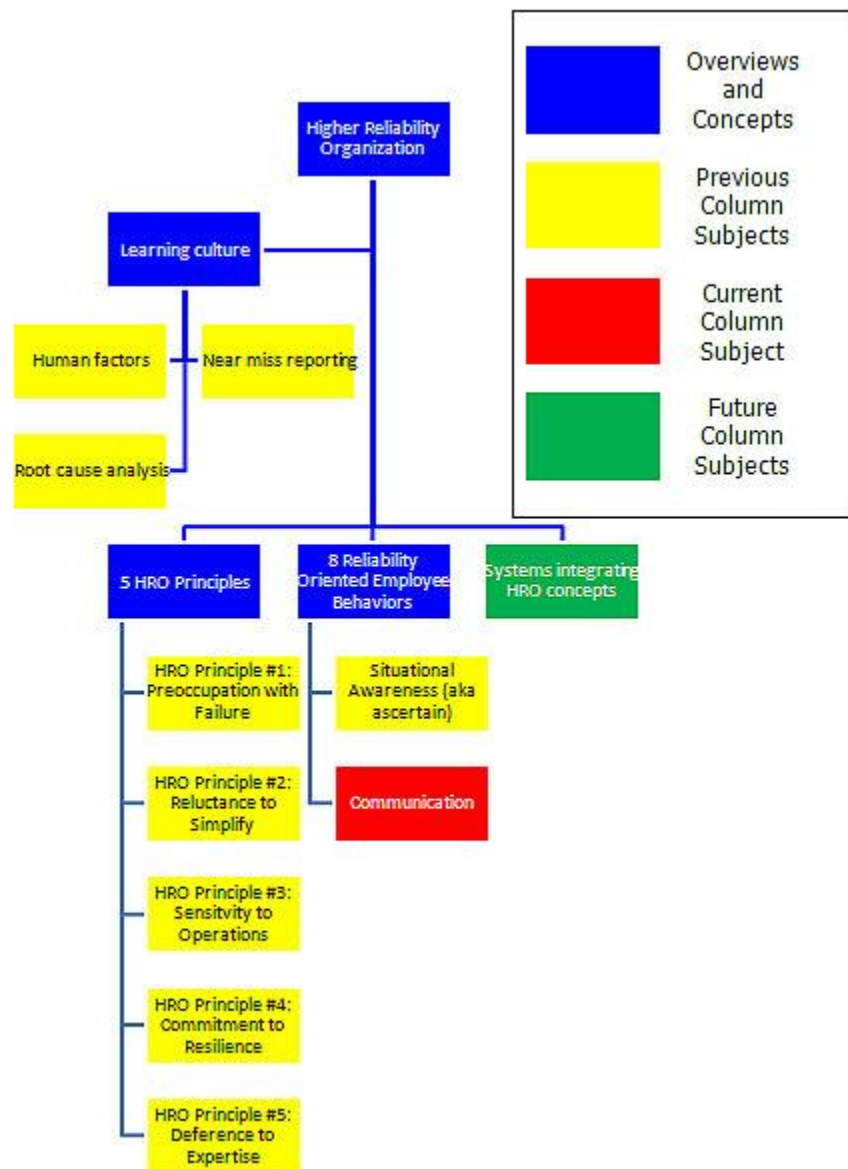
- The Abilene Paradox
- Putting a positive spin on information flowing up to a superior
- Not communicating often enough with important information

The Abilene Paradox is a communication problem of hesitancy. This is when your crew makes a choice that you disagree with but you do not say anything because you assume you are the only one who disagrees. You go along with it just as others in your crew may be doing because you do not want to "rock the boat." In the Abilene Paradox story, a family piles into a car with no air-conditioning on a hot summer day to drive 53 miles for dinner in Abilene, Texas. No one really wants to go, but no one says anything because they want to do what everyone else seems to want to do. When they arrive, no one is hungry and the food is terrible, so they go home. Had one person spoken up, others would have also said they had no interest in going (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2006). How many of you have experienced the Abilene Paradox?

How many times has your gut said something is not right with a situation but you follow because the rest of the crew is going, only to find out later that the others had the same uncertainty, hesitancy, or question? This was your experiencing the Abilene Paradox. Have you ever been on the engine or truck riding north when you thought you heard an address to the south during dispatch? Why did you not say something? Was it because the other crewmembers did not say something? Maybe the other crewmembers thought the same thing and waited for someone else to speak up because they were afraid they heard it wrong, too. We should see these as opportunities to ensure everyone is on the same page and not as potential arguments or a chance to second-guess others in the crew.

The second communication problem involves twisting information to make it more "palatable," like the example in the opening paragraph. This is simply described as tweaking information flowing up the chain of command to meet a real or perceived expectation of other crewmembers or officers. None of us likes to admit that we need more resources to finish our task, so we temper the information flowing up to our superiors to make it sound as if we can accomplish our tasks with what we have. Have you experienced a fire where you were close to making headway but you had your doubts? Did you report that things were "going fine--just give us a minute," or did you say you were not getting it and needed more crews to help? In such situations, how comfortable would you feel asking for a second alarm? Would you tell your incident commander that you are not making the expected headway? Would you call a Mayday immediately when entangled or lost? Be honest. Why not? Is it because it implies failure?

