



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## **Getting a Handle on the Future**

Don't you sometimes wish you had a crystal ball? You could look into the future and know that some particular event was going to take place. Then you could plan accordingly and reap the benefits. The problem is, Merlin the Magician is a fantasy. The future is still a mystery to most of us.

Yet, a fire chief needs to have some idea of what's going to be happening next week, next month, next year, and he needs to know it with a fair amount of accuracy. Planning is one way to gain such insight. More recently, fire department managers have embraced the concept of master planning.

For decades, the fire service relied on a document called the "The Standard Grading Schedule" when making policy decisions about planning for fire protection resources. I know I can still recall many decisions about fire station location and fire equipment purchases that were made based on the ambiguous reasoning of "because the grading schedule required it."

That tool, while it served us for a while, is no longer viable. It has lost its impact on city managers and city council members because it is no longer responsive to the changes going on in society today.

In essence, the early systems we used to plan fire protection were tools to prevent certain outcomes, such as major conflagrations. But they were not very effective for measuring the cost-effectiveness of fire departments. The grading schedule, for example, staffed a fire department to fight fire but did not deal with controlling the fire problem or with comparing the costs of protection to the benefits that were derived.

The very first step in changing all this was provided by Chief Byron Chaney and the Mountain View (California) Fire Department. They created a concept called *master planning*. It was a concept based on controlling costs and benefits from a delivery system instead of merely inventorying fire protection resources.

This concept was picked up by the U.S. Fire Administration and was taught to many fire officers as a means of controlling the future of a fire protection agency. It was and still is a good system. For those who have not looked at the system, the material is still available from the U.S. Fire Administration, 16825 South Seton Avenue, Emmitsburg, MD 21727.

But, as Bob Dylan reminds us, "The times, they are a-changing." There are now some other materials available for fire chiefs to use in constructing their own crystal ball for looking into the future. Several are non-fire service related. They are concepts that are being developed in other arenas - specifically, the business world. Let me give you an example.



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The idea of master planning implies that you can control something by planning for it. A master plan spells out where you will be someday. The business world has been exploring a concept called *strategic planning* based on the idea that you can control the future by deciding what it is you want to achieve and then spelling out how to get there. There is a distinct difference between the two concepts. A master plan implies a static document; a strategic plan implies a process of going somewhere.

One of the most recent documents produced on this subject is an ICMA Bulletin entitled "Strategic Planning: An Approach to Launching New Initiatives in an Era of Retrenchment." It was issued by the International City Management Association as an MIS (Management Information Service) bulletin (volume 14, number 9) in September 1982.

You won't find the words *fire service* anywhere in the document, but it makes excellent reading if you want to know what the private sector has been using to define its future. More importantly, it is a good way to learn what the ICMA is telling city managers and mayors about planning for the future of our cities.

Among the first "nongovernment" books to point out the shifts in our thinking about planning for the future was Alvin Toffler's blockbuster, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970). He has since followed it with another glimpse into the future, which was titled *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980). Both of these are good books to read when planning a fire department's future.

Two other books published more recently are *Megatrends* by John Naisbitt (New York: Warner Books, 1982) and *In Search of Excellence*, by Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). In all cases, these books have made it onto the best seller list and offer macro views of the process of dealing with change. Unfortunately, these same books often lack specifics on how to deal with the planning of your fire department.

Recently, I came across an inexpensive paperback that offers something new to the process of planning a fire department's future. It's a book that has absolutely nothing in it about fire protection and everything in it about how to obtain the upper hand in acquiring the resources to provide for fire protection. The title is *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* (New York: Warner Books, 1982). The authors are Jack Trout and Al Ries. The theme: How to be seen and heard in an overcrowded marketplace.

At first blush this is not the kind of book you would ever pick up to study when thinking about a fire department's master plan - it is a book about advertising. But hear me out. If you look over the table of contents, you will see that the book covers the role of communications in business and "politics" today. It talks about the battle for the dollar and minds of the consumer. It discusses how people accept the "position" of a product or person as first, second, or third in priority.



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Think about that for a second. What is one of the biggest problems we face in getting a fire service master planning process going? Right, it's getting our "consumers" to recognize and accept that there is a fire problem in the first place. This book talks about how to get positioned as a leader in the minds of your public and how to develop a strategy to stay there. It contains a section on "repositioning" your competition; another on positioning a service; and a section on personal and career positioning.

Finally, the book outlines a six-step process for successfully using the concept of positioning. I have modified the six steps to make them applicable to the fire service. The terminology is different, but the concept remains the same. The six steps are:

- Define the position you own.
- Define the position you want to own.
- Decide whom you must outgun.
- Decide how much you are willing to risk to win.
- Decide how long you will remain committed to win.
- Decide what you will do if you obtain the power to choose.

Probably the most important chapter is the last one. It is entitled "Playing the Positioning Game." The authors point out that there are those who win in life and those who lose, and the difference in many cases is that the losers get hung up on words.

According to Trout and Ries, "In a sense, every product or service is 'packaged goods'." That's what fire protection is - a packaged service that must be sold, and sold, and sold. We can never take our status in the community for granted or we lose our position. It only makes sense that if we want to improve our status in the community we must learn how to play the game of positioning. Later on we can call it anything we want - master plan, strategic plan, or whatever.