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Ronny J. Coleman

Continuum of Relationships

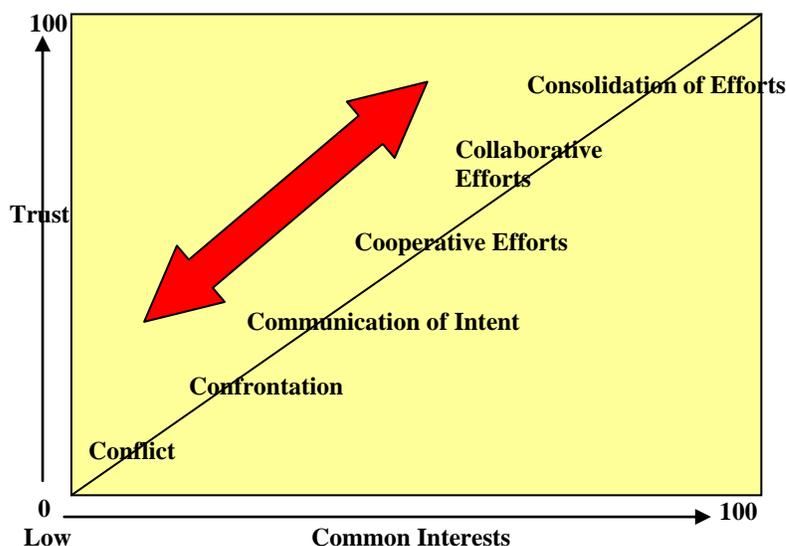
When viewing fire agencies as single, totally autonomous, free standing entities, the primary emphasis is on the internal capacity of that department to do its job. However, when you begin to look at multiple fire departments, in a geographical or politically defined area that is complex and multi-jurisdictional, the question then becomes what is the total capacity of all of the fire agencies if they choose to work together on common goals and objectives.

This raises the possibility that it is conceivable that there might be economies of scale by combining efforts. This possibility can be both positive and negative for any number of reasons.

The thought process that supports this idea is based on the common sense approach that “many hands make light work.” The reality is that many organizations have difficulty coping with that concept for fear that some of those hands will be removed as part of the process of working together. This model places emphasis upon the fact that there are many different ways that organizational relationships can be crafted on a continuum from outright conflict to total consolidation.

The purpose of this model is to talk about how this range of those possibilities comes about rather than recommending that any specific one is an appropriate course of action right this moment.

The following model shows that the relationship between entities ranges from conflict all the way to the ultimate of consolidation.





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Conflict	Is manifested by the behavior on the part of any two organizations that refuse to agree on any points of the discussion. Conflict in and of itself has a wide range of behaviors associated with it. For purposes of this discussion, conflict is when two organizations position to one another and that there is little or no attempt for either of the two parties that is supportive of the opposite.
Confrontation	Is similar to conflict except that is more of an open exchange. When organizations are in a confrontational mood they often challenge each other on the simplest of issues and find reasons why things cannot be made to work. Confrontational behavior looks for things to go wrong as opposed to looking for things to go right.
Communicative	Organizations that begin to communicate are actively engaged in both listening and talking. When organizations are communicating there is a level playing field of exchange of information.
Cooperation	Cooperation is the next level up in terms of relationships. This is when two organizations decide that they can do something together that neither of them can do successfully on their own. Cooperation is an extension of trust and often results in one of two organizations taking a leadership role. A classic example of cooperation is an automatic aid agreement.
Collaboration	Collaboration is one step higher in the continuum. It is essentially a decision by two organizations to mutually invest in them some level of activity without giving up their own individual autonomy. A good example of a collaborative effort might be something such as a building of a joint training facility.
Consolidation	This is the highest level on the spectrum and it consists of the two individual organizations giving up autonomy and becoming one entity. This takes advantage of the ability to leverage the organization and especially be able to reduce the amount of overhead associated with delivering the level of service. An example of a consolidation of course would be the merger of two fire organizations into one.

As one looks at the continuum just described, there is a parallel process that must be in place. That is matter of trust and respect. Organizations that are in co-conflict have no trust or respect. Organizations that are totally consolidated have to internalize that trust and respect or they will never achieve the benefits for which the consolidation was intended.



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All along this continuum being expressed there are consequences of achieving each level. In general, organizations move up and down the spectrum in direct correlation with the extent of self-worth and their sense of self-awareness. An axiom in the field of fire protection methodology is that any two organizations that are in conflict should never be allowed to consolidate because they will dissipate their energy internally through conflict. Secondly, any two organizations that wish to cooperate or collaborate and eventually join together to seek benefits should not be stopped from doing so by outside influences. That decision should be given internally by the roles and objectives of the two respective organizations being based upon a consensus.

Applying this model to fire organizations consists of determining what specific ways and means are available in which you can establish different levels for the organization to function. Those agencies that are on the lower left hand side of the spectrum stand very little chance of doing anything collectively that will accomplish anything that effectively. Organizations functioning on the middle of the spectrum have a high degree of possibility of combining their various capabilities to create a whole new capability. The degree to which the leadership, management and membership of organizations follows through on the process at the upper right hand corner determines whether or not any of these levels can be applied successfully in a fire service deployment system that is cost effective and efficient at the same time. The term “economy of scale” really begins to apply when this level of cooperative behavior occurs.

This model establishes a wide variety of opportunities for experimental cooperative effort by firefighting agencies. It also offers opportunity for the execution of a number of legal re-organizational concepts. The list includes everything from the consolidation of selected groupings of fire departments to a consideration by an entire County to provide for overall consolidation and a number of options that are far less binding. These considerations could include:

- Functional unification – this is defined as the cooperative joined of one or more programs or services to the enactment of contractual arrangement between entities. Such inter-government agreements are normally used throughout organizations to share resources, improve service and to save money at the *program* level.
- Operational unification – this represents the creation of a single organization with a unified structure and chain of command for two or more (previously) independent fire departments. Operational consolidations are usually implemented to the execution of inter-government agreements between the governing boards of entities
- Legal unification – this characterizes the legal consider of two or more fire agency into a single new agency. Legal considerations are usually enacted a process established by state law. This action not only joins programs of organization but also units of government and budgets.



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In identifying any potential cooperative opportunities the advocates must consider all of the key issues that are challenging each individual agency. Some of these very issues represent real roadblocks to total integration. Others provide the unique chance for improvement without going that far.

Considering the current state of the economy, and the dire predictions many fire agencies are facing in the funding of local fire protection taking a look at possibility of improving the level of cooperation and collaboration at the local and regional perspective should not be considered as a threat to the organizational culture of the fire service. Instead it may well be an evolutionary step that is necessary to sustain the future of the fire service.

Now, shake hands and go to your neutral corners for the next rounds of the budget battle.