



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## The Media is the Message

When Professor Herbert Marshall McLuhan coined the term “the Global Village” it was the precursor of many things to come. He recognized that television was going to be a powerful influence. He also stated “the medium is the message.” When McLuhan said, “we look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future” he was talking about society’s tendency to be comfortable with the way things are. McLuhan who died in 1980 also observed, “if it works it’s obsolete”.

Fire departments by their very nature have to live in the present, respecting the past but moving into the future as rapidly as the adaptation process will allow. In order to pursue the future some tough questions need to be asked in the present. Among these are what are we doing, how are we doing it, and can we do it better in the future?

Those questions were posed to the Zone Chiefs in San Diego California several years ago. The net result was the pursuit of an idea that may well be one of the largest steps in improving productivity that technology currently offers the fire service. Fire Chief Kevin Crawford of the Carlsbad Fire Department posed several hypothetical questions to the Zone Fire Chiefs at a meeting. His purpose was to generate interest in encouraging the group to act collectively. His questions provoked considerable discussion that has probably been repeated in many other local and regional fire chiefs associations throughout this country.

The rhetorical questions were “why do we exist and what should we be doing collectively?” Crawford’s provocative questions were responded to by the members of the Zone Chief’s with the development of a list that was focused on ways of improving efficiency and effectiveness of all of the individual organizations through cooperative efforts. The message that emerged was simple: what can we do collectively that makes us all work better individually?

The outcome of that discussion would probably have pleased Professor McLuhan. The choice was to seek a series of projects that would improve the ability of the fire agencies to communicate, cooperate and coordinate better in the future. Fire Chief Don Heiser who was a participant in the group meeting identified the fact that this could be an opportunity to seek a federal grant to support one or more of the ideas. Among the ten fire agencies there were five brand new fire chiefs. They saw this as an opportunity to create a new way of looking at things. They started to refine their list of ideas of cooperating through a series of meetings. As expected, many of the contemporary ideas that emerged included such things as boundary drops, and day-to-day cooperative efforts at the program level. None of these ideas were revolutionary. However, they did generate a lot of discussion over defining terms such as functional consolidation, merger, and more clearly defining what the word regionalization



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means. Over a period of time one idea that began to gain support was based upon a need for a regional approach to training. The ten fire agencies that are part of the zone included Fallbrook, Oceanside, Vista, Escondido, Rancho Santa Fe, Encinitas, Carlsbad, Solano, Delmar, and Elfin Forest. These ten fire stations collectively had fifty-three fire stations and there were several other facilities such as a communications center and administrative office.

As you would expect each department had its own training officer. And yet, each department had very similar training needs especially with regards to meeting certain standards such as EMS training requirements and having a standardized approach to specific topics such as incident command and tactics and strategy. Furthermore, attempts at standardization of such materials were a logistical maze. For example, these fifty-three fire stations had three shifts and the opportunity to send the same message out was a multiple of the number of stations times the three shifts times the number of events that would simultaneously occur taking people away from the training.

Many fire departments currently try to resolve this standardization issue by bringing stations together or by holding the same class multiple times. In spite of the best of efforts most of these scheduling scenarios still have significant holes. Moreover, even with multiple agencies it is sometimes hard to get one instructor to standardize the curriculum.

Another problem that many fire agencies face is even more basic. When you pull fire companies out of their first in district to receive training, it lengthens response times when true emergencies occur back in those districts. Even with move up and move and cover policies response times lengthen. In view of the public consideration that response time is the way they measure the fire departments performance, it became clear to the zone chiefs that anything they could do to keep stations in districts and meet an increasing demand for training would meet their theme of efficiency and effectiveness through cooperation. Chief Heiser offered to allow his Administrative Assistant Tom Gallup to seek a federal grant. According to Chief Heiser if he would have known how much trouble and time was involved in pursuing this solution he is not sure he would have started. By Heiser's own admission "with everything else I had on my desk I didn't need any more bags of rocks." But, the theme of the Zone Chiefs continued to be discussed at meetings and the commitment was made to form a team to pursue this goal.

The Zone Chiefs, who were equally committed, contributed various staff members to work on the development of the grant. Headed by Tom Gallup, Analyst from the City of Encinitas and Ingrid Lenz, Analyst from Carlsbad a task force was created to develop a grant proposal. According to Heiser it would have been very easy to walk away from this project at any point in time. It was complex, required a high level of cooperation and required seeking input from multiple, non-traditional information sources. After months of preparation the ten agencies agreed on a grant application that was submitted to FEMA in February 2003. They received the grant in September of that same year. The grant was



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awarded for \$701,629. In addition, there was matching funds of approximately 30%, which meant that the participating agencies had to raise an additional \$300,699. A formula was worked out so that each participating agency paid a pro-rata share per facility.

Once the grant was awarded a comprehensive request for proposal was created. After distribution of the RFP to various vendors the technology offered by Tandberg was selected. A contract was awarded to SBC to be the overall contractor. The system installed was started in April 2004 and was completed in December 2004.

