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How Big is Your Cage?

Have you ever stopped to wonder what it would be like if Benjamin Franklin were alive today? You remember Benjamin Franklin. He's the guy who was responsible for developing some of the basic principles that resulted in the formation of the American fire service. What would happen if Ben Franklin were alive today to vote in the next election that occurs in your locality?

Don't forget: Ben was an innovator, scientist and entrepreneur. He was also a tax revolutionary. He started the idea of fire insurance because it made good sense and it made good business. He helped formulate our government, a government that overthrew another form of government because of severe taxation by the British Empire. We could speculate all day long! If Ben were alive today, how would he vote on such things as an increase in property tax to support the expansion of a fire department? Well, fortunately, these questions are rhetorical. They are strictly imaginative.

Old Ben is safely tucked away between the pages of a history book. But it does pose an interesting question. How would Ben think today? In the evolution of fire protection methodology, Ben Franklin was in on the ground floor, so to speak. The American fire service has changed a lot since that era. Today, we are forced to operate in an environment that is drastically different from what the world was like in 1776. It is highly unlikely that old Ben's opinion would have remained the same. Relating that to the fire service, it should become obvious that in the evolution of our profession, changes in philosophy, technology, methodology, and economics are intricately involved with one another.

I don't believe there is a fire chief today who can state that our profession is like it was the day he first acquired his badge to become a professional firefighter. Most of us have seen radical changes in the field of labor relations, training and education, communications, hazardous materials problems and high-rise problems. The list goes on and on. There is an infinite number of issues that have not been totally resolved. Our horizons have not only been widened, but the issues have also been deepened, becoming not only more complex, but more entrenched.

The fire officer of today has to operate in an environment that is not only radically different from previous decades, but one that has many more dimensions to it than any previous period of time in the entire development of fire protection.

This places us in a not too unique position. Many occupations have faced a similar set of circumstances in the transition of civilization. For example, I might ask this question: "How important is the village blacksmith in your town?" At one point, say in the 1840's, the village blacksmith, or "Smithy" as he was referred to, was probably one of the most highly visible members of the community. He was required because his ability and skill to perform a certain number of tasks was very important to the operation of



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the local community. Technology has changed. The world has moved on and left the village blacksmith in its wake.

Is there a remote possibility that the fire service that we know today is following a similar path towards obsolescence? There are probably people who will take both sides of that argument. I have gone to numerous seminars and conferences where doomsday predictions have been made. These predictions are based on the fact that we are losing support or at least having an eroding tax base to support fire protection as we know it. I have also gone to conferences, workshops and organizational meetings where a rosy picture has been painted based on the premise that we are so “important” to society that “it cannot afford to do without us.”

There is a high degree of possibility that the truth is found somewhere between those two positions. Our world is expanding. The degree to which a modern fire officer understands the new perimeters to that world is going to indicate how far he will stretch in order to be in control of what happens to him and his profession.

There are certain signs in our profession as a whole that we might be suffering from what they call the “small cage habit.” Most people have never heard of the small cage habit. However, any of you who have ever been to a zoo have probably witnessed it.

Many, many years ago in a small eastern city, they acquired a polar bear. They put him in a cage that, unfortunately, was too small for the animal. He was powerful, had a great deal of appeal and attracted a lot of attention at the zoo.

The visitors at the zoo soon began to notice that the bear’s cage had a certain limit to it. The bear would pace first one direction six steps, stop, turn around, and then pace six more steps and return. He would stop, return six more paces, turn, and so on and so forth. The bear paced his way each day like this for many years.

Eventually, the citizens felt this was really bad. A large fund-raising event was planned in order to give the bear a new cage. The project was successful.

Over a very short period of months, enough money was raised to get a cage for the polar bear that was many times the size of the other one. With a great deal of fanfare, this cage was constructed and a special media event planned to release the polar bear in his new cage. The day of the event came and all the local elected officials and dignitaries were standing in front of the cage to watch the polar bear’s reaction to its new-found freedom.



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The door was opened at the back of the large, new facility and the polar bear allowed to trundle down a walkway until he was standing in front of the dignitaries. Slowly, the bear looked up to the crowd, sniffed and then turned. He paced six paces to his right, stopped, turned, and paced six paces to his left and continued to repeat the same old habits that he had accumulated by being confined in such a small cage.

This syndrome is called the “small cage habit.” Loosely translated, it means that sometimes we have developed answers and habits to a set of circumstances that are so ingrained that when our boundaries and our parameters are moved outward, we still walk in the same old rut. To many of us, that phenomenon may sound all too familiar.

