DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, SAME FIRE

Behavioral Health Through Time

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TRAINING AGENDA

- **The Goal:** Mental Health & Cohesion
- **The Shift:** Operational Changes & Community Expectations
- **The Culture:** Identity, Lifestyle vs. Career
- **Deep Dive:** Traditionalists & Boomers
  Gen X, Millennials, & Gen Z

- **Strengths & Weaknesses: The Superpowers & Kryptonite**
- **Communication Breakdown: Texts vs. Talks**
- **Coping Evolution:** From the Bar to the Clinician
- **Action:** Case Studies & Tools for Connection
- **Peer Support Strategy: Tailoring the Approach**

WHY ARE WE HERE?

BRIDGING THE GAP

A divided house cannot stand. When generations clash, stress rises, and mental health suffers. Our goal isn't to change who you are, but to understand who is sitting across the table from you.

Show of Hands…

- Being the newbie
- Training a newbie

TRADITIONALISTS (1928-1945)

THE SILENT FOUNDATION

Context: Post-war era. Limited safety equipment. No concept of "PTSD."

Stressors: Extreme physical danger with little protection. Financial instability led to working multiple jobs. Great Depression Era

Coping: Stoicism. "Suck it up." Silence was a survival mechanism, not a flaw. Mental health was viewed as a character weakness.

BABY BOOMERS (1946-1964)

IDENTITY FUSION & THE COST

- **Workaholic Ethos:** "If you aren't at the firehouse, you aren't working."
- **Stressors:** Pressure to be the stoic leader. The rise of EMS began to change the job description mid-career.
- **Coping:** The "Brotherhood" was the therapy. Informal venting at the kitchen table, often fueled by alcohol.
- **Blind Spot:** Retiring is terrifying because they lose their primary community and purpose.

THE "OLD GUARD": BOOMERS & TRADITIONALISTS

THE STEREOTYPE (HUMOR)

- "I walked uphill both ways to the fire."
- Thinks "The Cloud" is weather.
- "We didn't have earplugs, we had tinnitus!"
- Hides their "goat" (emotions) at all costs.

THE REALITY

- **Strength:** Unshakeable stability. They have seen it all. The "Safety Net" for the crew.
- **Weakness:** Change aversion. Tech frustration. Identity is 100% tied to the job.
- **Mental Health:** "Suck it up." Silence is safety.

THE MIDDLE CHILD: GENERATION X

THE STEREOTYPE (HUMOR)

- The "Latchkey Kids" who raised themselves.
- Drank from the hose and survived.
- Response to everything: "Whatever."
- Skeptical of everyone, especially management.

THE REALITY

- **Strength:** Ferociously independent. The ultimate bridge between analog and digital.
- **Weakness:** Can be cynical. "Trust no one" mentality isolates them.
- **Mental Health:** Uses dark humor as a shield. "I'm fine" usually means "I'm not."

GENERATION X (1965-1980)

LATCHKEY INDEPENDENCE

Grew up taking care of themselves. Skeptical of authority ("management is the enemy") and fiercely independent.

THE BRIDGE

The first generation to openly demand work-life balance. Caught between Boomer "workaholism" and Millennial "feelings."

SHIELDED COPING

Dark humor is the primary shield. Relies on small, tight-knit circles rather than the whole department.

IS TOO YOUNG

MILLENNIALS (1981-1996)

PURPOSE & BURNOUT

- **Context:** Entered service during 9/11 era or recession. Highly educated but financially stressed.
- **Stressors:** "Failure to Launch" stigma (living costs). High call volume burnout from opioid/overdose crisis.
- **Need:** Constant feedback ("Am I doing this right?") and clear career progression.
- **Coping:** Digital connection, willing to seek therapy, but fears professional reprisal.

THE COLLABORATORS: MILLENNIALS

THE STEREOTYPE (HUMOR)

- "Where is my participation trophy?"
- Killed the napkin industry (and Applebees).
- Can't buy a house because of avocado toast.
- Needs a "debrief" after a coffee run.

THE REALITY

- **Strength:** Team-oriented. They actually *want* to talk about feelings. Tech-literate.
- **Weakness:** Needs constant feedback. "No news" = "I'm getting fired."
- **Mental Health:** Burnout is their baseline. Financially stressed.

GEN Z (1997-2012)

DIGITAL NATIVES & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The "Why": They don't just follow orders; they need to understand the purpose behind them.

Brain Development: The prefrontal cortex is still developing; sleep deprivation hits them harder biologically.

Stressors: Public scrutiny (cameras), climate anxiety, and information overload.

Coping: Strict boundaries. Unapologetic about mental health. "I won't sacrifice my sanity for the job."

THE "ZOOMERS": GEN Z

THE STEREOTYPE (HUMOR)

- "Is this fire 'aesthetic' enough for TikTok?"
- Communicates exclusively in memes.
- Terrified of making a phone call.
- "Quiet Quitting" inventors.

