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I Have a Dream

One of the communications terms we often hear in our society is called the sound byte. It is probably derived either radio or television vernacular, and is usually regarded as a very short snippet of dialogue that results in selling an entire concept. You are already probably familiar with this same idea from studying history. For example if I start off a sentence by saying “four score and seven years ago” you could probably finish the rest of the paragraph for me. Or, you would at least know what the general idea was. If I say, “give me liberty or give me death,” you could probably tell me exactly who said that. Among the most easily recognized in contemporary times is the sound bytes from a Martin Luther King speech entitled “I Have a Dream”.

I would suppose that many of you out there have similar thoughts about the things you would like to see happen. You must have some sort of a concept in your mind of what you would like to see happening to you or to your fire department or you wouldn't be in a leadership role. However, it is unlikely that your quotations are going to make the five o'clock news. Nonetheless, you may have a vision – but unless somebody else knows what that vision is it remains nothing but a dream.

The purpose of this discussion is to focus on a concept that is currently being discussed in many fire departments and that is visioning. The fire service, which tends to be pretty down to earth, sometimes, has difficulty understanding the concept of visioning because it sounds a little touchy, feely. Yet, visioning is a process that has a place in all fire agencies. It likely already exists in the minds of most chief officers or they wouldn't have aspired to be a fire chief.

Visioning is nothing more than conceptualizing what you would like to see occur in the future. Visioning is not predicting. Visioning is projecting. In a sense visioning is nothing more than attempting to take an image of future conditions so that things can be done in the present that will ultimately result in it actually occurring in the future.

The concept of visioning relates too many of the other management methods that have been embraced by the fire service over the last twenty-five years. It is getting harder and harder to find a contemporary fire chief who doesn't have some kind of a grasp of the concept of mission and mission alignment. All one has to do is visit any of our more productive and effective firefighting agencies to find the widespread use of the goal setting process. Lastly the methods of setting objectives that have a certain degree of performance measure associated with it are becoming more of regular practice than they were 10 years ago. Moreover, one can observe many firefighting agencies that have identified very specific action plans that have been assigned to individuals. Those action plans often result in specific achievements in advancing to that department in its local context.



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And, one cannot have a discussion of this concept without realizing that the value system of the fire service has shifted a little bit also. It is argumentative as to whether or not we have a national value system driving the fire service, but it is fairly easy to see that individual fire chiefs and their values are definitely driving what goes on within their organizations.

That is where visioning fits in. Visioning is a process of talking about future conditions. How would you like to see things? Moreover, what do you need to do to make changes in the organization to assure that your vision is going to be achieved at some point in the future?

Visioning is not a one-time process either. It is a mental concept that requires that individuals engage in the mental activity of the cyclic of incremental basis over a period of time.

Who could have predicted what the fire service of the year 2004 would have looked like if you would have tried to conceptualize it in the year 1904? Yet, the writings of many of the fire chiefs from the early part of this century reflect many of the same thought processes that are going on today. All one has to do is review the work of John Damrell, Ed Croker, Ralph J. Scott and many other of the leaders of the fire service to see that they had a vision on how to modify the present to achieve a new future.

If we go back to an earlier statement in this article I said that visioning is not predicting; it is projecting. Projecting depends an awful lot on having a strong sense of reality of what can and cannot be done. One of the concepts that allow visioning to occur is called the event horizon. The event horizon in the context of this discussion is nothing more than an ability to look forward to find out how far you can see. One might refer to it as the how far ahead of ourselves can we see the current trends and patterns being played out. We are engaged in this process on almost a continual basis but sometimes we don't call it visioning.

For example, a budget is a one-year event horizon. When you sit down to write your budget it is almost always based on our projection of what is going to occur in the following twelve months. You probably try to incorporate a certain amount of anticipation in the budget document by looking for incremental improvements and seeking additional funding to achieve newly created activities or endeavors.

Many fire agencies have now embraced a multi-year goal setting process. That is a visionary practice also. If you begin to set goals on a multiple budget year basis, you are anticipating the same kind of process you do on a budget cycle except that you can often set your sights a little higher.

Then of course we have the concept of strategic planning which is essentially a document in which you try to define a state of future conditions that is built upon both your budget realities and your goals and objectives of planning process. In many ways the strategic plan is a form of visioning document also.



