

ASK NOT...

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“My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

- John F. Kennedy
Inauguration address, January 1961

This article was prompted by a series of field trips we took around our state to measure the level of interest in the volunteer fire service. We were consistently asked questions from volunteer fire fighters about the costs and benefits of membership in fire associations. We quickly learned that involvement in local, state and federal associations, and more importantly, active participation was profoundly lacking.

As a result of our trip, we discovered that people knew the cost of everything, but the value of nothing.

The “What’s in it for me?” attitude is alive and well in the fire service – career and volunteer. This is not surprising considering the narcissistic world we live in today. Is this a good attitude for the volunteer fire service? In a world of “me” who is going to do the giving?

This is not a new phenomenon. President John F. Kennedy addressed the challenge over fifty years ago in his 1961 inauguration address to the country. He called upon everyone to engage and get involved – to do what is best for the country. In other words, what is good for the country is good for you.

The idea of giving back or contributing to a cause seems a bit antiquated in our pervasive, “What’s in it for me?” attitude. Some may feel that thinking of the greater good is too simplistic for today’s way of life.

Today, we live in a world of social narcissism where the power of “me, myself and I” rules. Star Trek’s Spock’s great quandary was, “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few” (or “the one”). Captain Kirk’s counter position, “The needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many,” seems to be the prevailing behavior of today.

If you don’t commit to something bigger than yourself you will miss out on a lot of good things in life. This is especially true when supporting and actively participating in your association.

The frequent answer to our question of, "Why not belong to an organization that represents the fire service," is "What's in it for me?" If the respondent said that then they don't understand or appreciate what associations are, what they do or why they are beneficial.

Associations do not provide automatic rewards and satisfaction. Most people join organizations in order to be able to perform their job better, to be more efficient and effective. Personal satisfaction is not from membership but from engagement and from engagement comes the reward and satisfaction.

People who believe membership is about the "benefits" are missing the point. The goal of improving oneself and their organization and giving back is the point.

The fire service talks a great deal about saving lives and property. But could we do better? Do we have the ability to improve what we do through our own personal efforts? We submit the answer to these questions is a resounding yes, but it requires action, not talk.

It is not as if we are without challenges. For example, the fire service image has been tarnished by the actions of a few. Despite the high profile and heroic saves, the public often only remembers scandals. As a result public-safety agencies are under tremendous internal and external scrutiny to perform and improve accountability.

Downsizing, privatization and consolidation are but some of the terms we hear throughout the fire service today. Just a few years ago many of us would have denied such things would ever occur, yet today many of us wonder who we will be working for in a few years, if at all. These concerns are valid, but have you ever asked why the public does not trust and support public-safety like they used to? What can you do, or what can your organization do about this growing public perception?

Are you adding to the problem or providing a solution? Waiting for someone to do something for you may be a long wait. However, if you get engaged in helping others, be it your local firefighter association, regional or state trade association the return on your investment can be phenomenal.

You have probably heard of the old argument about costs versus benefit. Today it appears to be more about revenue versus benefit costs.

Not everything of value can be measured monetarily. There are many things more important than compensation or personal gain. Spiritual satisfactions, professional growth, passing on your experience to the next generation are just some of the benefits. So, if John F. Kennedy was to come back as a Fire Chief, I hope he would still agree that doing things with and for others is an important part of the process of growth of who and what we in the emergency services are all about.

Are you ready to stop asking, "What's in it for me?" and start asking, "What can I do for you?" Join - get involved - recruit others. Energize them with your enthusiasm and we can guarantee your life will be enriched.

Are you engaged or are you waiting for someone else to take care of it? (What is 'it?') If you are waiting for someone else, it begs the question, "Who is looking out for you?" Your one voice can make a lot of racket but a collective voice can raise the roof.

The benefit of membership in a trade association is not the decal, membership card or the "benefits" but the ability to engage with your contemporaries on how to better yourself, your organization and our profession. It is not about "me" – it is about "us" and the communities we serve.