What is a Stakeholder?

It sounds like a line from a movie: "what is at stake here - is the future of the human race!" That sounds like something that could be uttered by a hero – or villain in a Hollywood production. Whenever we use the word stake, what do we really mean? Today, the word stakeholder gets thrown around a lot in the management and leadership of both business and government. Yet, I have never seen anybody with an ID card that declared they were a stakeholder.

Who are these mysterious people? If you don't know the answer to that in a specific way, it may be possible that you are not communicating with the very people who control your fate. I am in reference to the fact that we are constantly talking about stakeholders, but spending very little time identifying who they really are. Instead, we often focus our time and attention on "special interest groups". I bet you don't have any trouble identifying them. These are the people who make the most noise about the advantages or disadvantages of a particular course of action you are attempting to pursue. Admittedly, some of them might be stakeholders, but on the other hand, they might just be special interest and could care less about the other stakeholders.

Contrast that with the idea that we in the fire service are working in the context of an environment where the vast majority of people who are paying for our services have little or no knowledge of what we are doing to provide those services. In conducting planning efforts, I have often come across the discussion of stakeholders in the context of making sure that any future planning processes includes input from those parties. When we talk about stakeholders, we usually mean the people that have the most to gain or lose depending upon our course of action. In the strategic planning process, there is a focus on stakeholders but there is no guarantee that we have actually identified the appropriate ones unless we engage in a conscious effort to understand why they are a stakeholder.

There is also another term being used in strategic planning called target audiences. Are they the same as stakeholders? The issue in both cases is to get out a message that we would like to see accepted by people we want to give support for the course of action in our organization.

Unfortunately, much of the literature on stakeholders focuses on the more positive aspects of this selection process instead of the realistic aspects of it. There are people who are stakeholders who don't want us doing certain kinds of things. Yes, there are individuals who are opposed to specific courses of action such as improved fire prevention, enhanced emergency response and higher levels of service that cost more money.

Therefore, it seems appropriate that we spend some time learning how to define the influence groups in our community that are both on the positive and negative side. We have as much of a need to educate our advisories as we do our allies. One of the ways that this can start is by examining the demographics

and economics of our local communities in a very specific fashion. If you are truly interested in finding out who your stakeholders are then you had better start focusing on the entire community and not just upon the users of our system.

We need to recognize that our customers are not just people whose homes have caught fire or suffered an accident or illness. Our customers are literally the people who pay our bills. Our customers, in many cases, are also the people that either support or work against our program activities.

There are four elements of any potential stakeholder. They might be called dimensions of stakeholders. They are as follows:

1. Power (low, medium, high)
2. Support (positive, negative, neutral)
3. Influence (low, moderate, high)
4. Need (weak, medium, strong)

This means that there are a variety of reasons why people have an interest or influence over what you are doing. That is what stakeholders truly are; the individuals that you can identify who are concerned and then committed to a course of action. If you would like to become an expert on this concept, you don't have to go very far. There is a website that is entitled "mind tools" written by Rachael Thompson that very thoroughly explains this concept. It is available at http://www.mindtools.com.

She provides a three step process that doesn't mention fire once but can be applied to any number of projects operated under the oversight of a fire department. My suggestion is that you look it up and add it to your vocabulary before you utter the work stakeholder in any future meeting.

Once you have identified who these groups are, then we have to take the next step. That consists of inviting them to the party. Most of fire service planning efforts seems to be very internalized. In my opinion, one of the beliefs in our careers is that we seldom lack the confidence that the public understands our profession well enough to make intelligent decisions about what we ought to be doing. However, that is not what stakeholders are all about. The purpose behind bringing them into the communications is to share two things. One is our goals and secondly to meet their expectations.

The way to move beyond using the cliché that someone is a stakeholder is to ask yourself the question of who belongs in our planning processes besides those of us wearing badges. Can we put a name on it and a face to a group of individuals who have a vested interested in the outcome of our activity? If the answer to that is yes, then we are probably doing a pretty good job of stakeholder involvement. However, if the answer to that is no, there is a remote possibility that we could be making strategic and even tactical errors in our service level determinations.