

## Top Ten Rules for Probies

Dear DFD Academy Graduate;

Congratulations on completing the Academy! Now that that's over with, we're moving on...

Probation is a stressful time; designed to break a person down to be remade in the organization's image, even more so than during the academy (in the academy, recruits outnumber the cadre and can rely on each other throughout the experience). I believe that probation should be more than a time to learn to play a game; it should be a time where we learn about the kind of firefighter we want to become and how to fit in most effectively to the organization we are employed by.

**The biggest difference between the academy and probation is that the academy is a performance based system and probation (and the rest of our careers for that matter) is a perception based system.** I don't want to repeat what was previously articulated in "The Best Damn Proby, Period", which is probably one of the best dissertations on what to do to be a successfully perceived proby. Instead, I want to articulate some principles which will allow you to play the perception game in such a way that you will become a highly effective performance firefighter. Which led me to think about my favorite statement from "Brunacini's rules for Proby's" which is, "always leave cleaner in the toilet after cleaning". In essence he's saying play the game – make sure you choose jobs that people will see, that are in your scope of duties, do them well, take credit for them in simple and understated ways – and then apply these concepts to the rest of your career.

**You will never have another period of time in the fire service where so many people will be willing to teach you.** This is why they make you wear your Class B shirt with a proby badge and a big P on your helmet. Although not always "fun", this will be the best learning opportunity of your career – take full advantage of it by remaining humble, keeping your ego in check, working hard, listening, and keeping your opinions to yourself.

So, it is with these thoughts in my mind that I'll try to write down my top ten rules on how to use the perception game to become a great performance firefighter...

- 1) **Above all, always work for respect, not acceptance.** I promise you two things; first that will look back a few years from now at some of the people you were working to please with nothing but disgust, and second that if you apply this rule you will avoid many of the pitfalls that are designed to trip up a new proby (remember, these guys have been at these games for years not to mention that they have been passed down for generations - we are not set up to nor will we 'win'). A note about "food challenges" which are designed mostly around making you puke. It's up to you if you want to partake, just realize that you never choose when you'll get a significant call, but if I chose to do a food challenge I can guarantee that the biggest call of my career would come in right around mid puke.
- 2) **Think of your inventory as evolutions when you're checking out the rig each morning,** E.g. don't just look at the hose load in the back of the pumper and make sure everything is on the check off sheet; visualize the steps for hooking up the humat to the hydrant, know where your McGard wrench and other secondary wrenches are, how you would go to work at the humat, how you would set up for a double lay, what combo of hose and appliances you would take to hook up to a standpipe, what the GPM's are for each nozzle you have on your preconnects, how would you pull a preconnect by yourself, how would you deploy a ladder, what tools are you planning on grabbing if you're second in, how you would hook up the Sampson, etc. Getting your mind in the game first thing every morning will minimize errors and reaction times at 2:30 in the morning.
- 3) **Always look up before going in (a.k.a. learn to be systematic, about small things and large).** At its heart, this job is about making big decisions based on very little information in almost no time. There are two things that

need to be developed to address this need: first, an algorithmic thought process based on pattern matching and second, a systemic problem solving methodology. The first topic is to try to build up your “experience tray” by studying and applying everything that you see - you’ll be surprised by the number of people who have effectively learned nothing in over thirty-five years of experience. A systemic approach to solving problems is something that you can apply to everyday tasks. I always clean the bathroom in the same order; I start with scrubbing the first toilet on the left, and end by putting hotel folds in all the toilet paper. That way I know that I’ve checked the toilet paper and when I stop in bathroom later in the day I can tell if the stall has been used and needs to be re-cleaned – trust me, you will earn the hatred of your crew if you leave them in the crapper without toilet paper and a call comes in... In the same way that you clean the bathroom you can approach a building systematically – on every medical call, start at the roof, work your way down to the eaves, note all windows and egresses, make a map of what the house looks like on the inside from the outside and what the back looks like by sizing up the front. Ask yourself how would you get out if the way you went in becomes blocked, what are the conditions of the structure, where are you most likely to find victims, where are the stairs to the basement. Learning to do this type of “personal size up” on normal calls will become an invaluable skill on stressful ones. The one consistent word of advice from the old timers on the two departments I’ve worked for is to “always look up before going in”. I have assimilated that advice into doing the aforementioned size up before entering any structure – those two seconds can make the difference between a successful fire attack, search, or vent operation and may just save your life. If you complete steps two and three every morning, you’ll be starting the shift mentally sharp.

