



Coffee Break Training - Fire Investigation Series

Fire/Arson and Explosion Investigation Curriculum: Conducting Successful Criminal Investigations

No. FI-2013-11 August 26, 2013

Learning Objective: The student shall be able to identify the basic steps of conducting successful criminal investigations leading to the timely identification, apprehension and prosecution of offenders.

For many fire investigators, the most challenging aspect of conducting a successful fire investigation begins after the fire is determined to be incendiary and a criminal (arson) investigation needs to be launched. This challenge is made increasingly difficult since many agencies fail to properly train their personnel in this critical phase of fire/arson investigation.

Fire investigation requires investigators to apply a systematic approach based on the scientific method. This approach should also serve as the basis for the follow-up criminal investigation to effectively document the circumstances surrounding the fire and determine whom is responsible for setting it. When investigators investigate any crime, including arson, they must conduct a systematic inquiry in which they closely analyze and scrutinize information. This information is generally derived from two primary sources: *people* and *things*. People and things provide investigators with information from which they hope to develop evidence that will ultimately yield the identity of the perpetrator(s).

The capacity for investigators to solve arson cases can be increased dramatically if supported by a specialized training regime that includes investigative techniques, interview and interrogation techniques, case management and solvability factors, report writing, intelligence gathering and analysis, surveillance techniques, and forensics. A training regime also includes managing informants, conducting research using public data repositories, and using social media and the Internet as investigative tools. Criminal investigation is both an art and a science supported by the experience, perseverance, intellect, communication skills and technical knowledge of investigators and their innate intuition for problem-solving. Investigators must also apply common sense and sound judgment throughout the investigative process and continually apply these skills, acquired through study, continuing education and experience, to the observation and examination of the crime scene, evidence and perpetrator(s) to solve a case.

An investigation is an examination of facts and/or circumstances, situations and scenarios based on extensive research for the purpose of rendering a conclusion of proof. All fire/arson investigations involve collecting, analyzing and evaluating data obtained from various sources. It is the job of investigators to determine what information is relevant to the investigation as soon as possible so investigative leads can be promptly followed-up. This data collection, analysis and evaluation process should be conducted with the mindset that all information with potential evidentiary value must be carefully scrutinized, corroborated and documented to produce viable leads that will yield tangible evidence. Investigators should use a team approach and utilize all available resources in this endeavor.

Investigators should remember that although the courts have historically held that information derived from the analysis of physical evidence usually carries greater weight than information derived from people, it is often the information derived from people that is the key to successfully solving and prosecuting an arson case. Investigators need to maintain an open mind at all times and follow the facts wherever they lead, even if the trail leads them to exculpatory evidence. Investigators are fact-finders not fact-makers, and they must maintain their impartiality throughout the entire investigative process to maintain their integrity, credibility, professionalism and effectiveness as criminal investigators.



Fire investigators must collect and carefully analyze all information and evidence obtained during an arson investigation to support the timely identification, apprehension and prosecution of offenders.