



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

CHOOSING UP SIDES; DEVELOPING THE TEAM

Very early on in our life we learn a valuable lesson about teamwork. Unfortunately, many of us lose that perspective as we grow older. I'm referring to the phenomenon that takes place on many a playground or school ground when it comes to choosing a team. There is a process utilized even by young children that has a lot of merit.

Choosing our team in enforcement and implementation of fire codes is a very important aspect of managing a community's fire problem. If our team fails to have a specific talent or ability that is required then it is possible we will lose the game. If a team is well balanced it can become quite competitive.

If we go back and witness what happens with small children in choosing up teams, you will notice an interesting phenomenon. In the first place, the team captains are usually chosen because they are leaders. (We use to flip a coin or use hand over hand on a bat for the first pick.) Then the respective leaders would choose their members from the assembled players. The two leaders would pick their next best person for their team and they would alternate picking the remaining participants until the teams achieved some type of equitable distribution. If the selection was based on competency alone it was not uncommon for the two teams to be relatively equally matched. When, and this happened too frequently, the choice was made on personality alone then it was not uncommon for one team to be overwhelming in its ability to compete.

How in the world does this relate to the modern world of fire protection? In the first place there are leaders on both sides of the fire protection discussion. We consider ourselves as fire authorities to be the leader in the advocacy role. On the other hand, we have opponents who have very capable leaders. Without pointing the finger at any specific industry or occupation, it is clear that in the field of built-in fire protection we have our detractors. The more effective they are the more difficulties we face.

Secondarily, in our profession we have a need for a range of skills and abilities that are competitive with the opposition. In short, some of the talents, knowledge's, and techniques that we extract from our fire combat experience might help in some aspects of fire protection. On the other hand, the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are learned by the construction industry, the sprinkler installer industry, the fire alarm installer industry, and others are equally important to their competitive stance.

For the vast majority of the history of fire prevention bureaus, the personnel who staffed this team tended to come from a very narrow spectrum of individuals. In many cases the people who were assigned to the fire prevention bureau were previously combat oriented. In some cases, their selection to go into the fire prevention function was based on physical disability or some other form of limitation.



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With the continued evolution in the complexity of fire protection today our team cannot come from a narrow focus of individuals.

We would not want a baseball team that consisted of all pitchers and catchers. We have to have utility infielders and a coach. The same thing applies to our fire prevention bureau. Everyone can't be everything in the context of the organization. While there are some general job knowledge's required, such as overall familiarity with the codes, there are some distinct differences in the specialization of people who serve as plan checkers vs. field inspectors, and field inspectors vs. public education.

I can almost hear people who are reading this article begin to reject the idea of specialization. The vast majority of fire departments in this country probably have fire prevention bureaus that are very small. The case I'm attempting to make in this column is not whether a person has to become a specialist, but rather whether a person needs to develop a specialty.

In a smaller bureau with one or two people, if they have the same skills and abilities and don't have available to them some form of specialization, then they are equal in the lowest common denominator level. As a bureau grows in size, going from one or two people up to as many as a couple of dozen, the diversification and development of a "team approach" can do nothing but strength the authority having jurisdictional ability to carry out its fire prevention mission.

There are many things that need to be considered by fire departments in developing this team work approach. One of the first options is to select our personnel for these jobs from a different talent pool than the combat force. Many fire departments have already instituted this practice by civilianizing their bureaus. The opportunity to bring in minorities and other special talents into fire prevention opens up a wide variety of alternatives. For example, I know of many fire departments that have recruited their public education staff from among the school teachers. Several fire departments that have expanded their role in built-in fire protection have actually gone out and recruited employees of fire protection companies who were either installers or sales people.

One of the best ways to keep this in the proper perspective is to look at the fire prevention bureau as a team having different positions to be played. By way of analogy, for example, the fire marshal may actually be a person who serves as a playing coach. A plan checker may be looked upon as a "goalie" whose job it is to keep the other team from scoring by accident. A field inspector may be viewed as a defensive lineman who tries to read the plays as they occur at the line of scrimmage.

Frankly, when we work from a field of technical expertise such as fire prevention and try to make sports analogies, there is a tendency to oversimplify. Fire prevention is rarely a physical activity. The corollary we're trying to draw is not so much a visual image as it is the outcome. The nature of most teamwork is to try to put together a game plan that results in winning. In the context of fire prevention bureaus



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there really aren't a lot of winners and losers on a day to day basis. There are only winners and losers with successes and failures as the fire protection system is utilized at the time of an emergency.

The more that the chief of a fire department concentrates on the development of a spectrum of teamwork capabilities, the more likely that team will produce outstanding results. Job descriptions that are almost cookie cutter impressions of one another with only slight variances in the level of responsibility breeds mediocrity. When we were back there on the playground of one of our schools at age nine or ten we always tried to pick the very best team members that we could so we could win. Nothing felt better than to be one of the first people selected; conversely, nothing felt worse than to be absolutely the last person picked.

The more we focus upon competency as part of our teamwork the more we will find people striving for that level of excellence to be part of that team. We might all be surprised if we go out and discover what our human resources are to fulfill that team. Whether they are civilian or from fire suppression, school teachers, ex-salesmen or even a retiree with a need to serve the community, there are lots of new members for our team. We need to find them and put them to work.