The third communication problem is reluctance to maintain constant communication. We often go out of our way to limit communication on the radio because it takes up "valuable air space." We are not advocating talking so much that a Mayday is walked on, but we do advocate relaying relevant and timely information in a concise manner throughout emergency incidents. In many of the tapes we have listened to involving Maydays, the Mayday itself could be heard audibly, but nothing was done because those listening did not hear it. The focus should be on improving the listening side of the equation instead of reducing the talking side, to provide a positive flow of information. Yet, how often do we train or provide resources on the listening side of the communication process?



In 1989, a crew of four landed a United Airlines DC10 in Sioux City, Iowa, without any hydraulic systems--no flight controls. Given the circumstances, they made an extremely successful landing after experiencing a catastrophic systems failure. How did they do it? Among other things, the crew did it with constant communication. The crewmembers communicated an average of 31 times a minute with a message each second at the peak of their communications (American Psychological Association, 2004). This is one example of successful, constant communication where communications increased to match the increases of stress and workload.

Possible solutions to communication barriers include the following:

1. Adjusting communication to the situation (emergency = more frequent and concise, nonemergency = less often and more descriptive)
2. Adding radio channels

3. Making it personal
4. Using an aide
5. Encouraging diverse, open, and honest communication

Adding more frequent (but concise) communication in an emergency may seem like a bad idea, but the more intense a situation is, the more often communication should be occurring. For us in the fire service, this is often the complete opposite of what we have learned or gotten used to, making it feel wrong. Why does the fire service put such a premium on air space, which causes firefighters to hesitate before communicating? It is, in part, because we *make* radio air space valuable by not providing enough channels for an incident. We often try to fit all fireground communication on one or two channels. Air space is like any other resource: The less of it there is, the more valuable it becomes, so adding fireground channels makes air space less valuable, which increases the ability to communicate (we will talk about adding an aide to help listen to them in a minute).

The United Airlines crew communicated relevant thoughts constantly in a time-compressed, intense, and entirely unfamiliar situation (a total systems failure is supposed to be impossible). For the fire service, this is not limited strictly to radio communication. It also includes communication among crewmembers, other crews, and command staff. Each of us has a different background of experience, training, and education, so we see different aspects of a situation. Combining this with constant communication can lead to more success.

Another communication solution to improve someone's reception (listening side) of communication is to make it personal. Instinctively, we know that addressing someone by name grabs his or her attention. When you grab someone's attention right away, the person is more likely to hear what you are saying. If we ever have to call a Mayday, we will definitely use someone's name (preferably the incident commander's, if you know it). We tend to do the opposite of this when we have bad news. We do not address an individual by name, making the statement less direct and easier to ignore. The statement is essentially thrown out as a general statement because it feels less confrontational. Many people have known they were providing life-or-death information but were afraid to address the person in charge directly. So if you know the information you have is critical to the outcome, address the person in charge respectfully by including the individual's name or title before providing the information.

As the fire service tries to do more with less, it becomes increasingly easy to miss communication. The next solution, using an aide, focuses on the hearing part that is often so easy to overlook. An aide helps alleviate workload and improves listening by providing another set of less-distracted ears. Providing sufficient channels for communication works in conjunction with an aide to develop an environment where firefighters' communications are heard and acted on. As additional channels increase the workload for incident commanders, an aide counteracts the increased workload. This improves the commander's ability to process the information, track the situation, and put the communication information to use. This is a link to a short YouTube video that illustrates this concept well: [Into the Fire with LAFD Command Teams](#).

A variation of this, already used by many departments, is assigning the company officer of the rapid intervention team (RIT) to shadow the incident commander. This essentially makes the RIT group supervisor an aide because the supervisor is monitoring the communications and assisting with tracking the information. For those who do not have the money or the staff to add an aide position, this can be a great way to get the extra help.

In contrast to these technical solutions, an organizational culture solution that appears in every higher-

reliability organization is the value placed on diverse opinions and open communication. Seeking out and listening to diverse opinions is the single most critical component of higher reliability communication. This type of communication is built on trust. It cannot be turned on and off because it takes time to build. The little things ruin the time it takes to build any trust, so it is impossible to treat a firefighter one way in training and expect the firefighter to behave differently on the fireground. It is little things like telling a new firefighter, "You have two ears, two eyes, and two hands but only one mouth. That means you should listen, watch, and work twice as much as you speak." The intent is great and, in the right context, is great advice; but unfortunately, it is often used to intimidate rather than to teach. These little things are what erode the trust necessary for diverse communications.

Case Study

The following case study is from www.firefighternearmiss.com. The near miss report, 11-0000074, is not edited. We were not involved in this incident and do not know the department involved so we make certain assumptions based on our fire service experience to relate the incident to the discussion above.

