



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Houston We've Got a Problem!

"Houston we've got a problem!" With that statement, the crew of Apollo 13 really got everyone's attention. One might say that the declaration was an understatement.

How would you like to be in a spaceship hurling along at thousands of miles per hour and be told that your life may depend upon a solution being developed to a problem that had never occurred before. As we all know, in the case of the Apollo crew, there were two groups of people working on the solution. One group was in the capsule, the other was on the ground.

In searching for that solution, the written script delivered another line that expressed an expectation: "failure is not an option!" The two lines only equal 10 words, but speak volumes with regard to the skill set that is needed to resolve serious problems. At one level, every problem has to be discovered, which requires insight. The earlier a problem is perceived as being a real problem, the longer you have to work on its solution, the reverse is also true. Late identification sometimes means there is not enough time to act.

Secondarily, staying focused on a problem requires persistence in the belief that you will prevail. This is usually a function of the complexity of problems, for the more difficult one eludes resolution by simple fixes.

There is another word we often hear as part of the vocabulary of problem solving and that is "being proactive". So, now let's define how you can improve your skills as a problem solver, and better yet, improve your reputation as a problem solver.

The first thing to recognize is that recognizing problems is a special skill set. Average people are often easily convinced that everything is going okay because everything is pretty much the same as the past. I'm sure you've heard of the phrase "same old, same old". That is an example of an attitude of indifference about the possibility of change. You may have witnessed the perspective in individuals who believe the status quo is challenge enough. If you have ever expressed it yourself, then you have manifested the perception. Identifying problems does not mean looking for trouble. But, it does mean that you should always be paying attention to opportunities to move up in performance.

Essentially, this means that most problems came disguised as performance gaps. The status quo is easy to accept on a day to day basis. So, the one thing that a person who seeks improvement in problem solving is that they continuously look for differences between expectations and results.



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Proactivity then is not just reacting to change. It is recognizing opportunities to define, refine and streamline policies, practices and procedures.

So let's look at the word opportunity for a second. How do we know that there is an opportunity to improve anything? Have you ever heard the term "if it ain't broke – don't fix it"? Harkening back to my discussion earlier of status quo that is a pretty frequent phrase. Let me add a new one to your lexicon. If it's not broke but it is not working as well as it could, it is time to make adjustments. The inference here is that opportunity comes by paying close attention to the difference between mediocrity and excellence. If you accept the fact that something is puttering along and is not effective, then you are overlooking the opportunity to make the necessary adjustments to improve it.

To put this in a fire service context, opportunity comes primarily from us improving the way we do everything. For example, can we improve on our turnout time as firefighters? It has been my experience that many fire departments after focusing on this issue have made significant inroads in improving response times. What about our fire inspection activities? Are there opportunities to improve on the enforcement of fire codes by exercising new options? We are always talking about educating the public but, may or may not be actively seeking ways to accomplish it. The list can go on and on.

I was once counseled by a fire officer who told me that it is not the big things in life that will bring you down; it is the tiny little details that will trip you up. Opportunity then is not always found in grandiose schemes but rather in the details of how we are accomplishing things. Ask yourself right now; are there any programs in your department that would be better if they were changed? I know that is very open ended, so let me make another suggestion.

The next time you go to a conference or workshop, ask yourself how what you have just learned can make an improvement when you go home. Anytime you are attending training or education experience there is an opportunity to make an improvement. They don't always have to be big ones as we stated before but they must possess at least one quality that you should value. That quality is that there is a quicker, faster, better, more effective, more efficient way of doing something and it is only going to happen if you make it so.

Earlier in this article, I talked a little bit about the two teams in Apollo 13. One was in a capsule; the other was in a communications center. We could draw a comparison between these two groups of the difference between the mindset of those who are on a fire company and those who are sitting in headquarters. Both of these teams have an opportunity to make a difference. But the consequences are often drastically different. The closer a team is to a problem; the more likely they will be the one to suffer negative consequences if they fail to pay attention. So, if something went wrong in the capsule, lives could end quickly. The same thing could be said for what can happen to a fire company. Failure is



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not an option when it comes to safety, for example. Once we elevate a problem to “management” then the consequences are usually felt further and further from the epicenter of the discussion.

Whether you are a fire captain in charge of a company, a battalion chief in charge of a platoon, or a fire chief in charge of an entire department, you have the opportunity to make improvements. If the two teams we talked about earlier can work together, they can create miracles. If they do not work together, we can have problems. It is in our best interest as fire officers to be seen as problem solvers rather than victims of circumstance when things go wrong.