



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Fiddler on the Roof

If you are a fan of musicals you are probably familiar with the one theme song from “Fiddler on the Roof”. The musical is the tale of a Jewish father, Tevye, his family and the trials and tribulations of living as a minority in Russia at the turn of the century. To the best of my knowledge – and I have seen both the movie and the stage presentation there is absolutely nothing in the productions that has to do with the fire service.

But, that doesn't keep me from drawing a comparison. The whole idea that Fiddler on the Roof was an identifiable person playing a catchy violin tune that evoked emotion in the recipients of the sound was resurrected recently on the fireground. I have a modern day version of Fiddler on the Roof for you. It was contained in a digital photograph that came across my computer recently.

What I am in reference to is a photograph that was transmitted around via the “cyber highway” of the fire service that clearly was one of the scariest scenes I have seen in a long time. It showed a very tiny roof in which there were approximately nine separate firefighters standing on it. They were all properly equipped and in full PPE including breathing apparatus. They were all carrying the tools of the trade and smoke could be seen pouring from the window in which all of them were crowded up against.

I am not going to even attempt to find out who the photograph belongs to nor do I wish to reproduce that photograph for fear that somebody might recognize themselves, their fire department, a neighboring fire department or for that matter one of your friends in the fire service. But that picture scared the living daylights out of me.

What can be more dangerous than being on the roof above a fire? Well, let me answer that by saying that putting a whole bunch of people on a roof above a fire is a lot more dangerous. Perhaps the danger increases exponentially with every person we put up there. My concern is why don't we get it?

One does not have to read through too many books, watch many movies or listen to firehouse tales to have heard a story of a firefighter going through a roof. It is such a common phenomenon that in some cases it is being taken for granted. I can recall a fire in the early days of my career in which a heavily laden fire officer meandering across the roof on an auto repair garage fell through the roof all the way up to his waist. The only thing that kept him from going the rest of the way was an eight-foot pipe pole. That event did not result in a fatality but it certainly resulted in a wake-up call for me personally.

Ever since then I have been very sensitive about the need and necessity of ever sending anybody on the roof of a building. Notice I use the word “need and necessity”. Those are two different things. A need is based upon the existence of a problem that needs to be resolved. And the term necessity indicates whether or not it is mandatory, voluntary or discretionary.



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In other articles and other venues I have had extensive discussion about the role of truck companies and the firefighting phenomenon of the modern building. In my opinion it is really time for us to examine the need and necessity of putting people on rooftops. Moreover, when we do determine that there is a need and necessity we have to have the discipline – intelligence – courage to not send people up there like they are kamikaze squads.

Let me go back for a moment to the scene that was portrayed to me as I opened up the slide on my computer screen. I have no doubt in my mind by looking at the photograph that it constitutes a combination of engine company and truck company personnel. Not only that there is also a white hat ascending the ladder preparing to join the other eight people on this small rooftop.

What is the need and necessity? Was it necessary to send all those people up there? What were they intending to do? They are so closely crowded on the rooftop that it is unlikely that an axeman could use his tools – nor is it really likely that a nozzleman would be able to be effective. Moreover, if the fire had gone to flashover I have no doubt that all eight of the individuals on this small roof immediately adjacent to a window would have been immediately in danger.

Granted, I wasn't at the scene of that fire. Neither were most of you. But I would like to fashion a couple of questions that you ought to be keeping in your mind if you are responsible for making those kinds of decisions on the fire ground. Once you have decided that you are going to send somebody to an area that is advance of where the fire is do you know the following:

- A. What the likelihood is that the fire has achieved a high level of pre-burn in the confined space immediately below the area you are sending people to?
- B. What the volume of heat production is based upon smoke production is?
- C. What type of construction lies immediately under the feet of your firefighters?
- D. Approximately how long do you expect them to be able to stay there?
- E. Exactly what you expect them to accomplish during the short period of time in which they can stay there?
- F. What will be the consequences if there is catastrophic structural failure?
- G. Who is going to be responsible for telling their next of kin?

