

# Top 10 traits of firefighters

*By Tony Vitalie*

Firefighters, more than most other professionals, need to possess a multitude of skills and talents. There are also many personal traits necessary to ensure that firefighters are properly and respectfully representing their department and profession as well. This, combined with the unique work and living conditions which place many demands on firefighters, creates a long list of traits that are necessary for success.

The firefighter candidate should be aware of these traits, make sure they possess and work on them, be able to show proof of such traits and be able to articulate them in an interview if such a question arises. You never know when an interview question may come up where you need to provide examples of specific times in your life or explain how your life experience or lifestyle is evidence of any of these essential traits. By clearly articulating such traits and giving examples from your own life, you will show the interview panel that you truly understand them and live by them.

There are dozens of essential traits firefighters must possess in order to find success on the fire ground and in the firehouse. Below I have highlighted ten of the most important. These are the traits that were the most frequently mentioned when firefighters around the country were asked to give the top three most important traits for the job. Some of the categories are very broad and could be broken down into many specific characteristics, but for the purposes of this article I have created ten very broad categories. They are in no particular order.

**1. Integrity (Honest, Trustworthy, Reliable, Accountable):** Unlike famous figures such as actors and athletes, when public safety professionals end up in the headlines in a negative way, people don't remember their names; they remember the occupation and city associated with these stories.

Trust is of the utmost importance in public safety. The public needs to trust us in order for us to do our job. They need to trust us with their personal property, their safety, their privacy, their loved ones' care and even their lives. A firefighter's misconduct of any kind not only hurts their department but hurts all firefighters because it chips away at the public's trust that is so essential. Our firefighting forefathers established a long legacy of trust and respect in our profession that we must continue to uphold. The reputation of a firefighter as being trustworthy and someone you can always rely on in any situation is something that all firefighters are responsible to help maintain.

In order for the team to function optimally each member must also trust everyone on their crew as well. Integrity and trust within the crew is essential. You must be able to trust your fellow firefighter; trust them to know their job, trust them to have your back, trust them to keep your secrets, trust them with your safety and even your life. A person who lacks integrity can never be truly trusted in all of these ways within the firehouse or on the fire ground and can be detrimental to the safety and cohesiveness of his crew.

The fire department's primary recruitment concern is that we are hiring people with the utmost integrity. People who will ALWAYS represent themselves, their department and their profession

well. As a firefighter and candidate, you need to understand that you represent your department and your profession both on duty and off and are held to the highest standard of conduct and public opinion at all times.

This is why I place integrity on the top of the list of essential traits all firefighters must possess and is what I consider to be the most important trait in any firefighter.

**2. Physical Fitness (Ability to perform the physical tasks):** Many aspects and the most crucial aspects of the job require firefighters to have above-average strength and agility. Many job functions simply cannot be performed without maintaining a high fitness level. Health and fitness is an essential part of our job and it must become an essential part of your lifestyle if you are to become a firefighter. I had a Fire Academy Instructor drill it in to our academy class that, "Physical fitness is the most essential trait of a firefighter." Although I do not necessarily agree with him, because I personally feel that integrity is more important, I do understand his logic, which is: if you can't physically perform the job, then nothing else matters.

**3. Communication (People skills, Articulate):** One could fill a novel discussing the importance of communication in the fire service. Communication is essential in any successful relationship. As a firefighter you will have many different types of relationships with different types of people. Clear, intelligent, courteous and open communication is essential within the firehouse, on the fire ground and when interacting with the public. You will need to know how to be an active listener, just like they teach in couple's therapy and live with, work with and get along with a multitude of personality types. You will need to know how to handle irate citizens, use radios to relay essential information to your crew or others, calm frightened patients and victims, console distraught family members and even co-workers, relay essential patient information to paramedics, nurses and doctors, instruct children in the area of fire safety, educate adults in fire prevention and CPR, explain and enforce fire codes to business owners, enlighten residents as to what their tax dollars are paying for, and do all of this with the utmost tact, patience, intelligence, professionalism and courtesy. Some people are naturally better communicators than others, but it is a skill that can be improved and must be improved if you want to not only land a job (excel in an interview), but be a successful, well functioning firefighter as well.

