FOUR-LETTER WORDS

If you mention that you are going to use a few four letter words in conversation, many people expect to hear something that is either rude or obscene. But the reality is that there are many four letters words that have very positive connotations. Let me give you a few: love, like, safe, even work! So, my next comment is that I am going to use some four letter words about fire prevention that I would like you personally to decide whether they are good, bad, or are we indifferent to them. These words are; risk, loss, code and stop.

The reason I am asking you to interpret these four words is that, if you are reading this column, you are likely one of those people who are involved in the interpretation of these words in the form of policy and process within your community. I am speculating, of course, but because this column appears in a magazine that addresses the sprinkler industry and the title of the column is the AHJ, I hope that most of our readers are directly involved in the execution of actions that address those 4 simple four letter words. In others words, it is your interpretation that really matters here.

So, let's play a little game with those four words. Is it possible to use two of the words in conjunction with each other? I would submit that the words stop-loss means something in our world of fire prevention. Do loss and risk have anything in common? Here is a troublesome one for you stop-codes. Wait a minute you say, we can't put those two words together. Or can we? There is clearly an action on the part of some communities, even whole states to do just that. Over the last few years we have witnessed a character assassination of the residential sprinkler concept by the home builders and now we have seen many communities ignoring the adoption cycles of codes because they contain requirements that one or more special interest organizations feel are against their best interests. We are also seeing special interest taking a political road to get themselves exempt from code requirements. Meanwhile these same individuals are attacking the budgets of fire departments claiming they are burdensome.

But, to return to my concept of the simple rule of a four letter word actually meaning something, let's start with your job and the concept of risk. Quickly; name the word that should go right after that word risk. If you guessed the word reduction, you are on the right track. If you guessed the word management you get another star. Both of these ideas are gaining strength in the world of fire protection. As a fire official you should be extremely well versed in both risk reduction and risk management. You might ask, is there even a difference in the two phrases. In my vocabulary there are differences between mitigation and management.

"Risk management is the identification, assessment, and prioritization of risks (as defined in ISO 31000) as *the effect of uncertainty on objectives*, whether positive or negative) followed by coordinated and economical application of resources to minimize, monitor, and control the probability and/or impact of

unfortunate events[1] Therefore Risk management is your use various techniques to either eliminate or provide relative relief from the problem.

The strategies to manage a specific risk typically include transferring the risk to another party, avoiding the risk outright if you can, , reducing the negative effect or probability of the risk, or even accepting some or all of the potential or actual consequences of a particular risk.

Risk reduction is the act of trying to bring a problem down to the level that your organization can actually handle any scenarios that might emerge. This often involves the use fire protection technology and policy choices, which include the provision of both manual and automated fire protection capabilities.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) identifies the following *principles* of risk management:[2]

"Risk management should:

- create value – resources expended to mitigate risk should be less than the consequence of inaction, or (as in value engineering), the gain should exceed the pain
- be an integral part of organizational processes
- be part of decision making
- explicitly address uncertainty and assumptions
- be systematic and structured
- be based on the best available information
- be tailorable (customized)
- take human factors into account
- be transparent and inclusive
- be dynamic, iterative and responsive to change
- be capable of continual improvement and enhancement
- be continually or periodically re-assessed"

That is where you come in. If there is anyone within the confines of government that has the possibility of managing a communities risk it is the fire prevention bureau. There is ample evidence that this role is beginning to take a different shape than it has in the past. For example, there is the work of the Vision 2020 group and the material being provided by the Public Entity Risk Institute. Both of these

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[1] Hubbard, Douglas (2009). *The Failure of Risk Management: Why It's Broken and How to Fix It*. John Wiley & Sons. p. 46.
[2] ISO Standard Risk Management, International Organization for Standardization

organizations are providing excellent guidance on how to put the word stop in front of the word loss. Are you familiar with both?

If you are not I would propose a field trip on the Internet. The first thing you should examine is what risk management is all about. That can be read at this address:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Risk_management

The next step is to go to these two sites to examine the work of these two organizations in developing tools for your sue in making your community a safer place to be.

http://www.strategicfire.org/

http://www.riskinstitute.org/peri/

Trust me. After you have read what these organizations can contribute to you understanding of risk you will be better off.

Summary

For the most part, these methods consist of the following elements, performed, more or less, in the following order.

1. identify, characterize, and assess threats in your community.
2. assess the vulnerability of critical assets to those specific threats
3. determine the risk (i.e. the expected likelihood and consequences of specific types of attacks on specific assets) in your community
4. identify specific ways to reduce those risks
5. prioritize risk reduction measures based on an overall strategy

Once you have accomplished these tasks, then utilize your codes and ordinances process to institutionalize those facts. Over time your community will be a safer place to live, work, and play and you as the fire official will never have to say to someone: we knew we had a problem, but we couldn't do anything about it.

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