



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Luddites or Leaders

You might find this hard to believe but not everybody is enamored with technology. Granted, we are surrounded by it in our modern culture, but at one point in time technology was considered more of a threat than it was an asset. A classic example might include the Luddite's of England. They were a group of textile workers who were confronted with a new type of technology that they considered to be threatening to their industry. Their response was to destroy the machines in hopes that the technology would go away. Maybe this is an over simplification of the story, but essentially the word Luddite has become associated with people who just can't seem to get with the program on new technology.

Are you a Luddite? Or, perhaps do you know one? In some cases we can almost be selective about our acceptance or rejection of technology. For example, I have a recent study that was done on the fact that many people who rejected using cell telephones to the point of being angry about it. Yet, they use a digital camera and have a video recorder.

The one group of people that seldom are given the luxury of being Luddites are leaders. The reason for that is that if you are going to be in the leadership role you must be an advocate of something rather than resisting something. Granted there are negative leadership forces in our world but the vast majority of leadership opportunities are generated by circumstances in which people wish to follow someone into the future.

One place you probably wouldn't expect to see this discussion occur is in a magazine that sells technology. For example, as you read through this magazine you are likely to see advertisements encouraging you to try something that is not only new but is on the leading edge of change. For many people this can be a terrifying experience. For others, it's a source of exhilaration and excitement.

This phenomenon recently surfaced at a conference I was attending in which a new technology was being discussed in a workshop. What was being expressed was a fear that many individuals are rejecting some specific technologies out of outright fear that it was going to make the fire service too efficient and too productive. The idea being that rejection of technology would then be replaced by the instantaneous need to reduce personnel.

If that were true, the Luddites of England would have won. But they didn't. The simplest of reason is that technology marches on whether or not individual members of society care to join or not. But, it does raise a question of what role leadership plays in the examination of any and all technology that can be brought to bear to solve our nation's fire problem.



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Sometimes, leaders have to make choices about technology. The better informed that a leader of an organization is, the more likely they will choose a technology that has a couple of characteristics that are of value in the fire service. The first is that it must work, and that it must work well. If there is any one thing that we place a high degree of priority on in our profession is reliability and consistency. But reliability and consistency does not necessarily mean simplistic.

Leaders sometimes have to be paying attention to what is going on outside of their world. They need to be paying attention to what is going on in society in general and industry specific. I would submit that many of the most innovative products that have been brought into the fire service over the last couple of decades were first born in some other arena and then adopted into the fire service after being thoroughly examined by leaders.

One of the first examples of this that comes to my mind was the whole concept of hydraulic rescue tools. I can recall a point in time in which we did not possess sophisticated tools that we have today. We were forced to tear apart cars with jacks, come alongs, and hand operated hydraulic tools. It was laborious, ineffective and in many cases unsafe. However, by adopting a hydraulic mechanism off of an aircraft that was used to control flaps on a jet plane the industry was able to make rescue into the finely tuned science that it is today. I don't know of any rescue squad that reduced staff because of this technology.

I argued with myself about whether to include in this article the very technology that was in question. I chose not to do so in order to preserve its anonymity and to not focus on that technology's success or failures in the modern working place. However, I would like to note that historically the fire service has been 15-20 years behind in most industrial applications of emerging technology.

Let's take the computer for example. No, let's take something even more basic than that. How about fax machines? I recall putting a fax machine in my fire department in the 1980s and being the brunt of many jokes of both friends and adversaries about why I was putting a fax machine in. One chief joked – I didn't know that you were in the business of selling floral arrangements. His reference was to the fact that fax machines at one time were being used to send orders for bouquets and corsages.

The one thing we don't prize very much is the sense of experimentation. Our tendency as a profession is to not use anything until it is almost obsolete in some other arena. Granted that has been slowly but surely evolving over the last couple of years. This is because the next thing that is on the drawing board is moving towards production before the current technology has even become obsolete.

The exact opposite of the Luddite is the Band Master Mentality. That is when someone accepts any type of technology without putting it to any test before making the expenditures. That is equally as irresponsible as failing to use a technology if it works.



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Right now the discussion of acceptance or rejection of technology may seem a little academic to many of you. But it shouldn't. How many of you can recall when they had a telephone with a dial on it? How long ago was it when there were telephone booths on every corner? I will bet you almost every reader of this column could within a few moments identify technologies that they grew up with that no longer exist. The problem is that the pace of that acceptance and rejection is increasing faster and faster and our profession simply cannot afford to be a Johnny come lately.

The leadership in the fire service with regard to technology does not rest in the fire chief's seat. It is a function of almost every rank in the fire service. Our professional curiosity, our ability to adapt, our recognition of trends and patterns in our society is not the purview of any particular person. There may be those who want to make sure that a technology conveniently gets broken as early on as possible so that an excuse can be made that this tactic simply will not work. If history has taught us anything, it should have given us the idea that it simply will not work. Any technology that possesses desirable traits will overcome resistance to change. It is just a question of who ends up being affected by it the most.

The Luddites of England took a great deal of pride in their use of the "hammer" which was a device to destroy the weaving mills. Later on scholars determined that the uprising was not really about technology but rather about the control of quality in the product. In other words, the weavers eventually began to learn how to operate the machines and the industry and the world saw an economic contribution of unsurpassed value. Recently I observed a television advertisement that showed an individual who was bragging about their new piece of technology and had a shocked look on their face as a billboard was going up right outside their office announcing the new technology that had rendered theirs obsolete. While there is humor in that supposition, there is practicality to it also. Leaders advance, Luddites don't.