Post-Accident Evaluation: A Proposed Worksheet

By Pete Methner

As a new recruit with the Niagara Falls, Ontario Fire Department some 14 years ago, I remember sitting with a senior officer on what we then called the 'back bench' and listening to some sound advice. Most recruits have heard something similar. He said, "Son, there's a world of opportunity in the fire service. If you learn something new, share it. If you find someone in trouble, lend a helping hand. Around here, remember to keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut." It came from a man who was well respected, so I took his advice and tried my best to follow it.

Each of our departments has evolved to accept and learn the practices implied by the 'Brunacini' incident command system (ICS). For us, ICS sparks genuine interest among firefighters and is taken quite seriously. In the long run, it simplifies things at the fire scene. Issues are addressed, like the responsibilities of each sector and officer. One particular change brought about by ICS, and the one that excites me the most, is post-incident evaluation (PIE) – or what some may call 'post-incident review' or 'post-incident analysis'. Whatever it may be called, the PIE is a valuable learning tool – and not at all about laying blame. Through PIE, we can learn much from each other, just like the 'old guy' said we should.

PHOTO: PETE FISHER

One thing is noticeable about firefighters, after you get to know them; each has different degrees of expertise in different areas. And some of them have a lot of expertise in a particular area. So it stands to reason that there are times when we can assist each other with the knowledge and skills of the different jobs we do. From garbage bin fires to house fires to more complicated high-rise hotel fires, effective PIE prevents us from making the same mistakes twice. It's likely that some part of a PIE stays with us throughout our careers and that we draw on it to teach other (perhaps less experienced) firefighters. When I think about it, that's probably what the senior officer was teaching me.

Motor Vehicle Accidents

My expertise is auto extrication. So, getting right to the point, I ask: When you return from a motor vehicle accident, or 'MVA' as we have come to call them, does your shift, or truck, sit down and talk about the call? Have you ever wanted to, but been too reluctant to initiate the discussion? If you do sit and talk about the last (or recent) call, is the discussion more patient/victim-related or about the qualitative characteristics of vehicle construction?

And think about whether crews take time to thoroughly examine the involved vehicles before leaving the scene. Before we clear incidents is often the only, and best, opportunity we will have to re-study the overall scenario, and, importantly, our effect on it. It presents a very good opportunity to more thoroughly examine optional evolutions that may have been available for extricating the victim, given differences in factors like the need for quick decision-making, scene stabilization, safety, etc. Further, reviewing the scene before clearing gives us an opportunity to look more closely at the vehicle's engineered construction and air bag locations. With time, the assimilation of new and broader information may allow us to read other scenes differently. That's learning. For example, noting the collision markings, and 'piecing together' how the accident damage occurred in conjunction with how the vehicle fared after the collision, gives us greater insight into understanding the integral strength (or lack thereof) of specific vehicles.

For future MVA calls, this information might help us formulate probable consequences and better pre-plan extrication techniques as we later approach the same types of vehicle(s).

I have been asked many times about what guideline(s) to follow for a PIE. What a great idea, a set of guidelines. Since I began touring the regional and international extrication circuit, I have made a point of putting the question of guidelines to fellow rescuers. What has been consistent among almost all of them is that rescuers tend to talk to other rescuers. With auto manufacturers regularly changing vehicle designs and safety features, we should now share with fellow firefighters through a more structured PIE worksheet.

So during the past year, I accepted the challenge of beginning development of what I think an effective, generic PIE worksheet might look like for use by any department. I've developed points to share that, I believe, cover the important areas of extrication while, at the same time, remain easy to follow with minimal instruction. As we all should do, I have forwarded my thoughts to a few of my closest "critic" friends, who have helped transform a worksheet with valuable input.

My worksheet outline is strictly suggestive of points that others may want to consider for the development of a more departmentally specific PIE worksheet. It's meant as a place to begin and, especially, as a means to facilitate conversation about the topic. And it's certainly meant to be changed to suit particular needs. For minor 'fender benders' or major incidents involving multiple vehicles, our hope as a rescue community should be to get first responders thinking about such important things as; stabilization; access; tool use; air bags; battery locations; and inter-agency cooperation.

My three-page worksheet outline begins with important details about date; location; times; vehicle type(s); weather conditions; resources responding; and units. An 'Action' section asks details about size-up; stabilization; and access considerations. Lastly, an extrication section asks questions about the methods and successes of disentangling victims; removing automobile sections; patient packaging; patient transport; tools; and teamwork issues. Included are opportunities for participants to make suggestions for the purchase of new or improved equipment that might increase effectiveness and/or efficiency. It's three pages – PIE isn't meant to take all day or be exhaustive.

We've placed a copy of my worksheet on the home page of The Fire Services Journal website at www.fsj.on.ca for you to view; electronically capture and/or print as you see fit. It's hopeful that facilitating PIE will also facilitate teamwork and help already stressful extrications progress more smoothly. If nothing else, however, it will help us share some thoughts. I welcome your thoughts.

Stay Safe
Pete

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Auto Extrication Tips

By Pete Methner

Technologies

- The Honda Insight uses a high-voltage, NiMh battery of about 48 lbs and 144 volts.
- The Honda Insight high voltage cables run below the floor, about one foot in from the driver's side. Beneath the vehicle, these are covered with a black cover marked High Voltage.

Techniques

- Disconnecting the negative side of the battery disables the high voltage controller and allows high voltage to run through the orange cables.
- Do NOT stabilize up to the black plastic high voltage wire cover, or remove it.