



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

IS IT GONNA WORK OR NOT? LET'S HOPE SO

Hope is not a management method. That has been proven over and over again in the real world. Hoping that something is going to turn out right is tantamount to letting success depend on the whims of happenstance. If you do not want to believe me, check out the book: *Hope is Not a Method; Leadership Lessons for Business from the Transformation of the America's Army*.¹ This text was focused upon the herculean challenge that leadership had in the transition period after the Cold War ended. In that text the author's talked a lot about proven principles and shared values. They definitely provided proof that hoping something good will occur is a dangerous strategy.

We, or in this case you, have to act if we (or your) want the good things happen when a fire occurs that involves something we made people put in their place of business.

What is your strategy to make sure that things go right? If you were reading carefully in the first paragraph, you will probably not try to tell me that we should "just wait and see" because that is the hoping method. You see, hope relies a lot on luck and luck can abandon you very easily. This concept we are talking about is highly dependent on you doing something active to assure success. Replace Hope with Plan and we can go from tossing the dice to seeing the rewards of our code efforts.

This thought came to me recently when I visited the site of a major fire. I will not discuss all of the details of the event as much as I will ponder the consequences. It was a fire in a very large industrial building. The building was fully protected by sprinklers. The building was also a total loss. What happened, or better yet, what didn't happen? I am not sure of what the facts are as I speak, but I did note that making sure that an industrial fire sprinkler works is a top priority for everyone to achieve. In this case I am not suggesting that anyone did anything wrong, but rather I am speculating on how it is possible that observing a problem with a system on an inspection can maybe prevent such a tragedy.

Just making person put in a system is not the end of the discussion. In reality the annual inspection and the other periodic reviews of a sprinkler system is not to be ignored or treated routinely. You can't just "hope" that the system is going to function. You have to make sure that every advantage that was put into the building when it was first installed is still there and operational. In the case of the fire I was observing I am convinced that something compromised the system. Could that reason have been caught on an inspection?

In the world of field inspections determining the operational readiness of existing fire detection, alarm, sprinkler system, or other built in fire protection technology is an extremely important task to be performed. It cannot be taken lightly. You should not assume that just because your people are going out to visit these installations that they are looking for and finding the right things.

¹ Sullivan, Gordon R., Harper, Michael, V., [Hope is not a Method](#), Random House, 1996



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I have a question for you right now. Does your field staff have a copy of every NFPA Standard that applies to the types of systems I just mentioned? Do they have the right editions? By that I mean that a system that was installed in 1950 may or may not look like one being installed today. Does your department library keep the older versions of the codes? Do you provide the updates every new edition? Does your fire prevention bureau have a training regime just like the operations side?

How good is your documentation for each system? How much of a historical perspective can the inspector count on in planning for the field work? If the field inspection has to guess what they are looking for we are back to hoping we are right....We shouldn't be hoping we should know.

Once the field inspector has gone into the field they are removed from the files, so what kind of documentation does your inspector take into the field? How comprehensive is the paper-work? The answer may vary according to a lot of variable, but one thing should be clear in all cases, the field inspector should be prepared to look for specific things, and not just take the occupancy for granted.

Field Inspector's make field observations. What are they supposed to be looking for? The first thing that is very obvious is that they should be looking for anything that can possibly compromise the system. They should have a plan for how they are going to examine the system from front to rear, and from top to bottom. They need to determine as quickly as possible that the system is totally operational and appropriate for the current risk.

The next step is to look at each component of the system to see if all of the "pieces" are there. Is everything that is supposed to be there in place? Does it appear to be well maintained or does the inspector have to crawl over a pile of debris or remove a ton of trash to see the components. This review of the components should also cause the inspector to review the area of coverage of the components. Is there enough of what is supposed to be there to do the job; Alarms, Detectors, Sprinklers, Fire Doors? Believe it or not, owners and occupants and workers in buildings have been known to do things that compromise functionality. Its commonly called tenant revisions after the C of O is issued.

While the inspector is looking at the system they should be looking at the hazards of the occupancy at the same time. Is the hazard class the same as it was last time. Is the system still appropriate for the process and materials? Sometimes there is a process called "business creep" which enters into the equation. This can come about for many reasons, but can be easily overlooked if the field observations are all done looking up instead of around. Business creep may not appear in the fire codes, but it does exist on the shop-room floor.

One admonition that is most important to emphasize is the make sure that there are no hidden spaces that go un-noticed. Minor little things like internal remodels and "cubby-hole" mentality can compromise a system easily. That includes storage and packaging processes. Look under, around and into everything.



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Obviously, if the system is supervised you want to make sure that the system functions correctly. But, you should not ever take this for granted. It needs to be tested, not just observed. And, then the final act of assuring performance when the system is activated is to review the maintenance records of the occupant. As the old saying goes; the job is not done until the paperwork is finished.

As the inspector leaves the building they should be confident that they have restored the system to as close to a brand new state as they can. You never can tell when the next fire will occur. And, if you have done your job correctly you won't have to "hope" that it's gonna work- You can bet on it.