



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Keeping Up or Slowing Down

Who wrote the following words?

"I have sometimes almost wished it had been my destiny to be born two or three centuries hence. For inventions of improvement, and beget more of their kind. The present progress is rapid. Many of great importance, now unthought-of will be available to be procured; and then I might not only enjoy their advantages, but have my curiosity satisfied in knowing that they are to be. "

If you guessed Steve Jobs, then you might be part of the "computer generation." If, you guessed Benjamin Franklin then you might be part historian or just plain traditional. When I found this quote among Franklin's papers I was amused. My reason for the amusement centers on the fact that the fire service is considered to be a really traditional occupation yet one of our founding fathers was on record as stating that he was looking forward to all the changes that were likely to occur. It has now been over 300 years since Franklin participated in developing the political philosophy of this country. It has also been over 300 years since bucket brigades were replaced by hand pumpers; then they were replaced by steamers; and today we have modern firefighting apparatus that would startle Franklin if he had a chance to see them perform. I bet he would be excited.

Where does that place all of us? Are we merely observers of change, or are we the creators of change? That's not a simple a question as it may seem. Conceiving of new ideas, turning them into realistic proposals and advancing the state-of-the-art in the fire service often takes on the shape of conflict and controversy. This can easily be proven by reviewing past practices of the fire service and comparing them to some of the changes being proposed impact our industry. I wonder what the fire service is going to look like 300 years from today. The one thing I know not to do is to predict that it will be the same as today, in spite of resistance to change. The next thing I know not to do is to try to predict exactly what it will look like, because there are forces at play in the creation of civilization and our culture that have yet to reveal he had reveal their respective impact on how we do business.

If you look up the term "state of the art" it refers to the highest level of general development, as of a specific device, technique, or scientific field achieved at a particular time. It also refers to the level of development (as of a device, procedure, process, technique, or science) reached at any particular time as a result of the common methodologies employed. The operative word in this paragraph is "at a particular time." I entered the fire service in 1960 and still have memories of technology that today is sitting on the shelf of fire museums. I strongly suspect that most of the chief officers who are operating at a high level in service delivery today are absolutely required to be familiar with the next new thing.

The essence of this column is to emphasize that one of the tasks of a leader is to lead the process of change. It is a dangerous, exciting and convoluted path that can often result in conflict. So, what is the chief to do in reacting to new ideas as they emerge as part of this change process?



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There are a couple suggestions that are appropriate here. The first is that nothing changes in the fire service without it being thoroughly vetted before it is accepted as a general practice. We can go back and see how that process has worked in the acceptance of specific technologies. One of my best examples is the adaptation of the steam fire engine. That was a technology that emerged from the industrial age. The fire service didn't invent steam. Nor did the fire service invent steam engines. They adopted them. Histories that were written of the fire service about that same time clearly indicate that the idea was unacceptable to the fire service in general. The devices were considered dangerous, if not outright deadly. Yet, we adopted steam technology; put it on the road using horses, which were soon replaced by the internal combustion engine.

There is a continuum of engagement regarding technology and it often plays itself out in the decision-making process. The following are conditions that we all need to be aware of if we want to adequately deal with emerging changes. By the way, I'm not just talking about technological changes. I'm also including philosophical changes. This also includes methodological changes. The first comment I would make about this continuum is that there are two opposite poles with regard to dealing with change. The first is the idea that a person is totally unaware of a proposed change and therefore is likely to fear it. We often call these people resistant to change; or traditionalist.

The second is the idea that a person can be extremely aware of a proposed change and is actually a proponent of change. We often call these people change agents. Believe it or not there is a very extensive continuum of behavior that fall in between these two extremes. For example a person to be aware of something or some type of change, but have absolutely no knowledge of the specifics. There is another behavior where you can have knowledge of a change but not have any interest in pursuing it. The continuum goes on to where a person can be fully engaged with the check proposed change but has concerns about its consequence. Have you recognized yourself yet?

The best strategy that all chief officers should adopt is to be fully aware of proposed changes, followed up by a desire to develop knowledge and competency in that proposal. In the organization individuals should be sought out who can develop a level of expertise about the change and contribute to its adaptation process internally. In other words, your behavior as a leader in not outright rejecting an idea before it has been fully vetted is a skill set that you might have more influence over change than merely resisting it.

Franklin, in spite of his perspective on seeking change did not invent the word state-of-the-art. It was not created until 1910. It was coined by Henry Harrison Uplee, an engineering graduate from the University of Pennsylvania when he was describing the design and construction of turbans operated by combustion gas. Somewhere in the fire service community right now there is an individual who is ready to create a new idea that could change our vocabulary in the future. The real question for all of us in the fire service is how soon we can embrace change that will allow us to remain relevant to the level of public safety at all of our communities.