



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Lightning Strikes Twice

They say that lightening never strikes in the same place twice. Having sat in an observation tower in Yosemite National Park and watching multiple lightning bolts crash to the ground during a fierce thunder storm, I would be hard pressed to disagree with that. However, no matter where lightening strikes, the point of contact is going to suffer some damage.

Where is lightening likely to strike in your community next time? Well, I am not referring to real lightening; I am using that phenomena as metaphor for the onset of a tragic event that nobody expects to happen. What I am talking about are those types of catastrophic events that do seem to be like a bolt of lightning out of nowhere. No one predicts them and no one is ready for them.

The thought for this column came to mind the other day when I was reading about an incident in Russia. In a Russian nightclub over 100 people died as a result of a fire that swept the facility. Not unlike that proverbial lightening we just talked about, I doubt anybody would have predicted that event occurring until after it had already transpired. It is amazing how accurate hindsight can be.

In this particular case, the fire official has been placed on indefinite leave. Notwithstanding the fact that there is a totally form of government in Russia as compared to this country, the reality is that a fire chief whether they know about a problem or not, is ultimately going to be the target of the public's wrath in some types of tragedy. When these events occur, survivors and relatives of the victims alike are looking for a scapegoat and one of the first places to start searching is at the top of the pyramid in a fire department.

Unfortunately for most of us lightening doesn't strike in our communities all that often. However, this catastrophic event, that destroyed the Russian nightclub, is not much different than the Station Nightclub in Wooster Mass.

Do we have our lightening rods out for these kinds of problems? What are the indications that lightening could strike resulting in an embarrassing scenario for the department and in the worst case occur rendering the event for the chief fire officer as a career ending disaster.

The answer is found in the very factors that seem to be derived from many of these types of catastrophic fires. First and foremost is the danger of a heavily crowded event. These scenarios often occur in entertainment venues in which there is very little oversight during the hours of operation. Here is a question for you. Do you have any facilities in your community that meet that criterion? If you do, then perhaps you need to attach the lightening rod to that occupancy.



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The lightning rod I am referring to is inspection frequency that is focused on regarding such an occurrence. As a fire prevention professional you should be paying very close attention to the conditions of your public assembly occupancies, especially after hours and during periods of their most intense usage. Granted, it takes a little bit more time and effort to go out and inspect these kinds of buildings rather than walking through them during broad daylight. That is the very thing that needs to be considered. These types of occupancies might pass inspection during the daytime and be a potential threat at night.

Some fire departments have established nighttime inspections of these types of occupancies especially in metropolitan areas. But, the fact is often ignored in organizations that are not quite metro size at this point. For example, those cities that have gone between 85,000 to 125,000 may have this kind of scenario occurring in their nighttime establishments and the fire prevention bureau not totally aware of it.

Generally speaking overcrowding is not by accident. It is linked in many cases to the popularity of a particular group, the conducting of a special event, or a function of other cultural aspects in the community. You cannot afford to have an occupancy in a city that exceeds its occupant load on a regular basis without anticipating that that lightning strike might occur.

Conducting inspections in these types of occupancies, the policy should be zero tolerance for two factors. The first of these is overcrowding. The second of these is the use of any flammable interior finish and/or open flame that can compromise the interior. Those two factors, followed by inappropriate acts and omissions can be found over and over again in these types of scenarios. While these conditions might be found in other occupancy types, they are the critical mass that turns a public assembly into a tragedy in a very short period of time.

An extra precaution you may wish to take in these occupancies is to have a briefing with the law enforcement agency and advise them of what conditions you have zero tolerance for. For example, many times law enforcement agencies will be brought to the scene of unruly crowds which can result in them identifying conditions even if the fire department is not regularly in and out of the occupancy. As it is with all occupancies, periodic checking of the manner of which they are doing business is a constant reminder of what is required for code compliance. These occupancies are different than the vast majority. The reason is that thousands of individuals are invited into these types of occupancies on a random basis. They seldom know the way out of a building and moreover they are unfamiliar with the conditions that arise in even a slight panic in a crowded room. In order to prevent lightning from striking these occupancies, the fire department should place an appropriate amount of emphasis on these occupancies and adequately equip the fire suppression division to inform every new generation of young citizens about the dangers of overcrowded public assemblies.



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In the final analysis a lightening rod is what causes electricity to go to ground without creating harm and a strong inspection program can do the same to public assembly events.