- 4) **Listen to everyone.** When the village idiot gives you advice, try whatever they said *in a training environment* to see if it can work for you, or if it can work for you with some modifications. My first time through probation, I had a 6’5” Lieutenant that loved the high shoulder carry for throwing ladders and wanted me to use it. Bottom line, it doesn’t work for me – I can’t get my stubby arms around my bulbous head in such a way as to be effective. After trying his way multiple times, he understood why I wasn’t using his way of doing things, and was at least pacified that I had tried it. The first note about listening is that about ninety percent of your sentences should end in a question mark. You can’t ask enough questions on probation. NEVER EVER say, “that’s not how they taught me in training”, or “I learned it a different way at my last house” – those are opinions, and you haven’t quite earned one of those yet; just ask them to show you how they perform a certain skill and then ask if they’ll coach you through it, and who knows, it might work better for you. Another note about listening; sometime during your first shift or so try to find out what everyone’s expectations of a proby are – it can be as simple as always taking out the garbage, but if you literally rebuilt the station from the foundation up but forgot to take out the garbage four times a day, that guy would say you were a lame proby. Make a note of everyone’s expectations and then make sure you do them. Final note about listening; paying attention to sarcasm will pay off. One of the hardest thing for most people to understand about the fire service is that it is passive aggressive. If someone says, “I remember when probies put the dishes away”, what they mean really mean is, “put the frickin dishes away”.
- 5) **Stay busy and show initiative.** While you’re checking out the rig and pouring coffee, come up with at least one project for the rig and one project for the station each shift. That way, every free minute that you have, you’ll be seen working on something that you didn’t have to be told to do – and you’ll look like a rock star. More important, this is a job where you must learn how to manage downtime. Staying busy will help you avoid getting mired down in the in the rumor mill – especially when you’re new, you don’t know who is related to whom and who is looking to trip you up. One note about working; try to make sure that you’re seen working. Choose visible and/or high profile tasks. One of my academy bro’s chose to repaint the horseshoes at a station that playing horseshoes was their favorite past time. He could do no wrong after that. One more note about being busy; if someone is cooking, and you ask them if you can help and they say no, find something to do in the kitchen. Invariably, they’ll need something and you can help them out. This skill translates directly to the fireground – if you’re in the right place at the right time with the right tools, you’ll get work. Final note on being busy; in the words of one of my favorite Lieutenants, “if the coffee is cold or the water is warm, put the cup in the dishwasher. Otherwise, someone put it there and will be back for it”. Again, being busy is important, but making work for someone else is not. Again, there is translation for the fireground – don’t just do something to

do something. For example, don't take all the windows at a structure fire if you're not ordered to, if you have to horizontally vent, use a door or window that you can shut instead. Taking all the windows when that hasn't been coordinated by your officer or senior guy can get other firefighters hurt.

- 6) **Be a student.** Subscribe to trade magazines, check out fire videos on YouTube, make plans to go to a conference, ask questions, and above all take the time to learn from every experience you can. Learn everything you can about this job – there's a lot that goes on in this arena that happens outside of the boundaries of the City and County of Denver.
- 7) **The less people know about you, the better.** You will be surprised how details of your personal life can be used against you – and not only by your crew, the members of which may be very deserving of your trust. A careless word spoken at shift change or in front of a rover can and most likely will haunt you in a future rotation. Again, keep your opinions to yourself, but always ask questions. If you're assigned to an engine company at a double company house, ask your senior guy if you can do inventory with the truckies or if you can ask them to teach you how they do ventilation.
- 8) **Anger is a luxury you can't afford.** However, anger (when used appropriately) can be a very useful tool when dealing with a call that is starting to slide out of control, a teammate who is working below the requirements of the badge, or when you see an academy bro being a jerk to a proby in a couple of years. Without it, people become lieutenants that are absolutely worthlessly lazy and people make it through academies that shouldn't. However, if you ever show anger as a proby, you should have just gone swimming with sharks after slitting your wrists – it would be less painful. As a proby, all we can do is realize why we're angry, make a note of it, and never treat a proby like that in the future – which will make the Department that much more of an effective organization going forward.
- 9) **Be an occupational athlete – it's easy to get complacent, don't.** I saw a presentation by a police officer turned psychologist that's main point was that if you can at least get your heart rate elevated for at least twenty minutes as soon as you get off shift in the morning, it will effectively reset your state of awareness (and all of the associated physiological and psychological effects) to a normal level. **NOTE:** I would recommend not doing a workout on duty that is so hard that you cannot recover within a minute or so. Save those workouts for off duty, you don't know when you may get the call that will demand 100% of your physical abilities.
- 10) **Learn to cook.** Crews love it when you put in the extra effort to make something for them. I would recommend finding a very simple, quick and easy dessert throw down recipe (cookies are always a good call – most stations have flour, butter, eggs, etc. all you'd have to ask to put in the grocery cart is a couple bags of chocolate chips) that you could make if you've had a good day or want to say thanks for a good training evolution.

Remember, probation will pass – probably like a kidney stone, but it will end someday... Although this is a game, the desired outcome is that we learn to exhibit controlled and aggressive initiative; three words that in the regular world are almost always mutually exclusive in any combination. The friends that you made in the academy are the same people that will help you through probation, and will be lifelong friends.

One last statement about being humble – at my station I have to race to beat the senior mucker (who has been in the senior seat of Truck 15 since 1987) and a former Navy SEAL to clean the bathrooms. **Please remember that every day you put your badge on, you are asking the citizens of Denver if you can be their winning lottery ticket – do everything you can to earn that privilege over the rest of your career and there will be no end to the rewards this job will offer you.**

Welcome to the DFD, I'm looking forward to working with all of you. Should you ever need anything, please don't hesitate to call me.

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