

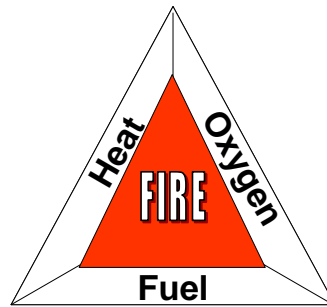


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Ronny J. Coleman

The New Fire Triangle

Quick – what are the three sides of the fire triangle? Every rookie firefighter in the entire world knows the answer to that question. Heat, fuel and oxygen. Next question. Is there a fourth side to the fire triangle? Once again many firefighters know that there is a fourth dimension called “the free radical”. But I consistently see the fire triangle still represented in its simplistic form as an explanation of how combustion occurs. Nobody ever talks about removing free radicals from the atmosphere when it comes to fire prevention, do they? Nor, do we base our fire prevention program on that scientific fourth element.



The Fire Triangle

As fire officers we tend to use the three sides of that triangle because it is a simple way of explaining to the average citizen what we are talking about. Most people understand that when you remove flames from a set of circumstances the fire is not likely to start. They also know that if you diminish the fuel there is a good possibility the fire won't go very far. And, who can deny the fact that when there is no oxygen, nothing can breathe. All of these things are used to sell to the public the idea that combustion is a function of three interrelated components.

So why it is that accidental fire is still tolerated as an enemy of society? The answer to that question is because there are still ample opportunity for circumstances in our community during which those three factors will still engage in the production of combustion resulting in death, damage and destruction that is tolerated. That is why we call ourselves the fire service; we service those that have fires. It was admitted a long time ago that it is virtually impossible to eliminate fire from society. Instead we have to build a better working relationship between those who are dedicated to the reduction of damage from the process that results in the main cause of the damage.

That is the basis for my proposal that we have a new fire triangle. The three sides are public information, public education and public relations. The result is public commitment to fire. I have illustrated the diagrams as follows:



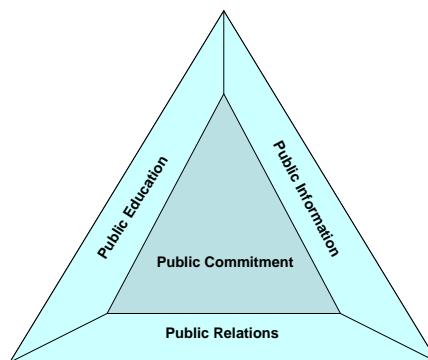
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The world public is really important here. When I use the term “the public” I am referring to everybody but us. We are the ones wearing badges. And by us, I am talking about those who are dedicated to the proposition that fire can be mitigated and controlled in a much more effective fashion through a wide variety of techniques other than fire suppression. Manual fire suppression is the court of last resort. Fire fighting is necessary task, but one that we should not be in any more than we have to be. In a past article I described what I call the era analysis. In that article I noted that a very small fire once it has been discovered is usually controlled by just about anybody who can use a couple of cups of water – or maybe a coffee pot that is full. And that the mighty conflagration can only be dealt with effectively by the massive deployment of physical firefighting resources.

The public is responsible, to a very large degree, for creating the environment in which all fires occur. It is in the homes behind doors, or in the factories or the industry during processes, or even in the wildland environment in which heavy fuel build up on the ground is a result of apathy and ignorance results in small events turning into large events. If we want to alter that outcome eventually we have got to go beyond our obvious use of tools and techniques of fire suppression and obtain the public support for addressing all of these issues simultaneously.

I have divided these into three categories of information, education and relationships because I think they are actually three different things. Let’s take apart these three legs and see what is similar about them and what is different about them.



Including the word public in each leg of this model implies in the model that everybody is a possible target of future activities beyond the scope of the fire service. Each is a different type of public and is capable of entering into one of the three different levels of commitment to the reduction of the fire problem. When I use the word public information my intent is to utilize those techniques that can inform the public on the level of service and the quality of services in the proper way to understand built in fire mitigation practices. You will notice that I keep public information separate from public education. My reasoning for this is that distributing public information is aimed at the entire spectrum of society from top to bottom, side to side than just educational materials. Public information efforts



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are a distribution of facts and figures and information that in many ways is compartmentalized and have to be aimed at target audiences to cause them to act in a certain way. .

How is that different from public education? In the context of this model I am suggesting that the concept of education is aimed at human behavior and is not aimed at anybody in particular. Education efforts are seemingly aimed at select teachable moments in our society. Granted it may use some of the public information that has been developed in under the previous description but public education involves a teacher, learner relationship. It involves the utilization of public information at a much more intense way. Public information involves a different relationship – targeted message about the need to act upon something but without a teacher –student relationship.

That leaves our third leg of this triangle. This is sometimes called public relations. Public relations are not the same as information or education. It is the establishment of trust between the fire service and the target audiences that result in a high level of commitment to the use of the information. Public relations are not a case of trying to prove to John Q public that we are professional heroes. Rather it is designed to prove why they need to support program activity in the fire service, which includes adequate staffing and adequate reinforcement of our resources so the job can continue in the future.

If you take those three components independently it is easy to see that standing on their own by removing one of them there is a high degree of possibility the other two will suffer. It's just like a fire remove a leg and the fire goes out. If you remove fuel there is a good possibility that fire will not occur. I would submit that if you remove public information that it has an adverse effect on community trust.

I remain somewhat amazed at the fact that the average person in the average home in the average community knows practically nothing about the fire department other than a few simplistic stereotype ideas. Some of it is being produced by the mass media and others are being produced by an overwhelming sense of apathy about public services from the masses, until they are actually demanded for an event. My amazement continues when I observe situations where fire departments are inadequately funded and when they go out to the public to ask for support their efforts are rejected. I am not going to suggest that everybody's request would increase funding is always justified. I believe that there are cases in which the fire service is overreached and resulted in a loss of credibility because they failed to realize that the community relationship was as important as the request for funding.