THE REALITY

- **Strength:** Boundary masters. They work to live, not live to work. Digital natives.
- **Weakness:** Lack of life experience. The "Why" matters more than the "What."
- **Mental Health:** Openly anxious but proactively seeks therapy.

IDENTITY: LIFESTYLE VS. CAREER

"I AM A FIREFIGHTER"

Traditionalists & Boomers

- **Identity Fusion:** The job is the self. Retirement feels like a loss of existence.
- **The Firehouse:** Often felt more like home than their actual house.
- **Success Metric:** Years of service, sacrifice, and "being the guy."

"I WORK AS A FIREFIGHTER"

Gen X, Millennials, & Gen Z

- **Healthy Separation:** The job is what they do, not entirely who they are.
- **Boundaries:** Value time off, hobbies, and identity outside the station.
- **Success Metric:** Sustainability, mental health, and diverse experiences.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS

OLD SCHOOL: "SUCK IT UP"

The Cost of Silence

- Emotions = Weakness / Liability.
- Trauma was "part of the job."
- Result: High rates of divorce, substance abuse, and silent suffering.

NEW SCHOOL: POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

Maintenance Required

- "It's okay to not be okay."
- **Maintenance:** Mental health is treated like physical fitness—requires regular work.
- Result: Earlier intervention, but potential friction with older cultures.

COPING: THEN VS. NOW

THE BAR

Historically, the bar/club was the unofficial debriefing center. Alcohol numbed the hypervigilance.

THE GYM

Physical exertion remains a constant bridge. Burning off cortisol is a shared language across all ages.

THE CLINICIAN

Therapy is becoming the new "maintenance." Viewed by younger gens as similar to going to the dentist.

LIFE THEN VS NOW

THEN

- Husband was the primary breadwinner.
- Wives were the primary caretaker and worked part time if at all.
- Latchkey kids
- People defined themselves by the career.

NOW

- **Increasingly more women are working full time and making the same or more than their husbands.**
- **Pensions and retirement benefits aren't as secure or attractive.**
- **Young adults will have 5-7 careers in their lifetime (not obs!) After retirement, they will likely need a second career.**

THE "SUCK IT UP" SPECTRUM

COMPLETE SILENCE

"The Job is The Job"

(Traditionalist/Boomer Default)

DARK HUMOR

"Laugh to keep from crying"

(Gen X/Millennial Default)

ACTIVE CARE

"I'm talking to my therapist"

(Gen Z Goal)

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

THE PHONE FRICTION

Boomer View: "If you're on your phone, you're slacking off."

Gen Z View: "I'm literally looking up the vehicle extrication manual for this car."

The Clash: Boomers want a phone call. Gen Z views a phone call as an aggression. Millennials just want a group chat.

> *"Calling a Gen Z firefighter without texting first is like walking into their house without knocking."*

SCENARIO ANALYSIS

THE SILENT CAPTAIN

Scenario: 28-year vet. Withdrawn after a pediatric fatality. Jokes "kid gloves are for the new generation."

Discussion: How does his generational culture shape this? How do we respect his experience while offering support?

THE NEW RECRUIT

Scenario: Gen Z rookie. Voicing distress after first fatal fire. Told by older crew to "toughen up."

Discussion: What message does this send? How can we validate their experience without coddling?

Remember…

- WE raised this generation
- We wanted them to be better, do things differently, and for their life to be easier than how we had it.
- Common phrases I hear: I just want my kids to be happy.

DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, SAME FIRE

Utilizing Strengths, Minimizing Weaknesses, and Supporting the Team

THE STRENGTHS MATRIX: HELPING EACH OTHER

OLD TEACHING YOUNG

The "Why" and The Wisdom

Gen Z craves the "Why." Boomers/Gen X have the context. Instead of "do it because I said so," share the story of *why* we do it. That is mentoring.

YOUNG TEACHING OLD

The Tech and The Ease

Younger members can streamline reports, map routes, and troubleshoot gear. Let them lead on tech—it gives them ownership and saves the Captain a headache.

Strategy: *"Reverse Mentoring." Assign a rookie to teach a senior member a new app. Assign a senior member to teach a rookie a "tricks of the trade" skill.*

APPROACHING THE "OLD GUARD"

RESPECT THE ARMOR

- **Do Not:** Ask "How are your feelings?" (They will shut down).
- **Do:** Ask "How's the crew holding up?" or "That was a mess, huh?"
- **The Key:** Use "Side-by-Side" communication (driving, washing the truck) rather than face-to-face eye contact. It feels less like an interrogation.
- **Know what you don’t know**

APPROACHING THE "NEW KIDS"

VALIDATE THE EXPERIENCE

- **Do Not:** Say "You'll get used to it" or "That was nothing."
- **Do:** Say "It makes sense that you're bothered by that. It was a rough call."
- **The Key:** Transparency. Be authentic. If you are bothered, admit it. They have a radar for "fake tough guy" acts.
- **Know what you don’t know**

THE "WHY"

Gen Z needs to know *why* they are feeling this way. Explain the biology: "That shake in your hands? That's just adrenaline dumping. It's normal."

