



From the Officers Seat

“You Bet We're Aggressive”

A look at the different uses and interpretations of the word aggressive in fireground tactics

There is an abundance of fire service professionals who use the term aggressive to describe themselves, their crew, or their department. This is typically meant as a reference to interior tactics supported by vertical ventilation when operating at structure fires. The word aggressive conjures a level of pride for some and liability and injuries for others. Aggressive means different things to different people within our business, so I thought it would be interesting to look at the definition and interpretation from multiple viewpoints.

Aggressive is defined as an adjective with the following description:

1. Ready or likely to attack or confront; characterized by or resulting from aggression.

“He’s very uncooperative and aggressive.”

**synonyms: hostile, belligerent, bellicose, antagonistic, truculent, pugnacious, combative, two-fisted, violent, macho, confrontational, quarrelsome, argumentative, warmongering, warlike, offensive.

2. Pursuing one’s aims and interests forcefully, sometimes unduly so.

“An aggressive businessman.”

**synonyms: assertive, pushy, forceful, vigorous, energetic, dynamic, bold, audacious, in your face, feisty.

Dynamic Aggressive (Smart)

Right off the bat, we should recognize that a majority of the synonyms have a negative connotation. I would bet my money that those who use the term expecting it to have a positive fire service meaning would contend that “pursuing one’s aims and interest forcefully” best describes what we want aggressive to mean. We would also associate with the synonyms assertive, forceful, vigorous, energetic, dynamic, and bold instead of those with a negative flair.

I have always thought being an aggressive firefighter meant that you were physically fit enough to perform at a high level, you understood fire behavior and building construction, you understood your capability and were competent with your equipment, you understood your limitations, and you made smart decisions that allowed you to adapt to the situation when needed. This allows you to eliminate some of the risks associated with the environment. Now that’s a pretty tall task to accomplish, but to me that’s aggressive. It means that because I can process what is going on and apply knowledge, equipment, and strategy, it allows me to reduce risk, not eliminate it, but I can manage it. Isn’t that what risk management is? All this is done to provide a potential victim the best chance of being rescued, and when that is accomplished, or the conditions are deemed unsurvivable, then we reassess and adjust our tactics based on managing the remaining risks vs. gains. We may not look at it in those terms, but that is what we do.

To have that same interpretation of aggressive, you would have to be physically fit, understand fire behavior and building construction, know the capability of your equipment, be competent with the equipment, understand your limitation (and that of your crew), and have the ability to make dynamic

fireground decisions while understanding the strategy of rescue. If you don't possess these abilities, then you naturally have a different interpretation of aggressive. I say it that way to make you think, because most of you taking the time to read this probably do have those traits and skills, but many in our business do not. In fact, many do not have those traits and skills for a host of reasons that include organizational dysfunction, mission creep, a lack of focused leadership, and bad hiring or recruiting practices.

The problem is not always only the responsibility of the organization. There is also a personal responsibility for lacking the knowledge and skills. If your organization is not providing adequate training for you, go get it somewhere else. For so many though, it is enough to wear the shirt, carry the badge, hang out at the firehouse, and hope someone will know what to do when we get there!

Macho Aggressive (Dumb)

There are those in our business who enjoy the status and respect that come with the uniform but may not live up to the lifelong pursuit of professionalism. They, however, want to be like you, and they want the respect that you have, so they also tout themselves as aggressive firefighters. Many of them are very tough and fearless; unfortunately, they practice based on a war of attrition strategy while you operate more like a special operations warrior. (You accept the possibility of injury or death for the purpose of rescue, but you are not a kamikaze pilot.) Their definition of aggressive is ready to attack or confront. They associate with the synonyms hostile, combative, macho, confrontational, and argumentative. They believe that being an aggressive firefighter means that you are not afraid of getting burned, falling through the floor and breaking a leg, or dying like a kamikaze to put that fire out. They are worried that you might not understand where they are coming from, so they often give themselves away with a plethora of helmet stickers to let you know they aren't afraid of anything! They may be spotted off duty wearing a fire department T-shirt with a statement about cheating death.

The difference in mindset is that the thrill of the fight against the fire is their primary motivation—no matter what the gain is. There is no rescue size-up or strategy. It is just man against fire. It's proving toughness by being able to take the heat, burn the gear up, and come out looking like a "real" firefighter. This mindset requires no decision making and no cognitive learning skills because there is no strategic thinking, just the same tactics used at every fire despite building construction, the stage of fire, or the conditions. These are good but lost people.

If we look at history, we could say that lining up in columns and marching across an open field toward our enemy would be macho aggressive. Getting close with a smaller, more maneuverable force; using the cover of the land or tree line; being a good shot and picking our targets; and firing then adjusting for the next shot would be dynamic aggressive. If we were really outnumbered and the odds were against us, we would use heavy artillery to try and gain an advantage. Again, this would be both smart and dynamic and not considered weak or risk averse.

Interpretations

Unfortunately for us, the two paradigms exist just in the context of the term aggressive. This creates a dilemma for the fire service managers. A conflict exists regarding what aggressive is because we display at least two extreme versions of them with many variations and combinations of gray. Some managers have chosen the easy way out and managed to the macho aggressive or have lumped everyone who is aggressive into one bad liable category.