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However, the reality is that strategic plans are not always as much visionary as they are pragmatic.

Another concept that has been embraced by the fire service is the Master Planning approach. Master planning usually looks at a much further event horizon anywhere between ten and fifteen years and tends to be more conceptual. This is where visioning processes can take shape also. The last part of the cycle is when we look up and try to anticipate what the fire service may look like as much as fifty to seventy five years from now. Some people don't think that is visioning but rather it is daydreaming. And, they might be partially right. Nonetheless, visioning could and should play a role in all of the previous types of activities and attempt to determine the overall destiny of a firefighting agency.

The military has adopted the visioning process. The following is an excerpt from the work of Colonel Bruce B.G. Clarke, at the U.S. Army War College. He states that "Strategic vision is a mental image of what the future world ought to be like.... Development of a strategic vision is preceded by forecasting the actual, matter of fact, realistic and pragmatic future to create an estimate of what the future is likely to be. In doing this, the strategist looks at history, the current situation, and trends.

Strategy is the crossover mechanism for moving from the world as forecasted to the world of our vision. Strategic vision provides direction to both the formulation and execution of strategy. It makes strategy proactive, rather than reactive, about the future."

One might also ask, what does a visioning statement look like? Rather than talk about a hypothetical one I am going to share with you a series of statements made by one group of firefighting agencies as part of a visioning process they developed.

The purpose of using this visioning process was stated as: "to provide a fresh perspective into the options and alternatives for the future of the fire department and the community".

The overall goal of using the process was stated as: "to improve upon the sustainability, effectiveness and efficiency of Fire Department resources through the use of analysis." This included focusing on the development of a feasibility model that considered both community and departmental service level. The review process pursued a range of options that included a spectrum from status quo, through partnerships, contracts and alternative government models up to regional fire services. The focus of this activity was to prepare for both short and long range planning decisions and to improve upon operational stability. The process also evaluated economic, political and operational issues.

The process was designed to be opened, balanced and flexible in order to encourage participation by all levels of agencies. The group was committed to the completion of this process within an agreed-upon time frame.



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- A. *Fire districts, cities, county, hospitals and emergency response organizations will adopt integrated, collaborative and multi-disciplinary planning to ensure that all citizens are served in an equitable, efficient, and effective manner.*
1. Strive for a “seamless” emergency response system regardless of jurisdictional boundary that considers availability, and closest resource.
 2. Pursue those organizational and jurisdictional changes that make financial and operational sense.
 3. Establish minimum standards that can be measured against the best practices in the industry.
 4. Establish a collaborative process for distributing the cost of providing service to the jurisdictions, organizations and agencies that use the services.
- B. *Fire districts, cities, and county will ensure the safety of its citizens through adoption of fair and reasonable fire and life safety codes and ordinances and by embracing the technological advances in fire detection and automatic suppression systems.*
1. Strive to achieve uniformity in the adoption and application of codes and regulations throughout the districts, cities, and county without regard to jurisdictional boundary lines.
 2. Continue to emphasize customer service, one-stop assistance, and a reasonable balance between public safety and economic development
 3. Work in concert with other regulatory agencies (Building, Planning, Environmental Resources) to develop a broad-based approach to public safety planning and regulation.
 4. Embrace the long-term benefits that can be achieved by including automatic fire detection and automatic fire suppression systems in new buildings.
- C. *Fire districts, cities and county are committed to enhancing their value by becoming “all-risk” emergency service providers.*
1. Continue to develop specialized capabilities within the public safety area including hazardous materials mitigation, technical rescue teams, domestic preparedness planning, incident command teams, basic and advanced medical first responder programs.
 2. Continue to develop and enhance relationships with public and private agencies and organizations involved in providing safety services.



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This begs the question as to whether or not your own organization has something similar. How would you answer the question; What is the vision of the fire department?

Summary

Martin Luther King had a dream. Don Quixote was on a quest. As a popular new management titles reminds us "Hope is not a Management Method."

How are you doing Chief, in terms of anticipating the future? If your idea of a vision is just trying to get through the average workweek then there is a high degree of possibility that your organization may never climb to higher and higher aspirations. On the other hand if your vision is so farfetched that it takes on the connotation of a pipe dream your organization may be unfocused and ineffective. Adopting the visioning process as part of your overall management methodology is not a bad idea.