FIREFIGHTERS LOVE CHANGE

ACTUALLY NO ONE DOES

- The science of neuroplasticity has shown us we ARE hard wired for change although it is uncomfortable
- We have only had consistent brain imaging to study since the mid 90's. We understand our brain the least out of any organ.
- This generation is getting flooded with up to date information and they want optimization of time, health, and resources.
- We must change. The world and the fire service is changing whether we like it or not.

LEADERSHIP

YOU ARE ALL LEADERS

- Discipline means “to teach” not to punish
- Younger generations expect to understand “why.” This isn’t to challenge or question you. It’s how they learn. “Because this is how it’s always been done” doesn’t cut it.
- People are still coming into to the fire service because they are helpers and they are attracted to “the brotherhood.”
- The fire service is different now

COMMUNITY DEMANDS: THE "AMAZON PRIME" EFFECT

INSTANT RESPONSE

The public expects immediate solutions to complex social problems (homelessness, mental health) in 8 minutes or less.

THE GLASS HOUSE

Every action is filmed. The pressure to be "perfect" on camera adds a layer of chronic stress unknown to previous generations.

SAFETY NET

Firefighters have become the "all-hazards" response for a failing social safety net, increasing "compassion fatigue."

THEN VS NOW

Fire Service Call Volume & Nature: 1980 vs 2020s

Metric	~1980	Recent (~2020s)	The Trend
Total Annual Calls	10.8 Million	36.4 Million	Tripled (+337%)
Total Fires	3.0 Million	1.3 Million	Dropped by half (-55%)
Medical/Rescue Calls	5.0 Million	24.3 Million	Exploded (+380%)
False Alarms	900,000	2.9 Million	Tripled
% Workload (Fires)	28%	< 4%	Massive Decrease
% Workload (EMS)	46%	66% - 70%	Dominant Activity

TOOLS FOR THE TOOLBOX

THE "72-HOUR RULE"

Don't make big life decisions (quitting, divorce) within 72 hours of a traumatic event. Let the cortisol settle.

SCHEDULED MAINTENANCE

Treat mental health like truck maintenance. You don't wait for the engine to blow up to change the oil. Don't wait for a crisis to talk.

COFFEE & CONTEXT

Create space for "non-work" talk. Bridges are built when we talk about hobbies, not just the job.

THE KITCHEN TABLE CLASH

SCENARIO

The Situation: A bad call. The Boomer Captain is silent and angry-cleaning. The Gen X Engineer is cracking dark jokes. The Gen Z Rookie is quiet and texting.

The Conflict: Captain yells at Rookie to "get off the phone." Rookie feels attacked and isolated.

Discussion: How does Peer Support intervene here? Who needs what?

KEEP IN MIND

“KIDS THESE DAYS...”

- Anxious Generation
- Drivers licences
- Need to teach things you think they should already know: Difference in philips and flat head, starting power tools, using a mop, making a bed
- I would argue, they DO NOT have it easier.

LEADING ACROSS THE DIVIDE

For Boomers: Share your stories, but listen to their boundaries. Your experience is invaluable, but their methods might be healthier.
For Gen Z: Respect the "dues paid" by older generations. Your psychological safety exists because they fought for physical safety.
The Common Ground: Focus on the *mission*. We all want to go home, and we all want to help. Everyone wants to feel valued and an important part of the crew.

ACTION PLAN

INDIVIDUALLY

- Identify one "Stereotype" you hold about another generation and try to prove it wrong this shift.
- Ask a member of a different generation for advice on *something* (Tech or Tactics).

AS A PEER TEAM

- Audit your resources: Do you have therapists who understand *both* the "Old School" and the "New School"?
- Practice the "Side-by-Side" approach for senior members.

ACTION PLAN

AS A DEPARTMENT

- Identify and discuss generational differences, strengths and weaknesses when onboarding new recruits.
- Aces in the right places.
- No one likes when a new person gives ideas on how to improve or simply the process we have been doing. And, great ideas can come from fresh eyes.

AS A PEER TEAM AND AS A LEADER

- Meet people where they are at
- You step, I step to prevent frustration.
- Resist the urge to think “If I were in their shoes, I would…” You aren’t and can never be.
- Lead and always reset with curiosity.

QUESTIONS?

"The fire doesn't care how old you are. Neither should we."

IMAGE SOURCES

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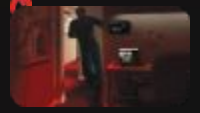

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