Event Description

While operating automatic aid on a working 2 alarm residential structure fire, my crew was making an interior attack in the basement of a two story house fire. There were several units advancing 1¾" handlines on the first floor Alpha/Delta corner. My crew of four personnel encountered heavy smoke and heat conditions while advancing a 1¾" line from the Charlie side back door to locate the seat of the fire. Once the fire was located and knocked down, several attempts to notify Incident Command of the conditions of the assignment were made but unsuccessful due to the heavy radio traffic. This is a significant near miss event because if a mayday had occurred, it most likely would not have been heard due to the heavy radio traffic from the scene.

Lessons Learned

On this particular incident there were fire fighters talking on the radio with no specific task given. It was also noticed that the Safety Officer was giving out command orders that should have only been assigned by Incident Command. The radio traffic should be coming from Company Officers in charge of each task given and reporting to Incident Command only. Those that do not have a specific task should remain off the air unless there is a danger or mayday.

Discussion Questions

Before we start the discussion questions, we would like to add thoughts about the incident above. This is a tough near miss to use because we do not know the specifics. However, we would like readers to look at it in the following context: A two-alarm fire indicates several companies. It sounds as if there are command positions beyond a single incident commander (e.g. safety officer, ops chief, group/division supervisors, etc.).

1. Given our discussion in this article, consider whether there was too much communication or too few channels for communicating. What is your crew's opinion, and why?
2. Listen to this [YouTube video of a Mayday call](#) (start at 12 minutes, 45 seconds to save time)
 - a. Was the Mayday audible? Was it stepped on?

b. Was the communication concise?

c. Was there enough communication? Was there enough quality for the amount of time used? Was the message received or just heard?

3. How does or could your department tweak your response to add a command aide without affecting operations significantly?

Possible Discussion Answers

1. We would make the argument that too many units attempted operating on a single channel. Although radio discipline is part of effective communication, even the most disciplined communications can overcome too little airspace for the number of units operating on a channel.

2. This Mayday was very audible. Listen to others. Can you find one where the Mayday is not audible or heard by units on scene? We have had trouble finding any (we know it happens though); yet we limit communication in the event that one may happen. How many times has limiting communication ultimately led to a Mayday?

3. Most, if not all, departments put some type of RIT in place. The RIT officer easily fulfills the role of an aide. This is one weakness of the on-deck system because there is no continuity with on-deck crews since they are constantly changing, which means the new on-deck crew needs to relearn what the previous crew learned.

Where We Are Going

Next month's column studies the third reliability-oriented employee behavior of initiation. Initiating is not about hazing the new firefighter but about recognizing a potential problem and acting to reduce its impact. We would appreciate any feedback, thoughts, or complaints you have. Please contact us at tailboardtalk@yahoo.com or call into our monthly Tailboard Talk Radio Show on Fire Engineering Blog Talk Radio.

References

American Psychological Association. (2004, February 6). *Making Air Travel Safer Through Crew Resource Management*. Retrieved December 13, 2011, from American Psychological Association: <http://www.apa.org/research/action/crew.aspx>

Ericksen, J., & Dyer, L. (2004, March 1). *Toward A Strategic Human Resource Management Model of High Reliability Organization Performance*. Retrieved February 18, 2010, from CAHRS Working Paper #04-02: Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cahrswp/9>

Hughes, R. L., Ginnett, R. C., & Curphy, G. J. (2006). *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* (5th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Irwin.



Craig Nelson (left) works for the Fargo (ND) [Fire Department](#) and works part-time at Minnesota State Community and Technical College - Moorhead as a [fire instructor](#). He also works seasonally for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources as a [wildland firefighter](#) in Northwest Minnesota. Previously, he was an airline pilot. He has a bachelor's degree in business administration and a master's degree in executive [fire service](#) leadership.

Dane Carley (right) entered the [fire service](#) in 1989 in southern California and is currently a captain for the Fargo (ND) [Fire Department](#). Since then, he has worked in structural, wildland-urban interface, and [wildland firefighting](#) in capacities ranging from fire explorer to career captain. He has both a bachelor's degree in fire and [safety engineering technology](#), and a master's degree in public [safety](#) executive leadership. Dane also serves as both an operations section chief and a planning section chief for North Dakota's [Type III Incident Management](#) Assistance Team, which provides support to local jurisdictions overwhelmed by the magnitude of an incident.

Previous Articles

- [Tailboard Talk: Do You Really Know What Is Happening With Your Fire Department?](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: More PPE or Improved Fire Behavior Training?](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: Deference to Expertise](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: Not Bulletproof But Close -- A Commitment to Resilience](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: A Sensitivity to Operations](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: K.I.S.S. or Not? A Reluctance to Simplify](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: Mistakes Even Happen to Firefighters: A Preoccupation with Failure](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: Why Do We Play the Blame Game? Let's Turn It on Its Head!](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: Near Miss Report](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: HROs Use Human Factors to Improve Learning Within the Organization](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: HROs Use Human Factors to Improve Learning Within the Organization](#)
- [Tailboard Talk: Introduction to Higher Reliability Organizations](#)

To access this Article, go to:

<http://www.fireengineering.com/content/fe/en/articles/2012/03/tailboard-talk-do-firefighters-talk-too-much.html>