



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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DINOSAURS OR DRAGONS

It seems very popular these days to be referring to some element of the fire service as either dinosaurs or dragons. The term dinosaur relates to those that are seemingly incapable of change; the term dragon as being related specifically to the phenomena of fire or the various crises that faces the fire service.

In the case of real dinosaurs they were once very powerful beasts that eventually became extinct. It is also interesting to note that while dragons are a myth, they almost always are regarded as fierce and devastating (except for Puff, the Magic Dragon).

And what do both of these reptilian images have to do with being fire chief? Well, one might start off with asking some questions regarding the dinosaur syndrome. Are you one? Do you know one? And, with respect to the dragon one might ask the question of; are we fighting of are you fighting myth or reality?

Dinosaurs probably never thought of themselves as being endangered. Even when their numbers began to thin out they probably regarded it as a blessing in disguise. There were fewer of their own kind to compete for food. The last of the dinosaurs were probably not very concerned about the small furry creatures called mammals that were scurrying around their feet. They died out one by one until they died isolated deaths. According to some scientist there was a singular catastrophe that resulted in their ultimate termination.

The dinosaur syndrome in the fire service has been the subject of slot of jokes. But it does exist. Essentially the problem is not as clear-cut as it was with our reptilian examples. The dinosaur syndrome in the fire service is one of attitude of obsolescence not of physical extinction.

Fire departments do not become extinct. Granted, many of them have been modified into other types of agencies and of course some have been consolidated or regionalized until they no longer look like their ancestors. The existence of the dinosaurian attitude in the fire service is best exemplified by 3 organizational behaviors. They are:

1. The development of an isolationist attitude - they get out of touch with others in the profession.
2. Preservation of the status quo for its own sake - focusing on how things are done instead of why they are done.
3. Loss of professional inquisitiveness - they simply stop caring about anything but themselves.

If you review the three provisions it is easy to identify the fact that an individual can be a dinosaur an organization can be a dinosaur and even an entire region can take on dinosaurian connotations. The fact



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is that this attitude is in existence in the fire service today. There are organizations that are lead by individuals that display all three of the behaviors cited in the previous paragraph. There are entire organizations that look upon themselves in a manner as described in the three provisions. Most unfortunately there are entire regions that look upon fire protection in a manner in which the three provisions apply.

So what! Is anything going to happen to the dinosaurs? Well, obviously if you stand and watch something occurring it is very difficult to observe any given movement. For example if you sit and watch the grass grow, the change minute by minute is almost imperceptible. However, if you leave and go on a trip and come back within 30 days you will be shocked to find out exactly what has occurred in your absence. The same thing applies with the evolution of the dinosaurian attitude. They simply are losing touch with reality and are slowly but surely sinking into the obscurity that can result with having programs under funded, responsibilities bartered away to other organizations or technological obsolescence.

The dinosaurian legacy is apathy, lethargy and atrophy.

Now, what of the dragons? This whole idea that firefighting is facing a “dragon” is a real macho attitude. It is sort of like saying that whatever we are going out to face today we have to be a knight in shining armor to deal with this terrible force. The reality is that fire is for the most part, a useful partner of the human race. The connotation that fire has a dragon like malevolence smacks a little bit of a schizophrenic attitude about fire.

What of the dragons do they really exist? Maybe some of them are “Puff the Magic Dragon”. We have to be very careful in our role of fire chiefs that we do not paint a picture that is too catastrophically full of gloom and doom regarding the mission of a fire department. The dragons become real when they have dimension. They become curable when they are clearly identified. While it may be fun to relate to firefighting as dragon slaying the fire chief’s task is to rise above that mythical perception that firefighting is accidental and unpredictable and start to give a face and nomenclature to the taming and domestication of dragons.

The literal translation of this concept is the responsibility of the fire chief to do long range strategic planning, short range tactical planning and to make darn sure that the dragon slayers in operations have all the right tools to do the right job.

As I listen to fire officers refer to this comparison between dinosaurs and dragons I am struck by the thought that a person today having to face one of the dinosaurs of the past would probably perceive it as being very terrorizing. One has to speculate that the Tyrannosaurus Rex or Brontosaurus that is illustrated in the comic books or cartoon features on Saturday morning is nothing compared to the



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actual beast that once walked the surface of the land. Dinosaurs at one time were dragons. And, dragons have a way of turning into extinct dinosaurs.

The modern day fire chief cannot afford to be either.

The current generation should reflect upon the contributions of each preceding generation to make sure that the lessons learned by dinosaurs are retained. They were hard won in their time. Respect for the contributions of the past generation is just as important as the quest for new knowledge is for the current generation. Dinosaurs and dragons are respectfully, tradition and technology.