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***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Ghost Towns and Buried Cities; The Pathway to Obsolescence

Just how permanent is permanent? In Northern California on the east side of the Sierras there is a city called Bodie, California. It is a ghost town. At one time it was a booming community dedicated primarily to the digging of gold and of the creation of a life style devoted to the expenditure of monies from that gold. Today, Bodie, California is nothing but a shell of its former self. Standing in the middle of what appears to be vacant land is a singular fire station. It once was the headquarters of the Bodie Volunteer Fire Department.

The park rangers inform the visitors to the area that the fire station stands alone in the middle of the area not because it was built so far from the other buildings. Over a period of years most of them just burned down around the station. Recently I heard a quotation of a similar nature regarding the famous Engine Company 82 in New York. It has now been referred to humorously as “the little house on the prairie”.

In a book entitled Southern California's Best Ghost Towns, the author Phillip Varney states, “Ghost towns are enormously appealing; they provide perversely comforting proof that progress is not a smooth road forward into a glorious future. Our young nation's equivalent of an archeological site, ghost towns bears witness to the fitful starts and stops of forgotten passages in our short history. Communities built upon one person's dream that dried up when the idea failed; weigh stations on a road that never materialized; boom towns that sank roots in a wrongheaded industry.”

The reason for reflecting on this curious phenomenon is based on recent conversations with individuals about the future of the fire service. I frequently am asked to discuss this issue with organizations that are struggling with some of the more controversial proposals for providing fire protection to our communities, i.e., privatization, consolidation, the public safety concept, and so forth. Some of our own members feel the fire service is in danger of being replaced by some other form of service delivery system.

This is a very real area of concern because, in spite of what many people think is a contemporary place in society for the fire service, there are no guarantees. It is conceivable, in fact possible, that the fire service as we know it may be altered into something else at some point in the future. The real question that remains is what will our role be in assuring that it becomes something else that we want it to be, or will it become something that somebody else wants it to be?

A couple of months ago, I wrote a column entitled Organizational Archeology which dealt with the constant need to clean out our closet and make sure that we are keeping the hand on the tiller of our organization. By definition, “archeology” is the study of the history of a people by examining the



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remains of the earlier periods of their existence. We know archeologists primarily from their role in uncovering the remains of a former society and then attempting to draw conclusions about its culture or life style from the artifacts that are found in the debris. Artifacts are merely manmade objects that are evidence of man's activities.

The definition of "organization" is the act of systematizing or organizing; the arrangement of several different parts for action or for work for the performance of a vital function. If you take these two definitions and look at them side by side they almost become an oxymoron. How can we perform archeology on something that is still vital and active?

If an organization is performing a vital function, chances are it will not become extinct and, therefore, not require archeological excavation. On the other hand, if a culture, community, society or an organization or even an entire nation has been obscured and swept away by other forms of activity, then it is likely they were not performing a vital or needed function. If an organization is viable, it will never become a target for an archeologist. To the contrary, if an organization allows itself to become obsolete, at some point in time it will have to be unearthed and examined to determine what its cause of failure was and what its inherent weaknesses were that resulted in its failure.

Anyone that has been in the fire protection business for more than 10 or 15 years has to admit that we have seen a lot of changes in the last couple of decades. At the same time, I think most of us recognize that not all of these changes have been for the better. Granted, some of them have an immediacy to them that appears to be highly desirable but then can sometimes turn around and hurt us in the long run. The real question is what changes are for the better and what changes are for the worse. When will we know the answer to these questions?

One cannot entirely rely on personal observations about the positive or negative aspects of change because what is one person's advantage may become another person's disadvantage. What may become one organization's asset may become another organization's liability. In short, the way we assess the effects of change is over a period of time in which we get a chance to reflect upon the outcome of the change as it affects our entire profession or our entire organization.

We mentioned that organizational behavior tends toward viability. If we are performing important acts and are sustaining the organization, then it is very possible that whatever changes occur that improve our vitality and improve our ability to perform are going to have long-term positive effects. The reverse of that may also be true. The antonyms found in the dictionary for organization are disruption, breakup, dismemberment, distortion, and adjourned. All of these words tend toward identifying sets of conditions in which the organization is less than it was at some point in time.



