



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Know Fire Prevention

Someone needs to explain to me this logic. Every time there is a budget reduction in a fire department, one of the first things that have to be lopped off of the table is the fire prevention bureau. They are stiff competition for being number one to have your head taken off in departments. The other person who is always concerned in budget reductions is the training officer. To me, eliminating your fire prevention bureau and your training chief are sort of like taking your fingers and poking yourself in both eyes when you are trying to see where the heck you're going. Neither of these concepts makes any sense at all in budget reductions.

Yet, commonly fire departments must face up to the fact that they can only do what they have the funds to accomplish. And, we need to admit one thing right now. The presence of fire suppression forces is absolutely essential in protecting the investment in a community. Given that we have to account for every dollar and every cent that we are given, most fire chiefs will place their priority on keeping their staffing of suppression forces to the highest potential level.

I've been in attendance to many animated conversations over the wisdom of this. It's a waste of time arguing over the point. The average citizen walking down the street really doesn't care about how much fire prevention is going on in their community. What they are interested in is what happens when they dial an emergency telephone number expecting someone to come and assist them. If we show up with a clipboard in our hand and start telling them everything that they did wrong in fire prevention, I strongly suspect there is going to be some conflict.

The other side of this argument has yet to be more adequately explored. And that is how to use our fire suppression forces more effectively in providing fire prevention in our communities. Your initial reaction to this will probably be that you know of many departments that do "company inspection programs." My definition of company inspection programs is somewhat biased. I've had the opportunity to review numerous programs in very diverse organizations and I've come to the conclusion that most company inspection programs have been created out of a strong desire to "make work" for the firefighters, but nobody pays any attention to what they are actually achieving.

I can honestly say that in some cases, that the company inspection program has been bred more by desire to just become familiar with the building than there is to do any effective fire prevention work. And, some organizations have chosen to do company inspections as a defense measure against the city manager and our other governmental officials, condemning the fact that the fire service is not doing enough about their community fire problem. At first blush, both of these reasons have some positive aspects. Even if you are going into look at buildings just for familiarization, you are doing something in



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the arena of fire prevention. And, even if you are just out there trying to make sure that you are active in the community, you are going to make a difference in certain occupancies.

Therefore, instead of bashing company inspection programs with this column, I would like to say that most of them are doing some good. However, most of them could do a lot more if we would just invest a little bit more in the training of our firefighters. What I mean by training is not that we give them more drills to go on, but rather we raise their level of consciousness of exactly what they are looking for when they are out there performing this desired service.

I've been involved in the training of firefighters ever since I was appointed as the training officer in Costa Mesa about 1965. I've seen the development of professional standards and I've watched the evolution over the years of all the specialty services that we placed into our firefighter's curriculum. Granted, we have a very complex and convoluted set of standards for entry-level firefighters today. EMS plays a bigger role. Urban Search and Rescue is playing a bigger role. Hazardous Materials is playing a bigger role. The one thing that has not been placed into context with entry-level firefighters in most places is knowledge of fire prevention. In contrast I look at the fire training programs in other countries around the world and would have to admit that most other nations that place a lot more emphasis on their entry level firefighters understanding what they are doing in the field of fire prevention. I don't want to draw too many comparisons across the board because admittedly the American Fire Service is a different set of circumstances than the fire service in other countries. Nonetheless, I would point out that an average firefighter in the United Kingdom, by the time they reached the level of being a company officer, probably has an exposure to ten to twenty times more information about fire prevention than the average company officer in this country. In addition, it is virtually impossible for someone to rise to the level of a command officer in many of the countries without having some kind of a degree in either engineering or fire prevention that allows them to be more responsive to the fire prevention side of their job duties.

No one is going to be able to revolutionize the fire service in this country overnight. We have been working diligently on raising the level of standards in the fire community for almost fifty years now. What I am suggesting here is not that we go back and start throwing things away, but rather we start adding some areas of emphasis so that our fire professionals as they move up through the rank structure, begin to know fire prevention. The curriculum to support something of this nature needs to be more in-service than external. There are many fire departments that go out and repetitively conduct certain kinds of drills day in and day out; because they believe that it is essential that they repeat certain kinds of training because people lose the job skills. Yet, there are climatic weather and other types of conditions that make it virtually impossible for firefighters to drill all of the time. What we need to be doing is to find ways of supplementing their training by giving them more and more information on the nature of fire prevention.



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Once, as an experiment while conducting a recruit academy class, I introduced entry-level firefighters to how to read the Building Code, how to read the Fire Code, how to classify occupancies by the codes and how to calculate basic fire flow for buildings. One might ask the question of why I would do that when these were entry-level firefighters.

My answer was simple. In the case of the experiment I was getting ready to put a very small fire department into effect that never had a full-time fire force before. I chose to do this to see if the knowledge and skill abilities of the entry-level firefighters were capable of coping with that type of information. They surpassed my expectations. First and foremost, I picked the best and brightest of some 2,000 candidates in order to choose the ones that I brought into this program. How could I not believe that they would have done well? After the academy was over and I put them out into the field conducting fire prevention activities, I noticed that they did not lose the information that they had contained, but rather had built upon it.

Another element that we need to break down is the barrier between the fire prevention bureau and the fire operations division in most organizations. There is a term called stove-piping. What this means is that individuals who live within a certain area of specialty and expertise tend to communicate only amongst themselves and fail to maintain linkages outside of their specialty. In spite of the fact that we all wear the same uniform, carry the same badge and have the same shoulder patch in many fire agencies, the fire marshal and the training officer never every exchange information. This is an unfortunate deficiency. Granted, this following technique may not work very well for many fire departments, but some have the ability to do this. What I am suggesting is that when a person is appointed as a company officer that they spend some time in a fire prevention bureau getting to understand the basic practices. Sort of like an internship or officer's orientation program, individuals should be given as much orientation as they can before they are given the responsibility of supervising others in this practice. I'm not sure how long this should actually take, because in many fire agencies time is of the essence and is costly.

Another similar technique is to bring people in as entry-level people in the bureau, work them for approximately one year and then send them to the recruit academies. Once again, this is highly dependent upon the circumstances in existence to allow a fire chief to do this. More importantly though, is that someday think like this. It is real easy to follow the status quo of the past. It is real easy to think that entry level firefighters who are about to enter probation are pretty much a blank piece of paper and that we are going to write on them with a combat side to impress upon them the fact that fire suppression is going to be their way of life. I think we should take the time to impress upon our young firefighters that fire prevention is part of their arsenal. They need to know fire prevention just as well as they know fire behavior. They need to know building construction just as well as they need to know ventilation and forcible entry. They need to know the hazards that cause fire as well as the hazardous that can kill firefighters. They need to know.



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We are constantly telling the world that we are professionals. And if we wish to be treated as professionals, we have to be able to demonstrate that we have total competency of the environment in which we are exercising that profession. We are also in competition with our public safety partners, law enforcement. I would submit to many of us that law enforcement officers at the very entry level, are asked to enforce the penal code and the other forms of criminal codes in this country, up to the point where they may be asked to exercise deadly force in its preservation. We should expect nothing less from professional firefighters. Fire prevention is not a place that we assign people. Fire prevention is a function of a professional. The better that we are at preventing the fires and the better we are at controlling the fires, the better we are at protecting our communities.