If a fire chief or high-level decision maker is to understand aggressive in our (your) terms, he would need to be physically fit, understand fire behavior and building construction, know the capability of

our equipment, be competent with the equipment, understand our abilities and limitations, understand the abilities and limitations of crews, have the ability to make smart dynamic fireground decisions, and understand the strategy of rescue. Without this, it would be difficult to make a sound decision or understand our (your) version of aggressive. Does that explain some of the direction, decisions, and policy we see today?

The Reality of Understanding and Interpretation

We all know that rules and procedures are primarily put in place to correct or prevent a problem. Operating as a dynamic aggressive under our definition is not a problem for the organization because we are typically successful. There's not a lot of catastrophic injuries because we manage the risks. On the other hand, our management staff often sees macho aggressive members with burns, lost time, workers' comp claims, and more—a managers' nightmare! That dominates their interpretation of aggressive.

So what rules and policies do we expect to be implemented? The management risk strategy for some fire chiefs comes in the form of limiting exposure. "If we don't let them go in, then it would be hard for them to get burned." (Get the picture?) Rules always limit those who do the right thing, and they work to erode the freedoms that come with competence. Now, don't misinterpret me here. Just because you aren't the macho aggressive, you (we) can and do get hurt, burned, or killed. Bad things happen to firefighters and incident commanders sometimes—even if they are doing everything right. We all operate in very hazardous and sometimes unpredictable environments. But the dynamic aggressive is the true risk manager of our trade. Unfortunately, with rare exception, we are losing our ability to make the dynamic decisions on the scene and are being limited by constraining rules and policies. This causes us (dynamic aggressives) to focus our attention on what we have deemed the risk averse safety crowd.

We hate the blanket rules because they limit our dynamic ability; we hate the notion that someone in an office can stop us from doing what needs to be done on the scene. We are justified in our grievance because we approach the scene with a strategy, competence, and the victim in mind. The macho aggressive approach the scene with themselves in mind and a set of skills. The risk averse approach the scene with a workers' comp claim, lawsuit, or line-of-duty death in mind.

Many of them will say they approach with you in mind (some do), but many approach with themselves in mind also. They are in fear that they can't justify an injury or worse, and they are protecting themselves from any liability. Some even tout that ALL injuries and deaths in the fire service are preventable. They are, but only if we shut down the fire service. We often write about, lash out, and criticize the risk averse and the nonaggressive slackers (which we haven't even discussed here), but we often give the macho aggressive members a pass because at least they will be inside if we need them. Unfortunately, they will also always be inside when we don't need them to be.

I have heard time and time again officers saying, "I would rather have to hold someone back than have to push someone in!" I have operated under that stance for years and I believe it to be valid and true. But how many who say that actually have the guts to hold someone back when needed? How many take the time to explain the go/no-go relationship to the circumstances? How many maintain a lifelong pursuit of learning and understand that everything is always changing and we are always evolving?

Accountability Instead of Just Blaming the Risk Averse

If we do not redirect our focus to the root problem, we will lose our ability to be a dynamic aggressive. We must do everything we can to turn the macho aggressives into dynamic smart aggressives. We

have to accept that the macho aggressive group is largely responsible for creating the risk-averse group of leaders. They are both doing damage to our ability to operate as the other. The macho aggressive may in fact be doing the most harm.

Dynamic aggressives and other macho aggressives are the only ones who can influence macho aggressives. If the dynamic aggressives become more aggressive with them, we will create a larger pool of potential fire service leaders who understand and relate to our definition of aggressive. We can no longer ignore the macho aggressive because it is that group that is the cause of our grief. Many in that group don't realize that they are in the macho aggressive category because we don't tell them. We are the only ones with any credibility with them. They will not listen to the risk averse, but that is the medicine that the fire service is trying to give them.

We need to stop taking them to the emergency room for treatment or headquarters for a verbal lashing and give them some home schooling. The dynamic aggressive members must contain and explain when a stupid decision was made and could have made or did make things worse.

We don't always stop them and show them how to accomplish the same goal while managing or limiting the risk. We sometimes fail to provide guidance because we get caught up in the moment and sometimes straddle the fence between the two aggressive interpretations ourselves. We have to teach that the same through-the-front-door-deep-into-the-structure tactic does not always fit the situation. We have to teach strategy and tactics to be smarter, not just tougher and task skilled.

“If the only tool you have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail.” (Maslow's Hammer) In other words, if all you do is train on forcible entry and rapid intervention, then that's what you will focus on when you get there. We must redirect the macho aggressives' focus to the victim or potential victim and away from themselves and the thrill. The thrill is just as big for the dynamic aggressives, it's just not the reason for our decisions. We must recognize that macho aggressives are often us if we hadn't had the mentors show us the way and hadn't had the initiative to stay current and engaged despite any organizational roadblocks.

So, the next time you reach into your vocabulary bank to describe yourself, your crew, or your department as aggressive, please explain yourself in great detail because the listener might be hearing something totally different. Don't excuse macho aggressive tactics or behavior, because that will ultimately be the definition that you, your crew, and your department get associated with. If you do excuse it, then you will be responsible for the aggressive proliferation of risk-averse leaders and policies.



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