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Taking a page from the history book it is easy to see that entire cultures have been affected by changes that made them less than they were before. Remember “The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire?” Bodie, California, mentioned in the lead paragraph, became a ghost town when one very simple thing occurred; the gold ran out. If one examines the reason for failure of cultures in societies in the past, they tend to fall into basically two categories. The first of these is that the organization faced a crisis they were totally incapable of dealing with, or they faced a situation in a changing world where they did not realize the change was occurring until it swept past them. Failure to deal with crisis or failure to deal with reality in both cases has the same outcome - obscurity.

One cannot help but notice that, in a lot of cases, societies that have gone by the wayside are ultimately built upon by others who either return to the same site or who have a different set of perspectives on how to survive the situation. That’s how one city gets built upon the ruins of another. It appears, once again by looking at the history book, that the two most important skills that are utilized by leaders in preventing obsolescence are vision and competency.

Vision means that the leadership is constantly looking to the future to predict changes as opposed to reacting to them. In the modern vernacular, this is often expressed as the difference between being proactive and reactive. Competency is a simple statement of making sure the ability to perform is a given function based on reality and not upon performing skills that are obsolete in themselves. A classic example of the latter might be by looking at the 19th century in the United States. There was an entire array of occupations and professions that have become obsolete because society has changed around them resulting in them no longer being needed.

It is well within the memory of many individuals alive today to recall the “ice truck” that use to go up and down the street delivering ice blocks for our ice boxes. We are not that far removed from a time when the village blacksmith was an integral part of the maintenance of a community, yet village blacksmith shops today are primarily limited to tourist facilities in those communities trying to maintain an 18th century appearance.

We are about to enter into a new era that is looking at different kinds of competency than we’ve ever seen before. Leadership in the fire service should be, or could be, impacted severely by this new reality. A recent study has indicated that by the turn of the century there will be a 50% growth in “knowledge workers” as opposed to task workers. The document “Work Force 2000” indicates that in the next 10 or 15 years the preponderance of our labor pool will come from minorities and women. Let’s do a little reality checking. How much of the vision of our fire department is aimed at improving our competency in the knowledge field and how much of our operational practices are based on the use of knowledge vs. task? How much of our recruiting effort is directed towards minorities?



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Many of you can possibly object to the implication in this paragraph that we are not doing things. The fact is that the fire service has seen some tremendous changes in the expansion of our knowledge base in the last couple of years. For example, those departments that are extensively involved in the hazardous materials field are finding themselves verging on the edge of an information overload with all the data that they are being held accountable to react to.

We are building structures today with built-in fire protection provisions that are so sophisticated that many of our combat firefighters are not adequately trained to operate the very equipment we are mandating be put in for their use. There are legal implications for the performance of firefighter's duties that heretofore were more or less protected by the shield of it being a government function. But, that shield has been eroded by liability and even by legislation to reduce the level of protection for individual organizations from financial loss.

Once again, revisiting the pages of history books, we find that in most cases the communities and organizations that have become obsolete over the years have suffered from a problem of entropy. That is, they have lost their vitality over such a lengthy period of time that those who were participating in the environment seldom saw their own weaknesses. Complacency, apathy, self serving, and myopic decision making allowed the organization to deteriorate.

Not unlike a city that has been buried under layers of dirt over the years, organizations can be obscured by activities of their own members. I once expressed my awe at how a city could become completely buried over a period of years when I was taking a class on archeology. The professor asked all of us in the room to regard a simple fact - that if we don't dust the tables in our houses, sooner or later the dust will accumulate to a layer of thickness in which we could write our name in the dust. Many of us have seen this occur, for example, when we are experiencing adverse weather conditions or our home is undergoing a remodel.

The professor asked us to look at that in terms of the depth of the dust and to place a very, very infinitesimal amount of weight on how thick that layer of dust was. In my case, I chose 1/32 of an inch. He also portrayed that if that were true and we did not dust the object, the next year there would be 2/32's of dust on the object and that at the end of the fourth year there would be 4/32's or 1/8 of an inch of dust. Granted, in a dynamic system sometimes the dust would blow away, sometimes the dust would come back, but the fact is that it is conceivable that in 100 years there would be 100/32's of an inch of dirt on some object that I had failed to maintain. 100/32's is 3 1/2 inches of dirt. In 200 years it would be six inches of dirt. If you were walking across a field and you were looking for an object and it was buried under six inches of dirt you would be hard pressed to detect it.