The cage that the fire service has had to live in for many years is expanding. If you ask yourself a question for just a few moments, you might come up with your own observation about how big our cage is becoming. For example, let’s see how many of the following questions you might have an answer to.

1. How many fire departments do you know that have become involved in the total planning process of their community in the last five years?
2. How many fire departments have been involved in emergency incidents that have now resulted in liability claims being made against the city because of improper action of fire officers?
3. How many fire departments have been involved in class action suits for equal opportunity employment litigation regarding hiring, promotion and selection processes?
4. How many fire departments have been more involved in the fire investigation field to determine more valid information regarding the cause and origin of fires?
5. How many fire departments have become actively involved in dealing with such issues as consolidation of public safety inspection, consolidation of police and fire departments, joint powers agreements, and integration of departments on a county-wide level?
6. How many departments have been involved in exploring alternate ways of financing the fire department? This includes such things as municipal fire insurance and developing fee schedules for the delivery of services for fire department activities.
7. How many fire departments have now begun to seriously explore in-depth the adoption of built-in fire protection technology to reduce the impact of the fire problem on the size and complexity of a fire department?

I think you can see from these issues the main point. The horizon that the modern fire officer has to deal with is much broader than it ever has been before. At one time, I think it would be fair to say that a fire officer really had to deal with basically only two problems - small fires and big fires. To a large degree, our occupation has been somewhat insulated from some of the social and economic aspects of the growth and/or deterioration of many of our communities. That phenomenon is no longer true.



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Additionally, we will never ever return to a state of mind in local government that will allow a fire department to be strictly a firefighting agency. We have probably seen the last of “the good time” fire departments.

So, again I ask a rhetorical question: “How big is your cage?” How far are you pacing back and forth in relationship to how far apart the borders are that you should be properly patrol-ling and being concerned about?

This article was not written to suggest that there are any simple answers to the problems that we face. To the contrary, this article was written to raise the question of how much time and effort are we putting into the development of ourselves and our personnel to be prepared to cope with these complex issues over the next few decades.

We can't afford to be mistaken or underestimate this issue. There is a lot of controversy as to what is the proper direction that we should be going in, in providing fire protection services to our communities. In my own circumstance, I have been heavily involved in residential sprinkler technology. I have actually had “professional” individuals from our occupation accuse me of everything from temporary insanity to being unethical. However, I personally am convinced that built-in fire protection technology must be part of the arsenal of a modern fire department. That's not just a philosophical feeling, but is based on the hard reality that one of the most rapidly spiraling cost elements to a fire protection system is the cost of providing manpower to perform the job of physical firefighting.

There are a lot of blind spots in the way of understanding the expansion of our horizons. Some of the pacing that is being done back and forth in the cage, which limits what is done in the interest of fire service, is based on the premise that some of the technology that we want to apply to the future is not perfect. Let me give you an example. In a recent document that was published regarding residential sprinkler technology, a comment was made that we should not encourage the installation of this kind of equipment because it is not 100% reliable. Further, a commentator made the statement that it is fallacious to install such equipment because it might lead to “those who had it in-stalled to have a false sense of security about their safety.”

I find that comment rather interesting in view of the fact that literally hundreds of thousands of people have gone to sleep in their homes secure in their minds that they had fire protection and never woke up the next morning. Fire protection in the form of a fire truck and firefighter down the street prepared to respond in the event that they had a fire has not been successful in stemming the tide of loss.

Those same individuals, secure in that feeling, were rudely awakened by the crash of glass, or the hissing sound of a fire in the next room, or rose up into that super-heated, boiling atmosphere created by a fire that has just gone to flashover, or valiantly struggled to go down hallways to save children who are



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already fatal and, in the process, become casualties themselves, or who were lucky enough to escape their home, but unfortunate enough to have to stand there and watch it burn to the ground while the manual firefighter forces were forcing their way through inclement weather, or congested roads, or forced to deal with the variety of problems that plague a manual firefighting force after arriving at the scene of an emergency.

Well, what are we saying? The vast majority of training and education that most firefighters have received in the past has been aimed at developing manual skills. Firefighting has almost always been considered a physical act. The cage that contains “fire protection” is changing. It is now requiring more cerebral exercise. Getting back to old Ben Franklin that we were talking about at the beginning of this article, I wonder how he would respond to the expansion of our paradigm. If Ben were around today, would he be part of the fire service as we know it? Or would he be part of the element of society that is forcing the fire service to reassess its values and its methods of operation?

On the other hand, if Ben were alive today, where would he fit into the scheme of things? How would he relate to the modern fire officer? That is something that some of us who have the task of managing a modern fire department should sit down and seriously evaluate on our own.