The volunteer fire service, as told by Darwin

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How many fire chiefs in the U.S. are in full-time, paid positions? How many are fire chiefs who receive some form of compensation or stipend, but less than would a full-time chief? How many are volunteer chiefs who receive no compensation for their time, energy or effort? I tried to find the answers to these questions recently, and while I could find bits of answers in many places, there is no single agreed-upon number.

As you are reading this magazine, there's a good chance you fall into one of the categories above — which of the three doesn't matter. I don't write separate columns for paid and unpaid. A chief is a chief regardless of compensation. Consider that our starting point.

Many believe that the fire service is about to undergo major changes that will affect these categories. Some argue that the volunteer fire service is going to become extinct; others pose that middle management in paid departments is an endangered species. But might these changes just be part of natural fire-service evolution? Charles Darwin postulated a theory a long time ago that the survival of a species only results when the organism evolves to meet current living conditions.

The volunteer fire chief has no less a duty to perform, than a person who is receiving compensation, but may have a limited amount of time in which to participate in the training and education system we have created for the full-time chiefs. Middle management is vulnerable during budget reductions because of cost/benefit analyses that often place little value on span of control and unity of command issues.

The volunteer fire service as iconocized by Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* covers — with a fire truck pulling out from volunteer station and a bunch of businessmen running behind it to jump on — still generally works well in the context of a limited community, which I define as one with less than 5,000 residents. It is highly possible that such communities need a volunteer fire department. It is probably the only thing they can afford.

But as communities become more heavily populated, the demand placed on volunteers increases and they eventually have to be replaced by more full-time personnel. The issue isn't competency, it's coverage. Almost every major metropolitan fire department in this country — Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia and Boston to name a few — began as a volunteer fire departments. But there came a point in time in which the demand upon the service could not easily be provided by a volunteer staffing system. Trying to fit three of four emergencies into volunteers' day-to-day lives becomes imposing.

So what do volunteer chiefs need to know? I have a very large library in my office on things that some people know, other things that very few people know, and a whole lot of things that many people do not know. The person who is serving as a volunteer fire chief in a community has the same obligations to his or her staff as would a paid chief. Most importantly, the chief needs to operate the department in a safe and efficient manner. The community also wants the chief to operate the department legally. Does a volunteer need to know about risk assessment? Yes. Does a volunteer chief need to know about NFPA standards? Of course. However, many people fail to apply common sense to the depth of required knowledge.

If your department is a volunteer service, you can no longer operate it as a social club. You are a viable part of the nation's first line of fire defense. And, if you have a an organization that is paid at every level, it has to pull its weight in terms of outcome. Both of these require a change of attitude by many of the incumbents.

It is a process that Darwin easily would have recognized. ■