



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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If You Don't Know Where You're Going?

There is an old saying: "if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." Loosely translated that means if you're moving forward without a plan you are unlikely to end up in a specific place that you prefer. You are likely end up is in a place that may even be hostile to you and to your leadership if you don't have a plan. That is one of the reasons why almost every discussion of organizational direction today starts talking about planning processes. It is one thing to say that we believe in planning but it is another to actually do it. Almost everybody feels that planning is an unnecessary activity until something goes wrong. Then everyone wants to know what the plan was.

If you are going to be a person in charge of a fire prevention bureau you had better have a plan. If you're waiting around for your boss to tell you that you need a plan then your organization is way behind the curve. If you're waiting for your subordinates to come in and ask for direction on the plan, then you are not only behind the curve but you are not even in the game. NFPA Standard 5.3 and 5.3.1 both suggest that there are steps necessary to develop a plan, given identified community fire safety problems. So what have you done to create a plan so that you can get your program approved, adopted, and executed with a real sense of success?

The real question for you now is: how much work is involved in doing all that?

One thing you need to recognize is that a fire marshal is a key staff officer in any fire service organization. In that position, you should be contributing to the decision making process regarding the overall organization of the fire department. The concept of risk management means very little unless the bureau is trying to reduce the community fire problem. That is your contribution to the overall strategic planning of your department. Unfortunately, many fire departments do not treat their fire marshal with any level of importance because the fire marshal job is regarded as being less exciting and less rewarding than being on the operations side. But, you should never forget that it is the fire marshal that creates the community fire problem. Risk mitigation is what you are planning for.

A fire marshal should be considered as a top level management person, regardless of what rank they hold. They should have direct access to the fire chief. The specific reason is so that the fire marshal can contribute information and decisions that will result in improving fire protection as the community then grows. This idea ties in with the reality that communities need plans for other purposes than the fire department. It is not uncommon for a community to have a General Plan, which relates to the growth and development of both residential and commercial buildings. It is not uncommon for a community to have a strategic plan, which deals with the overall direction of the community. Unfortunately, not all fire departments feel compelled to follow through with this planning process at the department level. Nonetheless, you should be thinking about what your plans are for mitigating the community's fire problem.

When you were over there in operations, your primary concern was incident workload. How many calls a day are you going to get is the main question? Now that you're in the bureau you should be doing everything in your power to reduce the number of those calls having anything to do with the loss of life and property from fire. Bluntly, you're not going to do much about the workload for EMS. So, don't



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worry about it. Your task is to look at the building fire problem and do everything you can to mitigate it. Two words that belong in your vocabulary are probability and possibility. They do not mean the same thing. Possibility is a binary condition. Either something is possible to occur, or it's not. There are two possible answers yes and no. There are two measurements of possibility 0% and 100%. This is where a lot of fire marshals get into some difficulty by not recognizing the difference between possibility and probability. Probability is a percentage. In other words, if you have 10,000 structures, it is probable that a certain percentage of them will have a fire even in any given year.

One of the criticisms of the fire service is that we are constantly touting that disaster is about to befall us. Often this is referred to as the "Chicken Little" syndrome. You know what I'm talking about. The declaration that the sky is falling, when in fact it hasn't fallen today nor did it fall yesterday but it could fall sometime in the future.

The fire marshal shall not speak in terms of Chicken Little. The fire marshal's position should be expressed in terms of the probability of it happening. Your community risk is almost always a probability issue. Is it possible to have a fire in a single-family dwelling? Yes. Is it possible to have a fire in a high-rise building? Yes. What are the probabilities that you may have a fire in a single-family dwelling in comparison to the probability that you may have a fire and high-rise? Community decision-makers want and need verbiage that deals with reality and not with idle threats. Therefore, the planning process for a fire marshal should focus on probabilities determined by looking at past experience. Again, is it more likely that you will have a structure fire in a single-family dwelling than a high-rise building? If you don't have a high-rise building, then the question might be, are you likely to have a fire in the business occupancy as opposed to a dwelling?

The purpose of this article is to get you to recognize that you need a plan for your communities risk level and do everything possible to reduce probability. That is your planning goal. Unfortunately there is not an awful lot of risk information available to the fire service that helps us make this decision at the local level. However, by focusing on probability, we can make some projections that lead us to risk mitigation. For example, would it be true that if most of your fires are single-family dwellings and that many of them are at night, it would be a strong justification for a smoke detector ordinance. That is the exact argument that helped us sell smoke detectors in the 70s.

Unfortunately, there are no guarantees in the world of probability. Some people become very uncomfortable when talking about probabilities, especially if they believe they can be held accountable for their predictions. But even Nobel Laureate authors, such as Niels Bohr admit that "prediction is very difficult, especially about the future."

I don't expect everyone to have perfect knowledge of what outcomes will occur in your community. There is always a degree of uncertainty that you must be prepared to deal with. That's where other terms come into our vocabulary that include; risk tolerance, threat agents, threat characteristics, and decomposition of our community that changes the nature of the fire problem over time.

Lastly, your planning efforts need to look at loss event frequency and vulnerability. This is what you're planning for in the long run. The fire marshal needs to be the expert on risk in the community. The fire marshal should be submitting that information as part of the fire departments strategic planning efforts



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and as part of the community's general planning efforts. In general, risk assessment should become common knowledge through your public education processes.

General Dwight D Eisenhower, supreme commander of the invasion of Europe in World War II once stated that "plans are useless – but planning is essential". I have interpreted that to mean that developing extensive documents that set on the shelf that nobody ever reads are essentially wasted time. But those who are put through the exercise of examining the probabilities and possibilities contribute as much to the safety level in the community than the four minute travel time that everybody touts as being our primary performance measure.

Don't get me wrong, we need to. We will always try get there as fast as possible. But I also believe that as a fire marshal you have the opportunity to shape the environment where an incident is going to occur by planning in advance. The better your plans, the more likely fire will result as an inconvenience rather than an injury or fatality.

I have listed two websites that you might want to visit to improve upon your long-range planning skills.

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¹ <http://www.amazon.com/Fire-Department-Strategic-Planning-Excellence/dp/1593700032>

² <http://strategicfire.org/>