



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Batter Up

What gets measured; gets done! That is a phrase that resonates throughout society. If someone is keeping track of performance, then someone else is probably doing everything they can to meet that expectation. On the other hand, if nobody measured it, frankly, most of the time nobody cares! I would submit that there are thousands of people looking at the statistics being produced in the Olympics in China right now.

The phenomenon of performance measurement in the fire service is nothing new. Over twenty years ago it was recognized that performance measurement was going to be a requirement that would either be embraced by government or it would be forced upon the government. Notwithstanding wholesale failures of various levels of government to actually do much with performance measurement, the more successful fire organizations today use performance measures as if they were playing professional major league baseball.

What I am in reference to is keeping track. Keeping track based upon my baseball analogy is actually a job description for a lot of people in the profession. If you follow that sport very closely you probably already know that who hits the most home runs is not the only statistic that is kept by a baseball team. A myriad of numbers are kept in order to assure that not only that games that are won or lost are kept track of, but the various reasons why they were won or lost is also recorded. Win or lose, everyone's performance is kept track of.

For example, sports statisticians keep track of the actual performance of each individual not just the team. Every baseball player has a batting average right? And, every team has a set of performance attributes that the sportscasters are always looking at. I was always amazed listening to baseball as a kid when the announcer very casually mentioned the fact that this was the 27th time that a 3rd baseman had struck out against the left handed pitcher!

In a way, these statistics are like brush strokes on a canvas. They make up the color and competency of an organization. They are also the basis for evaluation by outside observers. As a matter of fact, statistics kept in baseball are often the basis for how bets are made on specific games.

Well, fighting fire is not like playing baseball but the analogy is based on a similar assumption of statistics. Just like home runs are not the only indication of a baseball team's performance, response time is not the only indication of a fire departments performance. To place all of our eggs into just one basket creates a set of circumstances in which one individual failure focuses attention on the failure instead of the performance.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

How many numbers actually make up the statistical array of a contemporary fire department? My answer is, that it is not as many as most people think and simultaneously it is more than most fire departments spend a lot of time developing. The opposite of keeping track of only one thing is to try to keep track of everything. And that is the track that is almost equally dangerous.

Let's go back to baseball. What are some of the basic things to keep track of on an individual basis? They consist of such things as the number of at bats, the number of times that a person actually gets on base, the type of base run that they are able to acquire at each at bat. There is a win and loss score for individuals called the number of times that you actually took the bat and could score.

On the other hand, how do we measure teams in baseball? For the most part we look at runs scored and the win loss column to see if the number of runs that they scored is more than the number that the opposition scored.

What this creates is a cascade of data that emerges on the activity of each team member as it begins to emerge as a team performance. Notably everybody in professional baseball has some form of batting average. And when men are on plate, the coach wants the person with the best batting average to be at the plate. The game we are playing is called initial attack and it is one that has a strong need for a high batting average.

Over the last two decades I have looked at hundreds of communication centers in an attempt to understand how good a job we are doing in collecting some of our basic statistics. I am referring to the data that defines our performance in the field of time. There have been many articles written on this topic so I will not belabor all of the components. What I will point out to you though, is that a very large number of fire agencies never ever question the accuracy or validity of their time statistics. That is a mistake. There are way too many dispatch centers that we are allowing the element of time to be established by programmers and by program managers that are not in charge of the outcome. If there is any one advice I would give you today if you were coaching your department is to spend some time in your dispatch center really examining what time elements are collected and how accurate are they. If, for example, your time elements are kept in whole minutes and are not kept track of in seconds, it is sort of like an umpire who is calling balls and strikes with their eyes closed. Only keeping track of minutes without the seconds being recorded allows some time components to be inaccurate for as much as two full minutes.

The next component to be observed is the accuracy with which we are compiling information on the differences in the types of responses. Many fire agencies do not exclude non emergency calls from their response time calculations and subsequently leave the impression that they are worse than they really are. On the other hand, many departments that only document their Code 3 responses fail to take that analysis to the next step which is to discriminate between structure fires, vehicle fires and medical aids.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Why? That is because these are almost the equivalent to a single, a double and a triple in hits when you are at the base. Non emergencies are like taking a walk. Nobody cares how long you take to get there. However, we should be very focused upon the time elements of what it takes to get an effective response force on the scene of a structure fire. Altogether many fire departments fail to realize that keeping track of an effective response force assembly has more to do with the outcome than just a distribution of engine companies.

Another serious weakness to our statistics is our failure to equate our fire prevention efforts to our emergency operations. The essence of fire prevention is to prevent fires from happening. Every time a fire does happen then fire prevention has failed. There are very few linkages in our system that go back and look at whether or not a building had been inspected within a reasonable timeframe before it had a fire. And, frankly, that really only applies to commercial buildings because most fire departments do not do any inspection work in single family dwellings.

Unfortunately, the concept of keeping statistics has gotten a bad name in the fire service. You ask any fire officer what their least favorite duty was in the firehouse, you will likely get an answer of paperwork. Yet, the paperwork that we accumulate at the engine company, departmental, county, state and national level is literally fuel for an ongoing debate about what we are doing about fire in this country.

There is also a problem of being able to go back and analyze whether or not hose lines were laid and whether or not fire crews invoked the two in and two out rule. I have never come across a department yet that does a really good job of analyzing outcomes on working fires. There is a tendency at the end of the year to lump them in with a category called major events. However, there were causal factors in all major events.

One exception to that rule of course is when we kill someone on our team. There are nationwide investigations over the death of a single firefighter. Rightfully there should be. Yet there can be multiple fatality deaths involving civilians in which there is no more of an investigation than a press release that is issued to the local newspaper the following Monday morning. That is not the right thing to do

My last comment about statistics is a little cynical. Who cares? Who really cares whether or not we are winning or losing the fire battle? At one level everybody should care, especially those who are assigned the responsibility of protecting our communities. The reality is that we have grown so accustomed concerning ourselves over the process that we do not talk much about the outcome. The people who are beginning to care are the watch dogs in our society. They may likely be elected officials, but in some cases they are organizations that are beginning to focus on organizational performance in government.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

And, my last observation may be even more cynical. In the baseball world there are sandlot teams, bush leaguers, minor leaguers, and major leaguers. By the same token there are fire departments that have practically no data to offer for analysis and there are major metropolitan departments that are in a data rich environment. I am of the belief that we don't need to collect everything from everybody, but, we better be collecting the most important data from those who have the greatest experience. Depending upon which league you want to play in, you have to make a decision if you are going to be a contributor or an observer. Contributors go out of their way to make sure that their information is accurate and comprehensive. It is up to you as an individual fire chief in a community to determine whether both of those conditions exist. It takes a certain amount of professional curiosity. It raises some levels of internal stress and pain. In the long run though, it really makes you a more effective contributor to the overall profession.

My last reference to the baseball analogy is the idea that Babe Ruth who was the holder of the home run record for decades was also the holder of the strikeout record for many decades. The one thing we remember him for was the one that brought him glory and success. The other ones were just a byproduct and we have chosen to ignore them. While response time remains as the Holy Grail of the fire service, the true glory in providing fire protection is to have a community in which people's lives and their careers are not disrupted by the intrusion of fire. Our job is to keep it out.