How does this apply to a fire department on a day to day basis? This model suggests that all three of these components must be incorporated at different levels of the administrative tactics and strategy of the department.

In the first place, community awareness has to be a very high level priority in the mission, goal statements and the objectives to be accomplished in an organization. Reducing them to a footnote or



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worse yet, dismissing them as not being important at all often means that other more critical priorities may never reach their level of satisfactory performance. I recall having a conversation with one of the grand masters of public education a long time ago. We were attending a statewide workshop in which I made a speech about the fact that while I loved all of the public education programs represented in the room; I had to admit that I felt that everyone of them was vulnerable. In my opinion, which I still retain, every time there is a major budget reduction, one of the first things that will go is the public information officer, the public education officer, or the public relations officer. It is almost as if when we are being wounded fiscally the first thing we do is cut off our access to the public in hopes that somehow or other that will be translated into the public's understanding the problem. That makes no sense to me. When I suggested this to that wonderful leader in an arena of public education she became somewhat angry at me at the time.

Several months later she called me to advise me that her department had undergone some relatively serious budget reductions and her job was the first one to go. I am not the least bit pleased to have been the one to have predicted that disaster. To the contrary, I feel that it is one of the things that are wrong with the approach that we are taking with justifying modern fire protection. We simply assume that the public is going to respond to our request for additional funding by raising taxes regardless of the consequence. California proved that doesn't work very well in the past and other states have followed suit.

Now, as I am preparing this article, I can visualize many fire chiefs out there that are going to come back at me and say; we don't have the funding for those specializations!

You are right, you probably don't. That is not what I am suggesting. What I am suggesting is that these three types of activity should be part of the organizational structure of the entire fire department. Every fire station in this country should provide this three legged approach to the community. These three legs include being able to distribute information to the average person as often as possible about the level of service. Secondly, they should be positioned to be the ones to educate citizen group's every opportunity that arises. And, they should be at the dead center of the establishment of the community relationships that go on between the firefighting agency and every other institution within their first in district.

First in district. Everybody's got one. And, some departments are much more successful in understanding this new inspired triangle than others. In my travels around the country, I have found fire departments that treat their fire stations as "Fort Apache". They lock up the building, lock in the property and present a very cold atmosphere to the very community that they are there to serve. Others have found ways of protecting their security while simultaneously finding a way to invoke those three elements to increase community support.



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I blame part of the reason for the lack of expertise in this area on our own internal processes. We have never placed much priority on the development of this skill set. I can also imagine fire captains and even battalion chiefs out there responding to this article and saying: I don't have time for that stuff!

Well, maybe not. On the other hand I would really question whether all that other "stuff" that is being done at the fire station level does anything really to obtain community support, community information or community education.

The decision does require a certain amount of introspection on the part of the fire service. If we are doing a lot of stuff that pleases ourselves and we don't have adequate financial support to do our jobs effectively then my question is where are our priorities?

There are a lot of techniques that can be used to enhance this area. Many of them will be simple. On the other hand some of them can get quite complicated. I will be the first to admit that. But if you were in the business of doing almost any other kind of business there is a good possibility that you would be thinking about your community relations. In the wonderful world of the business economy, we call that advertising. Another term for it is called marketing. Hardly any business is capable of surviving today unless it has an ability to attract customers. Going to a fire is not an advertisement, it is evidence of commitment, but we cannot guarantee that the people who need to know we are performing are aware of the performance unless we document it and tell it to them.

And, we ought to get over the idea that our customers are only the people who call us for help. Our customers are every citizen who could call us for help. In other words, everybody. It is not so much that we convince the people who are pinned in the car what great medics we are but rather the entire community of why our medic program should be in place in the first place.

Therefore, some of the concepts that fall into this area include such things as customer service surveys that can be sent out not just to people who use these emergency services but those who also are exposed to fire prevention activities and other non emergency activities.

In another column, I noted recently a fire department that started up its own local radio station to broadcast public information and public education components to its community.

I have observed fire departments that provide each of their company officers with a business card that they can pass out like any other professional to build relationships. I have seen fire departments go to an extraordinary amount of effort to create newsletters in which they can distribute to their taxpaying public to maintain increasing knowledge of the awareness of the community's level of service and level of effort. And, on the other hand, I have seen the exact opposite. By that I am referring to fire departments that believe their entire marketing effort is dependent upon their performance on the fire



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ground. They are only regarded in as positive light as the least favorable event that occurs in the community. The very next event could be an unfavorable one can that can reverse fifty years of goodwill. Those departments that treat the public not as a customer but rather as a cash register are finding that trust is slipping. It may not be slipping badly right now but the possibility for that trust to continue to erode is there.

So in summary, if you take those three sides of the new fire triangle and separate them it is easy to see that by themselves they don't cause a serious problem if they are not there all of the time. But, if you have a really good public information program but it is not based upon trust and it does not result in people having a higher skill level about preventing fires, then you haven't accomplished anything. Conversely, if you have a lot of public trust but they don't know anything about you and your organization's needs, there is a possibility that your department can be compromised during tough economic times.

My suggestion is that if you want to create some heat in your community, it is time to elevate your interest in all three of these levels and put them all together and have them delivered at the lowest possible level. Nothing is as powerful as the influence of the neighborhood fire station. There will be company officers out there that don't like this suggestion. You know the strengths and weaknesses of your own organization. Put your thinking cap on and find a way in which your current delivery system can maximize these three components. I will almost bet you a steak dinner that your fire department will benefit in the long run.