

Fire Away: Interviews with Fire Protection Leaders

Alan Brunacini – AB
Robert W. Grant - RG

Fire Ground Command

Part I – Alan Brunacini: His Philosophy as Fire Chief

RG: Alan Brunacini, welcome to our program. I know you've had a long and lustrous career in the fire service. How did you get started in the fire service? What motivated you to want to be a member of the fire service?

AB: I had been interested in the fire service ever since I was a kid. It's kind of the classic case of always wanting to be a fireman.

Caption: Alan V. Brunacini, Fire Chief, Phoenix Arizona

AB: I never got away from that as I was growing up, and when I was old enough and had the opportunity, in fact as soon as I was twenty-one, I joined the Phoenix Fire Department. So I've had interest in the fire service all my life.

RG: Are you a native of Phoenix?

AB: No, I was born in New York.

RG: What part of New York?

AB: Jamestown.

RG: Oh, Jamestown.

AB: And my family moved to Albuquerque when I was about six years old, and I was raised in Albuquerque, and then I left Albuquerque after I graduated from high school to attend college, and essentially I've been gone from Albuquerque ever since that time. I've been in Phoenix about the last twenty-six or twenty-seven years.

RG: You graduated from Oklahoma State University.

AB: Yes.

RG: And then you went right from Oklahoma State University right to Phoenix?

AB: Well, I started going to college at the University of California Davis, and I went to school there for a couple years and took a general science course, and then I went to Arizona State University and, soon after that joined the Phoenix Fire Department, and then I attended Oklahoma State University on an educational leave of absence from the Phoenix Fire Department.

RG: That's interesting.

AB: I was a member of the Phoenix Fire Department when I went to Oklahoma State.

RG: I see.

AB: I returned to the Phoenix Fire Department after I graduated in 1960, and I've been there ever since.

RG: Then you have a master's degree in public administration from Arizona State University

AB: And a bachelor's degree in political science and urban sociology from ASU. I was kind of a typical fire fighter student in the process. I went to school while I was working on the fire department for a period of fifteen or twenty years almost. In fact, I'm still going to school. I kind of combined being a professional student and a fire fighter at the same time.

RG: Talk about your career path now in the Phoenix Fire Department. How did that go?

AB: I basically have served in pretty much every position in the department, and I started out as a firefighter there in 1958 and served four years as a fire fighter, four years as a driver engineer, four years as a captain, almost five years as a battalion chief, and then served as the assistant fire chief, and then for the last five years as the fire chief's position. So had kind of a steady, upwardly mobile profile I suppose and came on the Phoenix Fire Department during a period when the city was growing a great deal. So it was a lot of promotional opportunity for all of us. So we had the opportunity to not only go to school and work in a positive and [inconstructive] system, but also to promote ourselves. That was kind of the profile of my department. When I came to work on the Phoenix Fire Department we had around two hundred and fifty members and currently we have around one thousand members.

RG: What was the size of the city at that time?

AB: The city was about one hundred and fifty thousand. Currently its eight hundred and fifty thousand so it's been one of the fastest growing, not only cities, but areas in the country, kind of the classic Sunbelt area. So, again, there's been a great deal of growth and a great deal of opportunity for anybody who is located there. It's been an interesting place to be really.

RG: When you joined the fire department as a firefighter what did you kind of set for yourself as far as career goals? Because when I think of Alan Brunacini I think of a very successful person.

AB: I can't say that when I joined the fire department I really had a clear objective as far as what I wanted to end up being, but I think that I had a, and continue to have a, high interest in what I was doing. I had a great deal of energy, I think, to work on the fire department and to do a set of things on the fire department, and I think that I was just in a good spot to do that. That energy kind of got me through the promotional process. Probably my early objective was to be an officer, either a company officer or probably a battalion chief, and a great deal of my interest revolved around firefighting. I have been attracted and interested in firefighting as an activity not only to be involved in but to command, and, sort of, I think, as I got older, the management of firefighting operations. So the firefighting part of

it I would have to admit has been an interesting attraction to me and one that I've continued to be interested in.

RG: I think that's a very unique aspect of your career to take the firefighting side of the fire protection field and look at that of a very scientific and managerial point of view. Very objective managerial point of view. Which not too many people have done because firefighting can be a very emotional experience.

