

## Standard Firefighting Orders

Shifts in Meaning and Authority  
(1950s-today)

### Answers to questions like...

*What are the Fire Orders for?  
How should they be used?*

...**have changed over time** as:

*approaches to managing people have changed  
approaches to managing fire have changed*

### Before the Fire Orders (1930s-1950s)

**"Heroes"** were publicly  
praised for displaying two  
**virtues** (e.g., in *Fire Control Notes*):

**keeping fires small**  
*while also*  
**keeping crews safe**

Failures were also  
publicly singled out.  
*But they were also  
offered second  
chances...*

### Before the Fire Orders (1930s-1950s)

- "Praise and blame" approach eventually considered unfair:
  - "Same action praised in one situation is criticized in another."
- Many called for standardization:

**"There ought to be a rule..."**

## Standard Firefighting Orders

(creation,1957)

Chief convened a safety task force (1957)

- Analyzed 20 years of fatality fires
- Focused on 5 fires where 10 or more firefighters were killed at once
  - e.g., Inaja Fire, California, 1956 (11 dead)
- Also examined "successful" fires

## Standard Firefighting Orders

(creation,1957)

### "Sinners"

- "Men who know better...just did not pay adequate attention" to small details when it mattered most.

*Considered a problem of forgetting.*

### "Coolheads"

- Someone who "sized up a local change in fire behavior and figured out what would happen in time to get the men to safety."

*How they did so not really understood.*

*Memory and  
reaction times  
(human  
factors) were  
not well  
understood.*

Adapted from Ziegler, J. A. (2007). The story behind an organizational list: A Genealogy of Wildland Firefighters' 10 Standard Fire Orders. *Communication Monographs* 74:4, 415-442. Full article will be available for download in June 2009 from <http://blogs.valpo.edu/jziegler/publications>.

## Standard Firefighting Orders

(creation, 1957)

- Found 11 common factors among the failures
  - Successes attributed to: “**Someone did not fail** in one of these critical categories.”
- Turned them into **orders**
  - Rearranged, edited down to 9
- Chief McArdle added #10:
  - “Fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first.”

*keep fires small*      *Just like the original two “heroic” virtues.*      *keep people safe*

## Ten Standard Fire Orders

(first revision, 1987)

- Now applied to all agencies through the NWCG
  - Reordered for easier memorization
- Fire Orders shifted...
  - ...from an individual to an **organizational list**
    - “*Checklist*” for evaluating individual fires
  - ...from a list of virtues to a **list of duties**
    - *Accident reports started to find Fire Order “violations” in 1990s*
      - Violation of employee-employer contract

## TriData Study (1996-1998)

Revealed a **split in opinion** over the precise authority of the Fire Orders.  
(1,000 firefighters were surveyed)

Some called them “**guidelines.**”

Some called them “**hard and fast rules.**”

[http://www.wildfirelessons.net/documents/WFSAS\\_Part\\_3\\_Chapter\\_4.pdf](http://www.wildfirelessons.net/documents/WFSAS_Part_3_Chapter_4.pdf)

## Standard Firefighting Orders

(second revision, 2003)

- Many calls to get “back to the original intent”
  - Fire Orders are steps to be followed in order
  - Aligned with concept of “risk management”
- Fire Order #10 changed to:
  - “Fight fire aggressively *having provided for safety first.*”

“**permission**” to fight the fire ...

... **earned only after** completing steps 1-9

## Same Items, Three Different Kinds of Lists

1957	Personal taskbook for individual transformation
1987	Orders to follow in all situations (e.g., even driving)
2003	Tool for broader organizational “risk management”

## Same Items in Same Order, Different View of the Group Process

1957  
Fire Orders are described as a tool for the **group** to help the **individual** to not forget things they already knew  
(until the individual virtues became automatic).

2003  
Fire Orders are described as a tool for the **individual** to use to question a decision emerging in the **group**  
(e.g., Cramer Fire accident investigation report).