In today's world, and today's fire service, communication and the way we communicate is rapidly changing. Communication is not just verbal. Written communication is also equally important. We are communicating via e-mail more and more and using computers to communicate in new and different ways every day. Whether it is report writing, or communicating via e-mail, or other high tech avenues, having professional written communication skills will also be very important and essential to the job.

**4. Flexibility/Adaptability (Low-maintenance, Work under stress, Compromising, Adapt and overcome):** These are actually two separate traits that I have lumped together into one. Like many of the other traits these traits also apply to both the fire ground and the fire house. I will define a flexible person as one whose specific needs are few and dynamic rather than many

and static. One who is flexible can sleep anywhere, eat anything, do any job under any circumstance, function as a part of any team or group and thrive in any group dynamic, has few, if any, pet peeves and does not burden those around them with his or her wants or specific needs. Those who are not flexible are instead "rigid", or "high-maintenance". They have specific needs, many pet peeves and are particular about certain things. As firefighters these individuals not only have a hard time themselves, but they can make it difficult for everyone else around them. Firefighters need to make many sacrifices and compromises and have the willingness and ability to live and work very dynamically.

A related term is "adaptability". This is defined as finding a way to change with their environment and overcome various situations, whether they are living situations or stressful fire ground situations. Things are constantly changing for firefighters, from the environment we work in, to those we work side by side with, to the job itself. You must be able to easily adapt to new people, new settings, changing job descriptions and the changing conditions under which you perform those jobs. When one road is blocked you must be able to quickly find the detours and navigate yourself and your crew creatively through any obstacle to accomplish the tasks and goal at hand. This includes the ability to work under stress and perform your job duties under a variety of time urgent, life threatening and otherwise high stress situations. The ability to maintain a clear presence of mind under stress is of utmost importance and an essential part of being considered "adaptable".

**5. Dedication (Passion, Pride, Heart, Desire, Drive, Competence, Work ethic):** Dedication to the job is a vague and generic term that encompasses many traits and often goes by other names. Regardless of what you call it, it is essential that firefighters are hard working, hard training people who take pride in their work and want to be the best at what they do. Firefighters should never settle for mediocrity within themselves. They must strive for excellence at all times no matter how menial the task may be. They must be dedicated to the job and all that it entails, the glamorous and not so glamorous, the fun and exciting and the boring and monotonous. There will naturally be aspects of the job that some are more drawn to than others, but a general passion for the work, a solid work ethic and the drive to always be learning and bettering yourself are essential. It is too easy to get comfortable and complacent, fall behind the curve and not learn new things or grow as a firefighter. In a field that requires such a vast knowledge and skills base and is constantly changing it is crucial to be pro-active in your education and training and always be looking to learn and improve yourself in job related ways. Firefighters that aren't dedicated to the job, or who lack passion or work ethic quickly fall behind and can become a hazard to themselves and their crew, and stop contributing to the organization.

**6. Team Player:** Firefighters are a part of team. Being a team player and understanding the team concept is of utmost importance. This means that others are always relying on you to do your job and do it efficiently. When one person does not, the whole team suffers and the team's safety can become jeopardized. The goal will also not be accomplished in the most effective way unless the entire team is working together. Just like on a sports team, when one person fails to perform their job the whole team begins to break down. You may not always like the task

you are given, but it is always essential to accomplishing the goal at hand. Your firefighting teammates are relying on you at all times. This team concept applies to virtually every aspect of a firefighter's job and life. Those who like to freelance, isolate themselves, do not understand the team concept or are too self absorbed to be true team players hurt the entire team. Do any professional athletes come to mind when thinking of bad team players? People who, in spite of their talent, always seem to hurt the team rather than help them.

**7. Mechanical Aptitude (Technical Problem Solving):** You do not need to be a master mechanic to be a firefighter, but every firefighter must have some basic mechanical aptitude. If you've never turned a wrench, or know how your own house is built, you will need to start learning these things. A basic understanding of how things work is important. The more mechanical aptitude one has the more they can contribute and it also lends itself to being creative, problem solving and finding ways to accomplish goals or mitigate problems and disasters. Those who lack a natural desire to know how the world around them works, such as how their car starts when they turn the key and why it moves when they step on the accelerator, do not make very good firefighters. Our trade requires the use of a variety of tools, both hand tools and power tools. Being able to use these tools and understand the tasks we are performing with these tools as well as knowing how the tool itself works is obviously important. This is a blue collar profession like no other. Firefighters need to specialize in many different areas. We need to understand a wide variety of concepts and master many skills many of which require mechanical aptitude.

