CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Does One Size Fit All?

This is a phrase used frequently here in discussions about the fire service. Does one size fit all? On the one hand, it almost appears ludicrous because it is very obvious that there are huge differences between the size, scope, scalability and capacity of firefighting organizations in the United States of America. For that matter, it is pretty much the same in the world over. I will absolutely guarantee you that the design and configuration of a fire brigade looks nothing like the small village out in Whales. Yet, we hear this term used all the time as if there should be one size fits all.

Let me take this point to the next most obvious connection. Does one size pants, fit everybody? Does one size shirt, fit everybody? Does one size shoe, fit everybody? No, the answer to that question is found in the fact that each of these commodities that we take for granted have similarities in concept and design but they all have different "sizes" to them.

And size is an issue of scalability. In other words, we can have a very small pair of shoes or a very large pair of shoes but generally speaking they all have the same essential components, such as a heel, sole and perhaps other components that they share with other sizes of shoes.

This conversation came into context in discussing one of the most essential aspects of managing modern fire departments. Can we possibly have one standard that is going to apply to all fire departments? I am going to resist the temptation to adopt any one standard into this discussion. My rationale for avoiding that is to stay away from the argument that there may be at least one standard that readers might be so passionate about that they aren't going to listen to the rest of the discussion.

So, let's focus on a very simple concept. That concept is the scalability and capacity. The best way of thinking about scalability is that you either size something up or you size something down to make it fit. Whatever that fit looks like, and then you determine that the size is an appropriate selection.
If we then compare our commodity with what it is supposed to do, then we either have it right sized, too big or too little. Therein lays the dilemma. How much is too much and how little is too little. A tremendous amount of argument and ink has been spilt over this idea of trying to hammer an organization into a standard that just does not fit.

So let's go back to the concept of sizing. In general, the concept of sizing is based upon the logical step from very small to very large in which a particular commodity must be designed and assembled to make the right fit. Some of the considerations in determining sizing have to do with the attributes of the object being produced. For example, there are differences in length. There are differences in width. There are differences in depth. These are points that can often be measured and placed into some form of logical profession from end of the spectrum to another.

So let's start talking about the fire service and its need to have some degree of capacity to fit. As I was preparing this article, I couldn't help but reflect upon the simple concept called spandex. That was an attempt to make one size fit all but it even has its limitations. There is only a certain amount of expansion that you can allow. So, what comes along with the concept of scalability is the practical limitations of the component.

The line of logic we might apply to this discussion is any level of service that is being adopted by a fire department must be balanced against the level of risk in the community that something is going to go wrong. In other words, it is not about the standard, it is about the relationship. If you have a huge fire problem and a miniscule fire department, you have the beginnings of a potential disaster. On the other hand, if you have practically no fire problem and you have a huge army readied against it; it may not be able to be sustained. Therein lies another element of scalability that must be part of the discussion. That element is discretionary decisions.

My way of expressing this decision making theory, is to place it in the context of a formula. Need equals capacity. If you don't know what your need is, then you don't know what your capacity is. If you know what your capacity is and it is inconsistent with your need, then you either have an over kill or an under kill. This doesn't make it any easier for a decision maker but it does allow us to stand back from the problem far enough to say that obvious discrepancies should be obvious to the third party observer. So let's take this back and apply it to your fire department. Have you really assessed your needs and have you really evaluated your resources to make sure that they were equitable and balanced and not just based on some arbitrary one size fits all mentality. Can you prove that the need is there? Can you prove that you have the capacity to deal with the need?

Here are a couple of areas that we might want to play out this scenario. Do firefighters need to be trained? What kind of training do they need? What kind of training is available? What kind of training have you adopted and incorporated into your department? Is there any difference between what you trained your firefighters to do and the actuality of what they may be required to do at the scene of an emergency?

This simple line of logic means that we cannot make decisions in a vacuum. What keeps us from all feeling and sounding exactly alike is that our communities are drastically different from one another. We need to recognize that and put a face on it instead of acting as if it doesn't exist.

Now I have hopefully convinced you that one size doesn't fit all, let me introduce you to the second concept and that is called the template. The template is nothing more than a pattern to follow if you happen to want to develop an organization that meets a certain type of criteria. Templates are a combination of variables that all a volunteer fire department to look different than a metropolitan department. Not only that, a metropolitan department that has a port and airport might look different

that has neither. Templates are like patterns in that there are best management practices that a lot of situations in which there is commonality between organizations that face similar problems.

A template doesn't mean one size fits all. A template means that one size fits one size. There is a great deal of challenge in separating these two concepts in your mind. Nonetheless, an individual who can see the difference between these two can follow a pattern of development to achieve a certain level of service and simultaneously avoid being locked into solutions that don't work anymore.

Hopefully an individual who sees the implications of these two concepts can engage in the practice of making decisions that are pragmatic and doable. The opposite of this is jamming square pegs in round holes and seeing the damage that results from it.