Just for the sake of discussion let us imagine that each of those firefighters standing on that roof if they were stripped down to their gymnasium weight they would be around 200 lbs apiece. If you add a uniform, turnout clothing, breathing apparatus and too and equipment to each of those individuals it is likely that they have an additional 75 –100 lbs of additional weight. That means that in the picture that I am viewing on my screen there is about a ton and a half of weight concentrated in an area about 8ft long and 8ft wide. Is that the kind of ratio of weight to strength that you are willing to risk your life on in



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a dwelling fire? What is interesting to me is another photo that was recently sent to me about a balcony collapse of a group of party goers that resulted in severe injury to a person that firefighters had to go and treat. And the firefighters in that scenario were critical of the people for being out there. The emphasis in that article was the fact that the balcony was constructed without a permit. Do we know if the buildings were going upon the roof are up to code either?

Having spent my fair share of time at the dining room table arguing tactics and strategy I know that some might consider this criticism as being unfair. As stated earlier I wasn't on that fire. There might have been a real good reason for all eight of those people to be standing on that narrow roof ledge. But, I really have my doubts as to whether there was a logical reason. I think it was an accumulative reason. And I do not wish to enter into a debate about whether or not we could or should be ventilating buildings. Ventilation is part of our professional skills and abilities and will be practiced as it has been practiced by many fire departments as an act of discretion.

I recall another fire in my career in which we arrived on the scene and a large hole had already appeared on the roof in which the fire was belching forth. A veteran truck officer murmured something like "well if it's trying to get out of the building that bad let's let it go!"

Ventilation is an act of discretion – therefore it involves a decision making process. To use my opening line metaphor, we don't want to be fiddling around on a roof. If a decision is made to go there then it needs to be real specific. If you are unaware of the fire conditions immediately between a roof structure and you are the person who has to make that decision you need to realize that it may be a life and death decision.

Just because you own a truck company doesn't mean that ventilation has to be provided vertically all of the time. To the contrary the reason why horizontal openings are built into buildings is for purposes of ventilation. All means of exhausting a building by keeping firefighters out of harm's way should be exhausted before any decision is made to send people above the fire.

In summary, I can hardly get this picture out of my mind. I can't help but feel that the person who took the picture knew something was wrong. I am not sure if the chief officer who is climbing off the ladder to join the firefighters on the roof was up there to add to the problem or to resolve it. I am not the least bit interested in trying to fix blame for what occurred. What keeps going through my mind over and over again is the consequence of their actions. What would have happened if the roof had collapsed?

Fatality – possible! Injury? Highly likely. Cost to the fire service would be incurred in both cases of not only the emotion and the distress of being associated with the incident but also in the form of the second-guessing and the loss of professional reputations and credibility. I have heard of several studies that talk about how much it costs to lose a firefighter in combat. The amount of money paid out in



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terms of death benefits pales by comparison for the consequence of multiple injuries. Imagine broken bones – imagine crushed spinal columns, imagine foreshortened careers, etc. Is it really worth all of that for us to ignore basic fire ground safety provisions?

In working with one industrial group I was discussing the consequences of failure of a foreman to take an appropriate action on a safety violation and I was advised that in that particular industry it was grounds for immediate termination. Do we hold our people that accountable? I think not.

After engaging in conversation with those who are vitally interested in reducing the loss of life of firefighters I am convinced that the very people who pay most of the respects to our departed comrades would be among the first to chastise them if they had a chance to prevent that event from occurring by just being stricter for thirty seconds on the fire ground. As many times as we have stated it, it doesn't seem to resonate with many; the fire ground is a dangerous place to be. There is no room on the fire ground for free-lancing. There is no room on the fire ground for stupidity. There is no room on the fire ground for arrogance. There is no room on the fire ground for carelessness masked as bravado.

If we are going to fiddle around, let's stay on terra-firma. The minute we throw a ladder up against a building with the objective of going aloft, , the minute we start climbing an aerial or the minute our bucket from a snorkel rests on a roof top we ought to be asking ourselves two simple questions: why am I up here and how fast can I get off?