Thinking in the Box

I'll bet everybody has heard the expression, "thinking outside the box". The implication is that we want you to think differently about the way things are and do not be limited by traditional solutions. That is all well and good when you are dealing with unknowns or you are attempting to incorporate innovation and creativity into a though process. But does anybody ever tell you that every once in a while you need to think inside the box?

You know, there are times when it is not appropriate to be overly creative. To the contrary, there are times when you better follow policy, practices, rules and regulations to the letter because they were written for one reason or another and they should not be arbitrarily violated.

We should never forget that sometimes boxes are built for a specific purpose. When we use that trite old cliché about thinking outside of the box, we need to go back and ask ourselves the question of what is the shape of that box, what is its volume and what is its intended purpose? I would submit that there are boxes we build in the fire service that we should be living within.

Let me give you an example of a box we shouldn't be thinking outside of. If we truly believe in firefighter safety, then we have a box to live in. For example, we don't want to encourage free lancing. We are not the least bit interested in people being particularly creative on the fire ground when it places them in jeopardy. If we have a policy and procedure about wearing PPE – it means wear the PPE all of the time when it is required. You do not wear it sometimes, but always.

The purpose of this column is to try to get you to think a little bit about some of the boxes that we have built for ourselves that are not intended to be broken down and disregarded. They are the construct of some of the most fundamental aspects of our business. I chose firefighter safety as one of the boxes that we ought to live within because it has a very, very specific and obvious consequence when we start thinking outside of it. We don't want to encourage spontaneous behavior. We don't want to encourage improvised solutions that have not got reasonably predictable outcomes.

What are those boxes we should be or could be concerning ourselves about as fire chiefs? I would submit that if we are building a box for built in fire protection we better start thinking inside of it all the time.   Merely mandating the installation of technology is not the end of the game. I have noticed that many departments require, even mandate the installation of technology that they spend absolutely no time whatsoever going back to assure themselves that it is functional. That is a box that we should not be thinking outside of. Code enforcement has two words to it. *Code* meaning as a way of doing it and *enforcement* meaning we should be asking people to do it that way.

Going back to my opening statement, a lot of people will want us to think outside the box because they

believe that we have failed to keep the fire service contemporary. In this column I am trying to make the argument that the concept of being creative does not preclude us from going to sound principles, practices and policies that are fundamental. Thinking outside the box does not mean gambling. It certainly does not mean utter disregard for consequence.

Take a look at your department and ask yourself what kind of boxes have you built? Let's think for a moment of what we have as our expectation of our individual fire companies. Is there a box they live in? Are there things that we expect them to do that we expect them to do repeatedly and at a high level of competence? Does that box have any connection with other boxes? For example, what box do we create for a platoon? As a chief officer do you have minimum perspective to be able to achieve as being part of your organizational structure. How about the box that we built for the training division? Is it big enough to encompass all of the needs? Or, does it have to be expanded to meet a changing environment in the community?

Last but not least, let's use this box metaphor to talk about your entire department. What does the box look like? Is it a strong sturdy box with a base, four sides and a cover to it so that whatever is contained within it is stable, safe and sustainable? Or, is the box fragile, shop warn and vulnerable. Is your box constructed of the right materials?

I can tell you that there is a big difference between how a cardboard box stands up to weathering than a box made out of wood or metal. Is your box sturdy enough to withstand an assault from the outside? When I was preparing this column, I was reminded of an old joke. They once said that a person who is an optimist is someone who looks at a glass of water as half full and claims that it is beneficial. They say that a pessimist is someone who looks at that same exact glass that is half full and declares that it is deteriorating. Then some person came along and said, well if an engineer looks at that glass he will probably come back and tell you that the glass is the wrong size for holding the volume and it should be redesigned.

Boxes are not bad. The design of a box could be. There are lots of tools that we could use in our business if you go back and look at the boxes that we are building. Among my favorite ones to advocate is the use of the self-assessment method proposed by the Center for Public Safety Excellence and the Commission on Fire Accreditation International. Nothing makes for a stronger organization then a constant reassessment of what you are doing, how you are doing it and how you can improve upon it. That is not thinking outside the box. That is *building* a better box, even if it not necessarily bigger.

Therein lies one of the challenges we face in our current economic diatribe about the fire service. We shouldn't be throwing out the baby with the bath water. When someone tells us to start thinking outside the box, we need to go back to the fundamentals and ask ourselves what should we be doing to redefine, redesign and then execute a new box that is under our control.

Granted, some people view this entirely as a process of merely reducing cost. I am not going to make the argument that there aren't economic impacts, but I will say that fire protection is simply not a one size fits all profession. All of our communities are different. While we strive a great deal for consistency and standardization because it makes it easy to manage, the real challenge is to be able to customize and build your organizations structure around what you really need to do to protect your community.

Someone will read this article and probably take exception with my reversal of the traditional cliché. I will grant you that there are a lot of people out there that do want to change the fire service. Some want the better; some are aiming for the worse. I have spent a considerable amount of my career engaged in thought processes to bring about change. But, I am still not convinced that we have to turn our fire service profession on its head to become better. I think there are ample opportunities for us to recalibrate, redirect, redistribute, and come up with alternatives that can meet our needs.

So chief, what is it going to be: a better box or are we just going to remain boxed in?