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Breaking from the Past
to Accelerate Into the Future

Things just seem to be happening faster and faster. Or so it seems. We live in a fast-paced technologically-sophisticated society where things seem to change with lightening-like rapidity.

Alvin Toffler gave it a name; future shock. Not unlike a speeding vehicle or an aircraft approaching the sound barrier, the faster things seem to go, the more shock is created. This shock phenomenon has resulted in a whole bunch of other sociological and psychological effects. These have included such things as the "stress syndrome, burn out, mid-life crises" and others.

Interestingly enough, science tells us that we, as human beings, haven't changed much over several hundred thousands of years. Our physical bodies, our mental capacities and even our emotional states have not really been altered so much. However our minds have been asked to do different things as we accelerate into the beginning of the 21st century. As human beings, our bodies may not have evolved to deal with the pressures of society, but our thought processes have.

I think many people will agree that change is not all bad. Further, I think we can all agree that there are some things that, perhaps, will never change. In the fire service, we have often been accused of being overly-traditional and a conservative lot. The fire service, as a fulltime paid profession, is very much still in its infant stage when compared to some other occupations. When we compare the evolution of firefighting as a vocation, the last 200 years are a drop in the bucket compared to other contemporary occupations, such as clerk, restaurateur, magistrate and the proverbial butcher, baker and candlestick maker that make up societies in our civilization.

The fire service has been given the label as traditional, not so much because of our tenure, but because of our attitude. We worship the past of the fire service. There are very few other occupations that accumulate the amount of memorabilia and nostalgia as the fire service. Not every firefighter is a collector, but almost all firefighters have some link between their occupation and the past present in their home or in their living environment. Much of the knowledge that we have learned in the fire service we have earned the hard way--through losses of life and the destruction of property. It has paid us to be conservative in adopting a new scheme of things when it comes to fighting fire.

But, has the fire service changed a great deal in the last 20 years? The answer is unequivocally yes. All one has to do is walk on the exhibit floor of a major fire service conference to witness a kaleidoscope of firefighting technology. We have a cornucopia of information. Fire, an ancient enemy and contemporary problem of modern man, has not changed a great deal. But, we have and will continue to change in order to prevent it, detect it, and control it.



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This is illustrated by looking at what has happened in the last 200 years. The events that have occurred across that time frame are a measurement of the accumulated knowledge and inventory of technology that we have added to the firefighting profession. One does not have to be too analytical to observe that an increase in the availability of information and technology will continue to rise in the future. If we move our evaluation of the time frame out to the year 2100, just 100 years from today, the accumulated knowledge of man on the issue of fire will be almost incomprehensible to those of us who are sitting in the service today.

There are many individuals who criticize the fire service because of its reliance on tradition. But, that criticism is not supported by the evidence illustrated in our history. The only thing that remains traditional in the fire service are those things that are fundamentally still the best way of doing them. As soon as a new method or technology comes along to replace something that is "traditional," tradition barriers fall away and the old method and the old technology becomes part of the memorabilia of the fire service. Unfortunately, many of these changes are often traumatic and result in a form of stress on the individuals in the fire service who are experiencing obsolescence of their old ways of doing things.

Probably the most classic example that we can illustrate this point with was in the era of steam fire apparatus and horses. When it was first suggested that man-powered pumpers could be replaced by steam apparatus, there was a whole generation of firefighters that rejected the idea. Some, to the degree, that they terminated their careers and left the volunteer fire service. They were immediately replaced.

The next generation was enamored with steam and apparatus. They brought horses into the fire houses to pull the heavy machinery. For almost 50 years, the smell of hay and horses, mingled with the smoke from a boiler, was a unique odor for a fire house. Then, came the internal combustion engine and both the steam fire apparatus and the horses were replaced by the smell of diesel and exhaust smoke.

The best way of really understanding this process is to examine two models with respect to change. The first of these, which is illustrated in this present slide, is referred to as the innovation and adaptation curve. You will note that it is shaped somewhat like a wave. I always thought that it was interesting that Alvin Toffler's second book was called [The Third Wave](#). Because change is like a wave.

And, like a wave, moving through water, there is energy and a direction to all change. Those that understand it and are able to utilize the mechanisms of change can maintain their stability and move with progress. Those that resist the process or don't understand the phenomena can often be swept off their feet and bowled under, not unlike a person who falls off a wave that is breaking on a beach.



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If you examine this chart, you will note that there are three major subdivisions. These are state-of-the-art, mainstream and obsolescence. These subdivisions, in a sense, represent three terms--past, present and future.

To the extreme left, you will notice a category called the inventors. Then, they are followed by a group called the innovators. Then, there is a group called the early adopters. They are followed by the mainstream. Then, there are the late adopters, the resisters and, finally, the refusers.

You will note that there is a height to the wave, reflected by the numbers of people who are normally found in any given setting to represent that segment of society. For example, in all actuality, there are very few inventive people in our world. These are the idealists, the altruistic, who do not believe that the world should remain the way it is. They set out to make changes on purpose. They are the Thomas Alva Edisons. Right behind them are a group of individuals who take the ideas of the idealists and make them work in the real world. The innovators are primarily those who can bridge the gap between theory and reality. Of course, the early adopters are more frequent than the innovators because the early adopters are motivated more by competition. It is obvious where most people are. They are in the mainstream.

