By Michael Lee

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| **Mayday – When Would You Use It?** |

As Safety Week drew to a close, I was proud to look back and see how our department has grasped onto this concept and really put effort into it. We performed various drills and also covered various safety procedures during conversations around the kitchen table.

One of the topics we covered was the concept of Mayday and when it should be used. As usual, the old guard was vocal about when they would use it — essentially somewhere after the initiation of Armageddon.

As the new employees were soaking up all of this, it dawned on me that I was responsible for taking the unrealistic comments being used by the "experienced" crews and immediately change old and new expectations. I had to try to come up with a way to pass this information in a useable fashion.

I had my own personal opinion, but wanted to ensure that I did not miss any critical situations when I passed on the new nuggets of information. After some quick research, I was able to come up with a list of when to call for Mayday:

* At any time you or one of your crew: becomes tangled, pinned or stuck for what ever reason
* If you or one of you crew falls through a roof or floor.
* If a collapse occurs that blocks you or your way out.
* If you get disoriented and/or separated from your crew for any reason.
* If your partner becomes separated from you.
* If you cannot find an exit door or window for any reason.
* If your primary exit is blocked and you can’t find a second exit.
* If your low air alarms and you do not have an immediate exit.
* If fire conditions change to make you believe an imminent flashover or backdraft will occur.
* If your PPE fails you for whatever reason, especially your SCBA.
* If you or your partner is injured, or has a medical emergency.
* Any time you feel you or one of your crew is at risk, whatever the cause.

This list is by no means all of the reasons for calling a Mayday — but it serves as a reminder to all personnel that calling a Mayday should occur early when things are going wrong. Call for assistance from the RIT team (RIC, FAST, etc.) before it is too late.

Compare this to calling for additional fire resources on a fire before you may need them. It is always better to turn them around than to not have them when they are needed. Believe me, any RIT team would prefer to be put to work than to stand around.

In addition, remember that if you are counting on the RIT team to save you, you will be wrong. Better to call for help while you can, before you run out of air or worse. Use the resources you have on site — you wouldn't hesitate to ask a truck company to ventilate, would you? Let the Mayday get resources to you as fast as possible!

If you end up extricating yourself before they get there — great! Thank the team for their assistance and everyone can go their merry way. But should things continue to go wrong, having the team near you instead of having to wait at the last minute is a sick, lonely feeling.

Train your new personnel that calling a Mayday is a positive thing meant to help themselves and their team. Teach them when is it appropriate to call a Mayday. Ensure them that this should never be considered an embarrassment.

Change your shift/corporate culture to ensure everyone knows that calls for Mayday are expected when an individual or team is in trouble. If you hear of instances when a team should have called for assistance and did not, these are the groups you should chide for excessive testosterone and minimal common sense.

Remember, we are the ones who must change the fire service. We can do it by helping our people understand that we want them around for a very long time, and this change to tradition will help do that.

About the author

Michael Lee has 25 years experience in pre-hospital paramedic experience and about 20 years experience in the fire service. He started as a FF/Paramedic and worked up through the ranks, including training officer, to his current position as battalion chief at Cunningham Fire Dept in Colorado. He is currently filling the role of safety officer for FEMA USAR Colorado Task Force One and has military service in the U.S. Navy. To contact Michael, email Michael.Lee@FireRescue1.com.