AB: That's true too. And I suppose that as I was able to serve in promoted positions that my interest in firefighting kind of paralleled that, as you say of course, that as a firefighter and as a member of a fire company I was mostly interested in the task part of the process. As I became a command officer, a battalion chief, and I was a battalion chief in a busy area of the city, I was interested in direct fire ground command. I was the head of the firefighting division for about six years when I was the assistant fire chief. So then I became interested in the program of managing fire ground operations. So I've been fortunate that I've been able to have a place to kind of expend my energy in firefighting clear through my career. It's been an interesting process.

RG: Thinking back over your career what educational experiences would you say most profoundly affected your managerial development.

Caption: Robert W. Grant, President, National Fire Protection Association

AB: I think that my comment about the interest in the activity that I had as far as firefighting probably would reflect the same way in my education if you wanted to talk about that. Is that is, I have been fortunate because I had a great deal of educational opportunities. The city of Phoenix and our department has been supportive of any kind of education, and I think that's put us collectively in a strong position, but I think that initially the ability to go to Oklahoma State University at an early stage in my career was really something that was very positive and had an impact on me to understand and to be in a position to be able to understand, sort of, a full range of fire protection issues. I think that when I returned to the fire department and as I went through the promotions I was able to continue to go to school at Arizona State. As an undergraduate I had a, really, an opportunity to take a full range of social science kinds of courses, and I was in a social science curriculum. I think that that helped me a great deal when I was a company officer and early as a command officer. Being able to go through a graduate program that was focused on public administration, I think, was the right thing for me to do at that stage in my career. Today I still attend many seminars and classes and really anything that comes along that I can get to. So I laugh with you about being a professional student, but I think that truly I am a professional student, and it's really served me well and I've been able to kind of go through an educational process that was, as I said, sort of a parallel to whatever I was doing on the Phoenix Fire Department.

RG: Yeah, I think anyone is kind of washed up once they say "well I've learned everything I'm going to learn. I'm not going to learn anymore."

AB: That's right, and I see that as probably a liability of mobility, particularly getting to be a fire chief is that you think of that, many folks think of that, as a destination. They say "well I've achieved my goal

and my objective and here I am,” and I think when you do that you sort of turn yourself away from continuing to grow perhaps educationally and for a variety of other experiences. I feel fortunate that I’ve been in a position that I sort of developed the ability and the persuasion to go to school and to continue that. When I’m not going to school or I’m not involved in something like that I tend to be a little bit uneasy. I’ve probably made myself somewhat of an educational neurotic in the process.

RG: Well you know, when you were talking about the political science aspects of your education I was thinking about the philosophy of the British fire service which has been to develop their career officers in areas that beyond just the fire protection side of things and into more political science and governmental relations and even foreign relations to some degree so that they have a broadening of their experience, and I think you’re career path is fairly unique, frankly, in the United States. I don’t think that’s the normal career development of a fire chief here.

AB: Probably not. I think another thing that you pick up as you go through that particular approach is that you go to school with different people, is that I have gone to school a great deal and have been involved with a lot of education and training experiences with other firefighters, and I’ve enjoyed that, and I’ve got a great deal out of it, but I think that it’s healthy for a member of any profession or any service to get outside of that service and actually go to a place like a university and take on a course with a full range of people as far as their backgrounds and what they do occupationally and their persuasion and their approach because firefighters tend to get in a rut and you sort of just process that information in a closed kind of a way. So I have enjoyed that and continue to enjoy going to educational kinds of things where there are people from all over doing different things and have a different perspective. It’s amazing sometimes when you sort of turn that into yourself as you discover that maybe there is a better way to do some of the things that you kind of been raised with.

RG: It’s too easy in the firefighting business, I think, to look at it as a manual labor type of occupation so that you’re doing the same tasks over and over again. The fires may be different but just look at it as a manual labor type of operation when really it’s a very exciting managerial experience and administrative experience. So if you look at it in that way.

