

Making Breakthroughs - In Fighting Fires and In Your Personal Life

by Jada Hudson, M.S., LCPC, CADC

I recently had the opportunity to shadow Aurora Fire Department's Extrication Training, in which Private Stawikowski, Captain Garner, Private Koerbrel, and Lieutenant Glen Hasenheyer prepared and observed recruits as they tackled three staged obstacles with three specific tools. At the first station, recruits used an ax to cut through a roof. At the second station, recruits used a 26-pound saw with various blades to cut through rebar. At the third station, recruits worked with a hammer and wedge to open a 1000-pound metal door. Each station required precise skill and tireless physical exertion.

First, I watched closely at the team working to saw through rebar. Captain Garner instructed them, "Don't bounce the saw. Hold it steady to the rebar. Keep your elbows in." The consistent, applied pressure with the right tool – a saw made for rebar, as opposed to one made for wood – would create a breakthrough and make an entry point for them to begin their rescue. Meanwhile, they had to be aware of smoke, so it did not choke up their saw.

Next, my eyes narrowed in on the group at the metal door. The two men working to open the door labored, for what seemed like forever, to get the door to budge only inches. Covered in sweat, with adrenaline and cortisol pulsing through their bodies, they counted together as one placed the wedge between the door and the door frame and the other pounded it with his hammer. It took perfect timing and teamwork. They were told, "Do as little as you need to get the job done. Conserve your energy." Ultimately, the door budged, and they were able to enter. Completely exhausted, the recruits took a break. But, if this had been a real fire, this would only have been the beginning of their work. The real rescue work would require them to forget their exhaustion and move forward complete intensity of effort.

During these exercises, their primary goal was to protect one another. Their secondary goal was to locate and secure civilians. They multi-tasked, listening to commands from the chief, hearing their radios go off, looking for people, and putting out fires. Hasenheyer exhorted them to "Learn how to talk and work at the same time." Through the chaos, their attention and care for one another impressed me. Truly, this was the beginning of a brotherhood.

Making Personal Breakthroughs Using Firefighting Tactics

As I watched these firefighters making breakthroughs while fighting fires, I could not help but notice that their tactics can be applied to breaking through personal struggles. For example, when it comes to addiction, the rebar saw tactics apply perfectly: Hold steady. Once you gain some momentum, don't let up. So often, people bounce in and out of addictions because they think their progress permits them to have a little bit of freedom. The alcoholic says, "I haven't had a beer in three weeks, so I can have this one right now." No! Holding the saw to the rebar and not bouncing it was the only way to cut through it. Even so, holding clean and not tinkering with the addictive substance is the only way to become completely free and clean. Breakthrough.



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The level of protection these firefighters paid toward one another has something to say to those struggling with exhaustion or difficult memories. It surprised me that the recruits' primary objective was to keep their firefighters safe. But, this should be our approach when it comes to breaking through exhaustion or even a traumatic memory. If you are not okay, you can't help your family. If you're exhausted or wrestling with a trauma, your first priority needs to be self-care. Just as these recruits had to keep their personal team safe and strong, so you need to keep yourself strong by getting the rest and help you first. Then, you'll be strong to help others. Breakthrough.

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Third, all recruits were told to step back and do a personal 360. This applies to individuals working for breakthroughs in any area of life! If there is an obstacle you are struggling to overcome, look for another entry point. If you are struggling to at home, and communication seems to be strained, try a gentler approach.

Maybe open up about your personal situation and stresses, and maybe thank your spouse for her support as you take on your challenging career. Maybe find something your spouse enjoys, and decide you like it, too. Bond over that! What are other ways you could approach a stuck situation? You may find you have a wooden door waiting, when you thought you had to cut through rebar. Breakthrough.

What the Recruits Walked Away With

In their debrief, Captain Garner exhorted recruits to "Use what information you know to make plans A, B, and C on the way to the call." He also encouraged them to "Take a step back and do a personal 360 to assess the whole situation."

Hasenheyer reminded them that, as they used the ax to penetrate a hole in the roof, their real-life goal was "Get a hole in the roof." He challenged, "Learn from a book, and forget all that." And, recruits were encouraged to "Do a cost versus benefit analysis." What were the risks involved in each task and was the benefit worthwhile? For example, if it were a commercial fire, would it be worth risking your life to save an empty building?

In addition to keeping an eye on all potential options and hazards during the call, recruits discussed the need to prepare themselves before the call. Checking out supplies every day, knowing where each supply is, and knowing that each tool is working could save someone's life. Also, knowing the strengths and limitations of each firefighter on the team increases communication. Older firefighters may experience physical aches, pains, or injuries and be more protective of their bodies. Meanwhile, younger firefighters thrive on the adrenaline of going on a call, and may have more eagerness to tackle physically exhausting jobs. Older firefighters have experience and wisdom from countless similar situations they have already faced. Younger firefighters may have new perspectives to bring to the group. Knowing each individual increases efficiency and communication.

When it comes to breaking through roofs, walls, doors, or personal struggles, keep fighting, get a team, and take care of yourself. You'll find you always feel most exhausted right before your barrier gives way.