**8. Public Image:** As public servants, you must always maintain a good public image. Like it or not we are judged by our appearance as well as our conduct. Our appearance is the first and sometimes the only thing people have to go by before forming an opinion. For firefighters the way you look, speak and conduct yourself in public both on and off duty reflects on not only yourself, but your department and profession. Public image is different than integrity. It is how you appear or come off to the public, it is not who you are at the core. You may have integrity, but if you come off unkempt, immature, disrespectful, obnoxious, unorganized, rude, arrogant, etc, it reflects on all that you represent in the same negative way. If you look like a bum, people will see you as a bum. If you look or act like a jackass or conduct yourself inappropriately in public it hurts us all. Again, the many generations of firefighters who preceded us left a long legacy of positive public image that we reap the benefits of. This positive public image is a big reason why the fire service and firefighters are so respected. As a firefighter you need to carry that torch and continue that legacy by always maintaining a positive public image.

**9. Tolerance (Understanding, Compassion, Level headed, Thick skinned):** As a firefighter you work and live with a variety of personalities. The long hours and often close living quarters, combined with the stressful working conditions can often create tension in your relationships with co-workers. For those who exhibit tolerance, understanding and compassion these same things that create tension can also create bonds between co-workers. Unlike other professions where you can often escape from the stress or chatter of an annoying co-worker after a few

hours, as a firefighter you will be forced to deal with them, sometimes for days on end. Intolerance is not an option. It leads to anger and hatred and these are cancerous emotions that destroy a group, and over time can spread to destroy the organization as a whole. The smaller the organization the faster the cancer spreads. Exercising tolerance will help you maintain your sanity, make for a happier work environment for you and everyone else around you and benefit the entire organization. This is not to say you should tolerate the intolerable, but you cannot let the little things get to you. You must learn to accept people for who they are, like it or not. You must learn to accept everyone's differences. You must also have thick skin and not let others lack of tolerance, ignorance or need to find your limits and push them get to you. It is called a brotherhood for a reason. We do not get to choose our brothers. We do not always like our brothers or sisters. We often have knock down drag out fights with them, but we all must learn to live with our brothers and sisters and get along with them, despite our differences and in doing so we grow to love them and would lay down our life for them without thinking twice about it. This is what the "brotherhood" is all about and why we refer to each other as brothers, and not friends. You can choose your friends, not your brothers or sisters. Tolerance is also essential when dealing with the public. You will be loved for what you do by some, but you will also be hated by others for various reasons. You will be dealing with people from all walks of life, cultures, races, backgrounds and all socio-economic levels. You will need to learn not only how to deal with, but care for people who live their lives and have chosen lifestyles that you may not agree with, and you must learn to treat them all with the same level of respect, courtesy and professionalism as everyone else. This also requires tolerance as I define it.

**10. Self Sacrifice (Courageous, Giving):** Self sacrifice means that you are equally concerned with the well being of others as much you are with your own well being. Those who possess this trait volunteer their time to worthy causes. They have a natural propensity to help others and have a giving spirit. They also tend to be those we label as courageous, because they are willing to take risks and make sacrifices in order to help others. As a firefighter you will be a part of an organization whose primary purpose is to serve and protect its community. You will be involved in fund raisers for causes that don't benefit you, you will be expected to give both on and off duty and never get paid for your time. Those who lack this mind set and are more self-centered aren't a good fit. This is why the fire service seeks those who exhibit that volunteer spirit and people who are involved in their communities because they want to be, not because it benefits them. If you have never volunteered for anything in your life you may want to re-evaluate your motives and whether or not this is the right fit for you. Most importantly you need to ask yourself this, "Are you willing to make the ultimate sacrifice and put your life on the line for someone you've never even met or don't even like?" Would you have climbed the World Trade Center steps to get people out, knowing that you might not get out? This kind of self sacrifice is what is expected of everyone who calls themselves a firefighter and it is a rare and unique trait.