AB: That’s right. I’ve described firefighting as the smartest form of manual labor. And I think that that’s part of it that’s exciting about it, though, is that there’s still a great deal of action oriented manual labor involved in it. It’s very intelligent and in some cases very dangerous manual labor, but there’s always that element, as far as firefighting, and the operation of a fire department that a fire department has to be ready to go out and do that manual labor. I think if you just focus, as you said very well, if you just focus on that manual labor you really put yourself at a disadvantage for doing a lot of other things, but no matter how smart a firefighter is or how broad his base is from time to time he has to simply go out and put, and operate on the fire ground.

RG: I’ll never forget Chief Ray Hill of Los Angeles at a National Academy of Sciences meeting, and they were into all kinds of very high level scientific things, and Ray stood up as only Ray could, and he said, “One thing I want you to remember is firefighting is a dirty, nasty business.”

AB: That’s right.

RG: And it is.

AB: Well you know, there's a certain attraction to that too, is that I notice in the recruits that we hire anymore very, very capable, many of them with an extraordinary set of experiences not only occupationally but educationally. And what they're looking for is they're looking for that excitement of that episodic firefight. And I have to say that I can relate to that. I don't think they're adrenaline freaks, but I think that they're looking for something that's action oriented that they can see the result of very quickly which is one of the advantages of operations on a fire ground is that the returns come back very quickly. A lot of times in the things that were involved in, they're very medium and long range kinds of things, and you don't know if what you're doing today is really going to be effective until maybe five or ten years from now. In firefighting you know that almost momentarily. There's a certain satisfaction in being able to get that closure that quickly.

RG: Yeah that's right, because fire is a negative business but yet firefighting and rescue and all those activities are positive because you're solving a problem and solving somebody's problem.

AB: That's right. When they need it very badly too.

RG: When they need it badly.

AB: Firefighting is an interesting activity. And unfortunately one, I think, even if we look at a full range of fire protection issues is going to be with us for a while. We live in a combustible society, and we haven't done a very good job at managing that environment that we live in so the fire mercenaries are a necessary element in the society that we live with simply.

RG: Well that's an interesting term I haven't heard – fire mercenaries.

AB: It's what I call the firefighters. It's like having an army.

Caption: Alan V. Brunacini

AB: No matter how peace breaks out, from time to time the army has to go out, and do what an army does is fight. It's just that simple too.

RG: What kind of books do you read these days?

AB: Mostly management stuff. I have been through most of the classics in my education. So, well, I return to them occasionally. Mostly the current stuff in management honestly. My wife teases me that that's all that I read. She says that I ought to throw in a harlequin romance occasionally. It's difficult to get around the current stuff that's on management it seems like. There's a lot of it coming out. It's interesting, and I enjoy that.

RG: Now, do you tend more toward business management books or more toward public service management concepts?

AB: Most of the stuff that's produced now, the material that's produced now, is aimed toward business. The educational part, I think, is a little bit farther behind that just because they have to process it through the academic system. Mostly, I think, is directed toward business. A lot of personnel things today, there's a lot of self awareness. We're all neurotic about the Japanese getting ahead of us so that's produced a lot of literature. I try to hop around in that to keep as current as I can.

RG: Let's talk about management philosophies. How would you describe your management philosophy?

AB: I would hope that it's results oriented really. I tend to evaluate the things that my organization are involved in with my eyes rather than my ears. Having been raise in that system I think I understand the system very well, and I'm familiar with the place that we are doing it because I've been there for a long time. I tend, I think, to be participatory. I appreciate that's almost a cliché today, but there is a great deal of active participation in my department. I tend to depend a great deal on my staff, particularly my senior staff.

RG: So that shows that delegation then, a part of your philosophy is delegation.

AB: They tease me about my delegation. They say that I use three boxes of paper clips a week because, you know, you always pin a note to something and send it to someone. But mostly action oriented. I hope practical. I see our department and fire departments in general doing a fairly basic set of things in the community. I am interested, sometimes fascinated, by the basic operations of a fire department. So I think that my orientation is to simplify, to reduce the mystery, and to try to refine the basic kinds of things that our organization is involved in. And that's difficult to do. We have been working on that for a good long while, and we have a ways to go in it. So I would hope it's very action oriented kind of results focused sort of management. From my stand point, our organization is a very young organization, and being in the west it's a fairly relaxed organization. We don't operate in a very military kind of a way. We have a very informal uniform for example. Most of our people dress the same way. We do not have a lot of protocols and ceremony in the way we operate. So I know people remark about that, that the organization seems to be very relaxed when they visit us. And they're able to observe the things that we're doing.