The significance of this chart is that we are all on it. We, as individuals, are represented at some point on the chart. Our organizations are represented on the chart. The political entities that we work for are represented on the chart. Everything that evolves goes through this process.

If you stop and think for a moment, you can probably recognize where others may be regarding their locations on the chart. Whole societies, for example, have fallen resistant to change and have, subsequently, become obsolete. Whole technologies have fallen by the wayside as the inventors, the innovators and the adopters have pulled the rest of the mainstream in a specific direction and away from what used to be a standard practice.

The analogy of a wave of change is also true in the sense that it never stays still. The only way a wave exists in water is that it has to have motion and direction. So, it is with the process of change. There is always a great deal of energy involved in keeping the mainstream supported. But, what is it that causes the wave to move in a specific direction and just how close are subsequent waves are to one another with regard to change? This, too, can be predicted.

Our next model illustrates that point very clearly. On this model, you will see that there are two axes. On the left is an axis referred to as time and on the bottom of the model is an axis is referred to as difficulty. In other words, there are some things that take very little time and are not very difficult to cause to happen and, on the other hand, there are some things that take a great deal of time to occur



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and are extremely difficult. Understanding this particular model has a direct correlation where a person finds themselves on the innovation and adoption curve.

For, as you can see, our model is divided into a series of hierarchical boxes. The first of these is labeled knowledge. The second is labeled attitude. The third is labeled individual behavior. The fourth is group behavior. And, the last is accepted behavior in society.

What this model tells us is that no change really occurs without knowledge on someone's part. And, no change is permanent until it is finally inculcated into the society in which it was introduced. The knowledge box is the one with the shortest time frame and the least difficulty. The society box is the one that takes the greatest deal of time and, in some cases, extremely difficult to achieve.

If one looked at this model as a representation of a person's influence over the change process, then certain predictions can be made. For example, an individual with highly-specialized knowledge that accepts that knowledge willingly and displays advocacy through their individual behavior in an assertive fashion, most often finds themselves in some type of a leadership mode. Generally speaking, people who continue to refine their training and education and utilize the knowledge in a rapidly-changing environment always operate on the left hand side of the innovation adoption curve. They are in the power positions of inventor, innovator or early adopter.

Of course, the opposite can be true also. An individual who actively avoids knowledge and has an attitude of rejection of new facts and exhibits behavior counter to new information is going to operate on the right hand side of the chart as late adopter, resistor or refuser. This puts them in a position of deterioration and subsequent obsolescence. Of course, the bulk of society and organizations are in the middle; they are mainstream and can or will be lead somewhere.

If we go back to the opening remarks of this presentation and review our basic premise, we may find some very important keys to the survival of the fire service as we know it. We discussed at the outset the fact that things are happening at a very rapid rate. And, I indicated that it is highly likely that this process will not only continue to accelerate, but it will accelerate in a very specific direction.

For the individual fire officer, the past is a very comfortable place to retreat. But, it is a dangerous environment if one wants to maintain control over the destiny of an organization or a profession. Simply stated, no one lives in the past. It can be argued that no one lives in the future--right now. We all live in the present. And, the present is where most of the changes are going to occur. As the wave of change goes through the fire service, there are going to be individuals who are found all along the spectrum. In general, we are going to continue to leave behind us those things that are no longer acceptable in a rapidly-changing world. This will be threatening and, in some cases, very stressful for individuals who are unwilling to accept or to understand a new order of things as they are created.



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Breaking from the past does not necessarily mean refuting the heritage of the past. I have always found it quite interesting that doctors in a modern setting are still expected to take an oath that is thousands of years old-the Hippocratic Oath. And, those same doctors are using all sorts of electronic wizardry and gadgetry to save lives. The link with the past is not on the tools of the trade. Instead, the link with the past is on our attitude about the job and loyalty to certain ideals with regard to performance.

Breaking with the past does not mean compromising on principle nor does it mean we lower our standards. It does mean that we sometimes will be forced to abandon a specific solution and seek new ones. The acceleration phenomenon is not a function of our occupation alone. There is a constant quest by the inventors and idealists for a new solution to even the most mystical of problems. Our role as fire managers is to be able to utilize the wave of change in a powerful and principled fashion simultaneously. Acceleration implies momentum. As the information acceleration occurs, those who are part of the information, especially those who create the new information, are going to have more and more influence over the decision-making processes.

Just where will we be in the year 2088? Chances are, they will still be having fire conferences. All of us in this room will have been replaced by five or six successive generations of individuals who will have made major modifications to things that we almost hold sacred today. Granted, it is difficult for us in a modern setting to think of ourselves as being obsolete, but we all will be as the wave of change moves further and further away from this point in time.

The one thing that we can work towards and hope for is that this generation can be looked upon as the first enlightened generation regarding the change process. I would like to think that, when we break from the past to accelerate into the future, we are not rejecting it. We are using it as a launching platform. If we do it right, our successors will be as proud of this century of achievement as we were proud of the founding fathers of our profession.

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