Essentially the system is composed of two flat screen televisions, which range in size from 17 – 42". One screen is used to watch the training session and the other is used to ask questions. Each facility has a video camera that is about the size and shape of a pencil sharpener. This camera is installed on top of one of the monitors to allow firefighters to conduct video dialogue. There are four central control units that were placed in the geographic region to administer the system.

Notably this video conferencing system does not substitute for physical training such as hose lays, breathing apparatus and other didactic subjects. Specific subjects such as terrorism response, hazardous materials and the theory behind emergency medical services activities, incident management and other training can be delivered to such a system. Furthermore, it can be used to conduct briefings. Individual departments can use it for just their fire stations or multiple departments can use it for broader based subjects.

In general most firefighters work about 100 shifts a year. National standards usually result in each of those firefighters receiving about 200 hours of training during that time frame. While this system has not been in use long enough to determine the actual number of hours that it will be used it is clear that this system has the possibility of achieving a high level of efficiency and effectiveness in keeping fire apparatus in district in meeting a significant number of those training hours.

The combined area that is linked up by this process covers about 350 square miles and encompasses about 550 firefighters and paramedics. Just removing the driving time to go to a central location is a positive operational outcome.

Moreover, this new video conferencing capability will allow these respective agencies to review major incidents, share resources and information during crisis periods and provides a secure method in communicating policy and procedure during times of crisis. One of the sites that have been incorporated is the dispatch center. This adds an entire new dimension to the word communications.

On May 26, 2005, a news conference was conducted in Carlsbad California to display this newly installed video conferencing network to both the public and press. Over 100 people participated. According to



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research on this topic this is the largest network of its nature in the public sector to date. In attendance at that press conference were both city administrators and elected officials. Vista Assistant City Manager Rick Dudley stated, “the idea of video-conferencing is perfect for training classes and standardization of services, because it keeps firefighters at their stations and in their response area for calls.” Dudley speaking on behalf of other administrators gave a great deal of credit to the system for being a cost effective way of approaching training. He stated it was, “making the most out of the taxpayer’s money.”

Operational firefighters such as Battalion Chief Don Shellhammer and District Chief Bill Metcalf immediately saw the results. According to Chief Metcalf, “we have already been using it and we have seen the advantages - we can leave engines at home in their stations rather than pulling them out for training, which runs the risk of longer response time if something happens.”

The system is built to accommodate more users in the future. Modular in design additional facilities can be added without serious technological consequence. According to Carlsbad Fire Chief Kevin Crawford, “when it comes to providing service, we need to foster good relationships with our neighboring departments, since we are going to be in each other’s territory. No fire department is big enough or has enough staff to accommodate every situation that comes their way”. Crawford speaking from experience recognized how this system could have been of use during the firestorms that swept San Diego County in 2003. Oceanside Fire Chief Robert Osby stated, “it is a step toward regionalization. Everyone will know what to do on mutual aid and mass casualty calls.”

The ongoing maintenance costs are relatively low. It is estimated that the first year maintenance was only going to be about \$1,900 rising to about \$6,250 in about three years. These costs will be distributed among user departments. The pro-rata share of such a cost per fire station will be less than \$120.00 per year. That would further be reduced to an estimated cost of less than .35 cents a day. It is hard to visualize a program that would be more cost effective.

FEMA Regional Director Jeff Griffin indicated that of the 19,950 fire agencies that applied for grants nationwide this grant was one of 7,000 that received a portion of the 2.5 million dollars in grants. Griffin noted that the community’s still were required to make matching grants. The ongoing expense of maintenance will remain the responsibility of the organization.

Chief Crawford from Carlsbad and Chief Heiser from Encinitas both reflected that this grant was an outstanding example of what a group of regional fire chiefs can accomplish once they agree upon a goal. They both agreed that one of the ingredients of making this project work was the use of the taskforce to write the grant and develop the request for proposal. The taskforce consisted of grant writers, analysts, information technology people and fire personnel. The taskforce created a process that encouraged



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both the exchange of information and simultaneously encouraged the development of cooperative efforts that are now going beyond this individual project.

There is an old cliché that states, “that failure is an orphan and that success has many fathers”. In this particular case that is likely to be true. Chief Crawford credits Chief Heiser and the task force with persistence. Chief Heiser credits Chief Crawford with the vision. Both acknowledge that the task force was instrumental in making it happen.

Marshall McLuhan would very likely look at this project with favor. However, it wouldn't satisfy his insatiable curiosity unless it was more widespread. Individual fire departments wishing to learn more about this process may contact Tom Gallup at the City of Encinitas, 505 South Vulcan Avenue, Encinitas, CA 92024-3633 to obtain a copy of the grant and the RFP. Regardless of whether the federal government continues to fund grants of this nature there is nothing to prevent regions from developing a similar concept in cooperation with community colleges and other alternative funding sources.

If response time is the holy grail of emergency services and fire stations are the focus of our performance anything that can be done to improve their productivity and simultaneously improve their job knowledge and skills has to be a cost effective course of action for the fire service.