

Don't Let the Future Happen to You — Plan for it



RONNY J. COLEMAN

Ronny J. Coleman has served as fire chief in Fullerton and San Clemente, Calif., and was the fire marshal of the state of California from 1992 to 1999. He is a certified fire chief and a master instructor in the California Fire Service Training and Education System.

In the world of social calendars, there is a wide range of events we may be asked to attend. At one end is the black-tie affair; at the other is the backyard barbecue. The former requires decorum and the right kind of attire, while at the latter just about anything goes. At which party are you most comfortable? Is it possible to enjoy them both?

What got me thinking about this dichotomy was a discussion I participated in recently about the current use or avoidance of strategic planning as an element of decision-making in an organization. One perspective suggests that strategic planning is absolutely the most important task one can pursue. This perspective assumes that when it's done, and done correctly, things get better. The other end of the debate says it is just too much work for such an ambiguous outcome. Believers in this perspective would rather be more informal and adjust as they go. In their opinion, strategic planning takes so long that by the time it's finished, it is already obsolete

But is there a third perspective that lurks in the gap between departments that believe they have to plan and those that can't or won't plan? I believe that somewhere between the black-tie affair and the backyard barbecue, you need to develop a perspective that focuses on your future, but is not so overwhelming that it is avoided at all costs. It is this third perspective that I want to discuss in this column.

If you choose an extremely sophisticated approach that takes multiple years to complete, the party is over before the guests go home. On the other hand, if your approach is marked by little enthusiasm and a lack of rigor, the guests may just stay home and watch TV. I believe that somewhere in between there is a place where a satisfying process can exist. The degree of planning will depend in large measure on whether you believe your department is on track, or totally lost in the weeds.

My observation about departments that plan well is

that for them planning is an organic part of the organization. The department plans its work and works its plan. Planning is not an event, but a lifestyle for such departments. Plans appear, are executed and evolve within an organizational structure that is neither too loose nor too rigid. Those departments that don't plan well generally respond only to external influences and seem to bounce aimlessly from crisis to crisis.

Those who wish to make organized planning a bigger part of the department's culture should start by asking the following questions: Where are we today and where do we want to be in the future? While it is essential to question what you are doing today, it is imperative to focus on the future, because it is difficult to change when your focus is solely on the present, especially if it is burdened by the past.

So, here's your invitation to the next party. It's not going to be at the Ritz, and it's not going to be in your backyard. It is being held in the arena of public opinion and it may determine where your department is next year or the years after that. Get started by answering the following questions:

- Does your fire agency have any kind of planning process in place?
- Does it result in a planning document or merely incremental activities?
- If you do have a formal process, is it kept up to date or does it sit on the shelf?
- If you do not have a planning process, why not?
- If you are responsible for the fate of your department in the budgeting process, what do you use to substitute for the planning process in justifying your existence?

I won't ask you to send me an RSVP that you have adopted planning as an organized process. But I will predict that if you are going to survive you had better have some kind of event that creates a direction for your department to go in — or the future is going to get less and less bright. ■