RG: Now what happens on the fire ground? In that kind of situation.

Caption: Robert W. Grant

AB: I would also balance that out by saying that I think my organization is probably among the best disciplined departments as far as being able to extend standard operations when they extend field operations within the framework of standard operating procedures is that I think that's the place that discipline needs to go on inside a fire organization. And I'm always a little bit fascinated by a fire department, and I know a few of them that have six pages of regulations about where you wear your uniform shirt, but they don't wear turnout coats on the fire ground. And it seems to me that in the fire service we have perhaps got some of those priorities out of balance and out of sync. So we have attempted to put the discipline and put the emphasis on standard operations when we do fire and EMS and disaster control and we have to go out on those kinds of incidents and manage our resources. And

again I'm continually attracted to the approach that our people are able to take because they generally do very, very well.

RG: Expand on this relaxed atmosphere a little bit. Because that kind of runs counter to say the military philosophy of management.

AB: I think that when people are relaxed and they feel good about what they're doing, and they're working in a system that has clearly stated objectives that they're able to participate in or, particularly on the company level, that you have people that can basically regulate their own schedules for example within the framework of strong programs that firefighters from my experience are a lot more effective. That they tend to see the organization in a more sensible context. To say that the people who run the organization are actually putting the emphasis on where they should, on the service delivery part of it. I think that where we regard the individual, for example, as an individual, and we give him that opportunity to be an individual within the framework of the regulations that you have in the operation. I think that we're taking probably as close to maximum advantage of the resources you have as far as personnel. Where people understand what's expected of them, where they have the tools and the training and the abilities to do those kinds of things and to achieve those objectives, where there's adequate feedback, where the results of their efforts, in effect, are fed back to them so they understand it. And you either reinforce what they do well, which I think is the majority of experience, or where they have problems you basically take an educational approach to those problems. It begins to build some user confidence let's say in the organization. In other words that the organization is in place not to constrain the individual but to somehow cause him to achieve his objectives.

RG: Now, let me ask you this, is that unique to Alan Brunacini's fire department, or is that an overall city of Phoenix philosophy, is it a philosophy that goes back over a number of years with the Phoenix Fire Department.

AB: I think that the city of Phoenix provides a very effective framework for a department head to operate in. It also gives you a great deal of freedom to operate in whatever personal style a department head is comfortable with. There are twenty-six departments in the city of Phoenix, and I would say that all of them are managed a bit different because of the personalities and the approaches and the values of those departments. I think that that particular approach is probably peculiar in the city of Phoenix to the Phoenix Fire Department, even though I would characterize the city of Phoenix as probably being a city that is much like that. There are other departments that are operated in a fairly straight forward kind of way. That particular style is probably somewhat peculiar to me honestly. An organization necessarily takes on a certain part of the personality of the person that is the head of it, and I would say that's the way I like to be managed in the process, and I'm sure that that flavor comes through to the whole organization.

RG: You're people are all very highly motivated. That's one observation that I would have. I'm interested in what you would view as the secret to that success. It's probably not a secret. I think you've been talking about some of it here. Can you just kind of summarize what you think brings about that highly motivated atmosphere with the people in the department?

AB: I think the first thing is the ability that we have had and the capability to hire extraordinary people. We will routinely test annually about between three and four thousand people from the community, young people from the community who want to become firefighters. We will hire between forty and fifty. So we are truly hiring the cream of the crop, and I mean that literally, the cream of the crop. Just recruit employees that are extraordinary as far as their background, their education, their motivation, their personal capabilities. When you're able to attract that kind of people you certainly start out at an incredible advantage in people who want to be firefighters. In other words, we're not kidnapping people to join the Phoenix Fire Department.

RG: Sure.