What causes the layers to accumulate in our organization? The three most likely perpetrators of organizational obscuration are hierarchy, bureaucracy, and mistaking techniques for tradition. Hierarchy



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is when an organization begins to focus more on its own personal self interest instead of focusing on what services or products it exists to provide. Hierarchy is best measured by the degree to which it has fixed upon its bureaucracy.

When individuals become overly comfortable in niches and begin to perform tasks in a perfunctory manner, it is possible that after awhile the tasks become more important than the mission and that the mission can change but the tasks remain the same. We jokingly refer to bureaucracy as “red tape” but it is usually the accumulation of individual decisions to do things a certain way without regard for the reasons for doing them. Most every organization I have worked with has contained within its bureaucracy many individual tasks and acts that have actually lost their original reason for existing but are being perpetuated because they are comfortable for the members.

This is especially true when individuals begin to regard the traditions of the organization as being the techniques for performing certain tasks a certain way. Simply stated, whenever something becomes a traditional way of doing something you have added a layer of obscuration and reduced the level of reality for that technique.

The role of leadership, therefore, is to make sure our organizations don't slowly but surely get covered up layer after layer which will reduce our vitality. The role of the leader is to challenge the status quo. No one remembers the last leader in a line of obsolescence. The only ones we recall are those that provided the initial start and energy that made an organization vital. For example, who remembers the last Caesar in the Roman Empire? Instead, we remember the ones that were there when it was at its glory peak. Who remembers the last mayor of Bodie, California? And who will remember the fire chief who was in charge when the organization disappeared, either in the form of dismemberment or consolidation.

There are some things we can do. A leader should be conducting a periodic evaluation of the reasons for the organization doing what it is doing. At the risk of oversimplification, one of the most important questions for a leader to ask his organization is why? There are lots of whys we have to cope with, including legal requirements, budget constraints, individual preference, and a host of others. It is important that we know what the reason is.

The second technique is to evaluate the efficiency of how well we are doing what it is we are suppose to be doing. In essence, this is a challenge that deals with the vitality of the organization. Are we as productive as we think we are or can someone else do it cheaper, faster, or even better than we are doing it? It is easy for us to fall into the trap of believing that because we have the ability to perform an individual act, such as firefighting, that we are the only ones who can do it. On the other hand, anyone who is examining the changes in fire protection technology today realizes that this is not true.



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The third technique is to keep a continuous vigilance on change in society or in the system that we exist within. In Mr. Varney's book on ghost towns, there was a quote that was perhaps one of the most poignant regarding a man who had built a railroad to a town called Keeler. When he visited the rail head, it was clear that the railroad was never going to go anywhere else. It was a dead end road. The reason why is that society had changed the ground rules and the communities had moved off in a different direction leaving this individual's railroad on a side track. He was quoted as saying to those within earshot, "Gentlemen, it appears we built our railroad either 300 miles too long or 300 years too early."

There are forces at play in our communities, our society and in the world that are going to have their effects on the fire service. We cannot afford to be myopic and self centered toward our profession. There are many "revolutions" that are going through our societies at any given time and the fire service, to remain viable, must be at least reasonably alert to what is going on.

Lastly, and this is not so much a suggestion as it is an attitude, leaders simply cannot accept mediocrity as a common denominator. Our place in the world is not that secure. The fire service as a profession, especially as we know it, has only been around for less than a century. Firefighting as a true avocation of society is only 200 years old. Some of the programs and problems we are dealing with and reacting to in our modern context are less than 25 years old. The role of a leader is to take the organization into the future without regard for the restrictions of the past.

If someone did have an opportunity to come back 5,000 years from now and dig up your organization, what one artifact would you want that archeologist to base their assessment of your culture on? What is it that is manmade in your organization that can be used as a clue of your attempt to keep your organization on the leading edge? More importantly, if you can select some manmade artifact, is it one you have fabricated or is it merely one you inherited from a previous leader?