



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Culture; The Double Edged Sword

Clichés and culture. What a partnership. Clichés came about when a phrase begins to serve as a shortcut to a mental image. Culture of an organization comes about by the actions of the membership that represents the values of the organization. Clichés support a culture; a culture sustains the clichés it believes in.

The next most logical perception for evaluation of the cultural concept is aimed at you. You are a member of an organization and you are part of that culture. If you are a person who influences that culture, then you are likely to support that culture with value statements to others in that organization. Let me use one example of a cliché and its cultural implications. “The fire service is 300 years of tradition, unhampered by progress”. If you believe that, then you are likely to be ineffective in dealing with change. You might even feel that the cliché supports the idea that we did a lot better in the good old days. You might even believe that tradition is the best template to solve problems in the current world of firefighting.

And, you would be wrong at two levels. The first is the fact that the cliché is an inaccurate. Walk the convention floor of a major fire conference and tell me what percentage of the booths are reflective of new methods or technology to carry out fire protection or emergency medical services, or hazardous materials, or sophisticated rescue in rapid water, high angle or trench scenarios. What percentage of those items was even on display thirty years ago?

Of course if you don't go to conferences or read fire magazines, you may not even be aware of that complexity. It may be that your department (or you) is still in denial that change is occurring. So, we should be devoting a little more of our attention to evaluating our culture in order to fully understand our ability to remain competent over our life as a member of our organization and a contributor to our profession.

My first question to you about culture and clichés is this; how important is it to you that you be perceived as a competent, capable individual?

Next question. How important is it to your organization to be perceived as a competent, capable organization?

What if you are competent and your organization isn't? What if your organization is and you aren't? Both conditions exist in the fire service. I have been collecting evidence for years by just listening to what firefighters say about their departments when in attendance at a conference. Have you ever heard these statements?



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1. It sounds good in theory, but my department doesn't believe in it.
2. I'm here on my own nickel, because my department won't pay me to attend.
3. We have our own way of doing things and we aren't going to change anytime soon.
4. I was sent here to get better information on: (fill in subject)
5. I am here to see what is new that my department should be considering for adoption.
6. I am here to research specifications on a purchase we are considering next year.
7. I heard a rumor about a new way of (fill in blank) and I am here to find out more about it
8. I'm here because my boss told me I was going to attend.
9. Our department is hosting a workshop next year and I am here trying to find some good instructors.

You can probably see for yourself how some of these responses reflect on the culture of the organization in a positive way. Others comments may have negative implications. More importantly, all of these comments reflect on the organizations culture.

Recently, I attended one such national conference; the FDIC in Indianapolis. A major theme of that conference was complying with change and simultaneously dealing with personal values. There were reportedly 23,000 attendees. There are supposedly 33,000 fire departments. That doesn't mean that there were 23,000 departments represented. Many departments send whole companies to this conference just for the HOT drills. These same individuals have to make choices of attending speaker workshops that included the likes of Steve Kerber and Dan Madrzykowski who are providing information that could revitalize firefighting tactics and strategy. I say could because there is no guarantee that those in attendance will actually be able to make changes in their organization. Do you know why? It is because the culture may prohibit it.

Go back to the beginning of this article and reevaluate your answers to the questions we posed. Does every fire department have a culture of change, or will there be rejection back home of even the best of ideas? There are 33,000 versions of that answer. What is yours?

Believe it or not, you are one of the most critical elements of that process. The most appropriate behavior in accepting change is to take responsibility for bringing it about. You must change your cliché first. Then you must change your organizational concept of competency. They work hand in hand.

In summary, the concept of culture in the fire service is a double edged sword. It can hold us back when we constantly stress the need to do things the old fashion way. And, it can move us forward if we accept new ideas and new technology by evaluating locally and adopting those concepts that make our organization more functional and effective.