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The Difficult We Do Right Away,
The Impossible Takes A Little Longer

Don't you just love it when someone tells you that something can't be done? It's sort of a challenge or dare. If someone says it can't be done, the world seems to be divided into two types of people; those who accept the fact that it is impossible and those who will embark upon a journey to prove that it is achievable.

The lead for this paragraph was taken from a logo of a chart I once saw displayed in a person's office. It read, "The difficult we do right away and the impossible takes just a little bit longer." The individual had penned in another statement at the end that reflected his own personal perspective; "Miracles require some planning!"

In the field of fire protection a lot of things that were considered to be virtually impossible a few years ago have not only become achievable but are rapidly becoming standard practices. The entire concept of life safety systems was nothing more than a theory 15 years ago. It is now a strategy being employed by many fire departments. A fire chief and/or fire protection professional who is an advocate of built-in fire protection will frequently find themselves running up against the naysayers when new concepts are first proposed.

Let's start off with a tricky one in this column. How about the subject of retrofitting major commercial existing buildings? Frequently this entire discussion starts off on a negative bent by someone saying it can't be done. Well, then why is it that some people are doing it? For example, Michael J. Corbyn, General Manager, Technical Services for the Hong Kong Land Property Company in Hong Kong, recently explained to me how his company has approached accomplishing the impossible.

The Hong Kong Land Property Company owns a major number of high-rise buildings in Kowloon and Hong Kong. This, one of the most densely populated land areas in the entire world, has probably more high-rise structures per square mile than perhaps anywhere outside of New York City. According to Mr. Corbyn, the Hong Kong Land Property Company controls over 6 million square feet of commercial occupancies at this time. A significant portion of the new buildings, of course, is already sprinklered because of the changes in basic philosophy about high-rise fire protection.

On the other hand, some of the older and some of the more middle-aged buildings are not sprinklered. They have to be retrofitted. Or, to put it more appropriately, the Hong Kong Land Company wishes to see them retrofitted. While this is a statement of corporate philosophy, it is easier said than done.

For example, Mr. Corbyn explained the fact that the 52-story Jardine House building is a major high-rise in this area that was slated for the installation of automatic fire protection. The problem was to find a



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way to retain rental income during the process. Considering the business and economic climate of Hong Kong it was not viable to move people out so that the landlord could come in and install sprinkler systems. According to Corbyn, after conducting conferences with Hong Kong fire officials, it became clear the fire service was supportive of the sprinkler systems but was not in a position of mandating them. This meant that the Hong Kong Land Property Company did not have the ability to use the fire services as a lever to support their policy decision.

So, there was the dilemma. The organization wanted to sprinkle a building, the building was capable of being sprinklered, the fire service wants to see it sprinklered, but there are many obstacles to actually getting inside the building and getting the systems installed.

Hong Kong Land's list of seemingly impossible obstacles included such things as the fact that the retrofitting had to be done after hours, on weekends, and over holidays. Of course, this meant that the individuals who were installing the sprinkler systems were naturally demanding some form of premium pay. In addition, because of the nature of some of the businesses, it was virtually impossible to work room-to-room and floor-to-floor in any kind of a scheduled fashion. The nature of the various businesses required that a checkerboard like pattern be utilized to make the installation.

Considering these types of obstacles, people with lesser will could well have just given up. Hong Kong Land did not. The basic approach was to ring the building with water supply line in a way that had minimum disruption on the business occupancies. Then, using a variety of innovative schedules and by working closely with the contracting industry, they were able to go into the Jardine House building and install the systems one occupancy at a time.

Herein was the first opportunity for a problem to occur. It was virtually impossible to turn on the sprinkler system. It doesn't make a lot of sense to have one series of rooms on one floor fully sprinklered and the ones across the hall be unsprinklered. The problems associated with making sure that everything was 100% protected was violated. Some say that's impossible to do.

According to Corbyn, the basic philosophy that was utilized was to disregard the level of protection at any given point in time and focus entirely on the ultimate outcome of the system. In short, it really didn't make any difference whether or not the systems were turned on in the individual occupancies if a major fire broke out. There is a possibility that the building would still be lost. They were in no worse a position than if they had no sprinkler system at all. However, if they started somewhere and continued with this basic approach there would ultimately be a point in time in which there was a maximum amount of fire protection available and the system would do everything that it was designed to accomplish.



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The job was far from easy. It wasn't a case of contractors being able to move on site starting from the front door and going all the way to the ceiling of the top of the high rise and being done. A tremendous amount of time was devoted to scheduling. There was always a concern of water damage of existing occupancies. In other words, this was virtually an impossible job that is now two thirds of the way finished. Corbyn indicates that as of the time of the writing of this article almost two thirds of the building has been retrofitted and the majority of the system has now been charged with water and is fully prepared to stand as the first line of defense in an incipient fire in those areas.

Could a fire still start in the unprotected areas? Of course. Could a fire start in the protected areas and be extinguished by the retrofitted system? The answer is equally as positive. The Jardine House building is not an extraordinary structure in the sense that it is not particularly unusual nor does it present an unusual fire problem to any community that has high-rises.

What the Hong Kong Land Property Company has done is make a commitment to assure that the Jardine House building will be a viable part of Hong Kong's economy until the point that the building is rendered useless in some other way besides being destroyed by fire.

So, the next time you're sitting in a room full of people and you start hearing discussions where people are predicting gloom and doom for aggressive fire protection planning remember the Jardine House building. In a part of the world where dollars are looked upon as tools and where the economy is a driving force behind many of the major policy decisions, the achievement of the Hong Kong Land Company does take on a connotation far beyond the pall of being impossible. It verges on being miraculous.

What distinguishes this particular situation from many others is that the advocate in this case, Michael Corbyn, simply never gave up. He chose alternatives and options that were perhaps nontraditional and pursued incremental decision making with an eye on the future.

What distinguishes an optimist from a pessimist is not the level of water that remains in the glass but a perspective on the context of the water.