AB: Inside the organization, once they get into the fire department, into our organization, I think that there is a strong and a very high commitment to train those people, and I'm extremely proud of the training approach that we take, clear through the organization. There is a high orientation on preparation. We train everybody and everything. We have some special officers' courses as ongoing courses, but basically during a recruit experience of twelve weeks, he or she will understand all of the basic programs and all of the basic roles of everyone in the organization. We attempt to begin to use that person from the first day they come to work. In the fire service it's still a very seniority based system so the effect of that is that in many systems it takes a person years to be able to try themselves out, so to speak, on a lot of the basic things that the organizations will be involved in. Now there's no "don't touch that until you've had seven or eight years around here [son]." We can't afford to waste that resource that is so expensive to us and so important to us. I think that there's a high expectation clearly stated from the very beginning that those people will be effective and that they will be highly involved. I think that that kind of sets the foundation for a person being motivated. When they come to work they know that they're important, and they know what they're doing is important from the very first day.

RG: What would you say it would cost the city of Phoenix to train a firefighter? From say recruit training up until they would become reasonably proficient in the firefighting business.

AB: Probably, exclusive of their salary, around ten thousand dollars.

Caption: Alan V. Brunacini, Fire Chief, Phoenix, Arizona

AB: It costs about twice that, for example, to make a firefighter a paramedic. So the investment that we make in an employee is considerable.

RG: Yes that's substantial.

AB: That's right. And we are effective to the extent that our employees are effective. It really, that's the case is that very little is automated in the fire service. Particularly as far as service delivery, as far as that manual labor is concerned.

RG: You know, one thing that always intrigues me in listening to you talk, and just before we came on the set, you were talking about customer relations. Well that's not a term that you hear in the fire

service, and I'm always intrigued to hear you talk about these concepts that are kind of alien to the fire service. And you were talking about running some customer relations courses. Can you expand on that?

AB: Sure. I was talking to the leadership of our union the other day, and they were observing, and I really appreciate it, that there was a concern about the continuing capability that we had to maintain positive relations in the community. Not that there was any problem. In fact just the opposite. I think that we have had a very aggressive public information approach, and I think that with our service delivery programs that are in place and the quality of people that we have that we relate to the community very positively. But they were concerned that over a period of time, particularly for a department this deeply involved with emergency medical services, that there's a maximum opportunity to expose yourself to those opportunities where you can have a problem with the public. So we had a little brainstorming session, and we talked about looking at some of the organizations that did an excellent job as far as customer relations were concerned. And you take some firefighter whose gone out on ten calls after midnight, and they're basically what the firefighters call snivel calls, in other words they really weren't needed, but you couldn't screen that call out of the system, and a lot of them relate to emergency medical services. Many times those people are confused, and they have some medical problem, but it's not really an emergency, but it's also an exposure that we have to the public where we can put ourselves at a disadvantage if we don't handle it effectively. So we're attempting to do just some of the very preliminary work in simply customer relations is how do we manage that guy who is going to be looking in that person's eyes and taking their blood pressure and doing those very routine kinds of things that when they leave that person, even though they weren't needed, that they have a good feeling about that individual as an EMT and also of the Phoenix Fire Department. So it's kind of a new area to us, and I think that we have just operated on the capability of those people and the fact that they felt pretty good about what they were doing. But I think in the fire service, and probably any organization, has to take a tough look at how you're relating to your customers because that's what's keeping you alive simply. But this is kind of a new area for us even, but I'm kind of looking forward to it, and just getting the opportunity maybe to talk about some of the organizations that have stewardesses or desk clerks or service men or something that do give you, you know, that you have a pretty good feeling about Maytag or Delta or whoever it is.

RG: Yeah.

AB: I think that's going to be an interesting exercise.

RG: And people that solve problems. Like with an airline, the airline clerk or the stewardess has to solve problems.

AB: Or the baggage service guy. You never see the baggage service guy unless they lost your luggage.

RG: That's right.

AB: So that guy deals for eight hours with people who are angry and upset. You know, their medication went to [Duluth], and they went to Dallas or something. So it's going to be interesting to look at the approach that some of those people have to cause that to happen in an organization. And there's many

fire departments that have lousy customer relations, and you go places, and you deal with the fire service and the citizens and they say, "You know they're a bunch of bums." Well they're probably doing a good job, but in that, something is falling through the cracks to the extent that they're having a problem with that. So I think that that can happen to any organization. So I think that if you can fix that before it gets to be a problem or do a set of things that causes those good things to keep going on.

*** This is the end of part 1. Parts 2, 3, 4 and 5 continue on the DVD