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The Five-Minute Drill

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By MITCH SAUER

A measurement of how well your crew performs fundamental fireground skills is whether or not they have to think of the steps to accomplish basic tasks—in




other words, are they unconsciously competent? The Conscious-Competence Ladder (also called the Conscious-Competence Matrix or the Learning Matrix) is a simple four-step learning process. As a student, you progress through the following four steps:

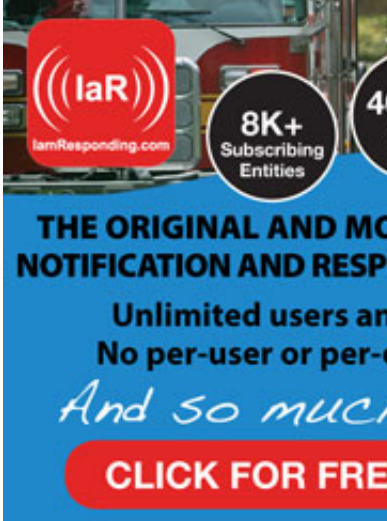

1. Unconsciously incompetent;
2. consciously incompetent;
3. consciously competent; and
4. unconsciously competent.

Remember when you learned how to tie your shoes? You started off not knowing that shoes needed to be tied, let alone how to tie them (unconsciously incompetent). When your mom got tired of tying your shoes for you, she showed you how to do it, but you still needed help (consciously incompetent). With a little practice, you got to the point where you could think through each step and tie your shoes (consciously competent). After a while, you were automatically tying your shoes, requiring little to no thought (unconsciously competent).

For crews to master the basics of firefighting and perform simple tasks without thinking about them, they need to become unconsciously competent. They can accomplish this with what I call the Five-Minute



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Drill: repeating tasks in short duration enough times so that they become automatic to the firefighter. Instead of thinking, “What am I going to do with the ladder after I ‘ground the butt’?” you can now focus on the roof construction, the location of the fire, what the smoke is telling you, or which window is most likely to be a bedroom—in other words, situational awareness.

HOW DO WE DO IT?

In my department, we usually run the drill with a three-person engine company. To begin, we start each shift in bunker gear. After a pass down from the off-going shift, an officer sets up the passport accountability tags while the driver gives the engine a very quick check. Then, we get on the rig and head out to the drill field. We perform one of two drills for the driver: Either he ties tight to a hydrant and takes his own supply, or we lay forward and allow him to attach his supply and lay out an attack line.



Photo by Mark Musch.



When we lay forward from a hydrant, the driver attaches his supply, calls for water, and then stretches a line to the front door and charges it (front door tactics). While the driver is performing his tasks, the tailboard firefighter and officer complete a separate hoselay from our manual; a ladder raise; or a specific fireground assignment such as vertical ventilation, imminent rescue, forcible entry, and so on.

Once we complete our task, we don our self-contained breathing apparatus and ensure it is working properly. Although it's called the Five-Minute Drill, it might take 15 to 30 minutes, depending on how elaborate it is. The intent is to keep the drill short; we look for frequency, not duration. This is NOT a training exercise; if we mess it up and, for instance, place a ladder upside down, we don't keep at it until we get it right. We identify that we need some extra work in an area and will schedule time for an extended training session. These drills are separate from our assigned training regimen.

We also don't include the entire shift. Some training drills require every member of the company to perform the drill at every position, meaning that you do the same ladder raise 20 times, depending on the size of your company. The Five-Minute Drill is meant

to get the blood flowing, to get personnel in the mindset that they are ready to go, and to make the basic functions of our job automatic.

DOES IT WORK?

My crew has said that since we implemented the Five-Minute Drill, their confidence and competence levels are high. The training division has remarked that our performance has skyrocketed, and our Five-Minute Drills are a model for others to follow.

A testament to these statements was my company's response to a lakefront structure fire down a narrow one-lane road: The first engine reported a well-involved house fire; members were having difficulty finding the hydrant on this dark, rainy night. My company was second due and assigned to secure the supply. Because of recent construction, the hydrant on the map had been removed, and the new hydrant was actually up a fixed ladder and above us on an elevated bike path behind a locked chain link fence (photo 1)! We were faced with not only getting a supply but also two other unique problems: a locked gate and how to get supply hose up an eight-foot ladder. Crew members were able to recognize and solve these problems quickly and effectively because (1) they

weren't tunneled in on their primary task of securing a supply; and (2) their short practices, which included forcible entry, had them bringing the correct tools and making short work of the obstacle.

THE TAKE-HOME POINTS

By drilling every day on the basics, members now respond automatically. When your company is faced with a complex problem, your crew will be thinking of how to mitigate the complex part, not the basic steps. My crew no longer thinks about the mechanics of stretching a line to the front door; they look at the building to figure out where the fire is and what potential hazards await them. They aren't thinking of which foot goes where for the flat raise; instead, they focus on the roof on which they will be standing. They have become unconsciously competent in the basics. The crew and our citizens are safer because of it.

To master the basics of firefighting and have the crews perform simple tasks without thinking about them, they need to become unconsciously competent.

MITCH SAUER is a 21-year fire service veteran and a lieutenant with the Northshore Fire Department in

Kenmore, Washington. He has served as the department's training officer and was a member of its technical rescue team.

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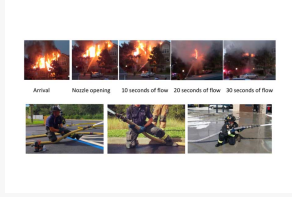
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