



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Room and Contents

Jargon is sometimes the hallmark of distinction between one occupation and another. We all have some form of slang or slightly technical term that distinguishes one trade from another. And, of course, we in the fire service do not like to be considered as lacking so we have a "street-wise" vocabulary that is colorful and textured. I have a lot of favorites, such as "header" and "Jakey". I'll bet we could create a whole dictionary with just the acronyms alone.

Recently a conversation with a non-fire person resulted in me realizing that those that do not share this vocabulary often are puzzled by our declarations. In this context I was talking about firefighter safety with a person who was discussing with me why so many fire trucks are called to the scene of the fire. I mentioned the acronym IDLH. His "huh" reaction caused me to have to explain the concept more thoroughly. In doing so, I also used a phrase "room and contents". His quizzical reaction spawned a broader explanation. Eventually we got through the explanation with my civilian counterpart actually knowing what RIC and RIT meant.

What is this conversation doing in a magazine about sprinklers and moreover, fire prevention in general? My answer is that the real problem we have in the fire protection services is that our world is not easily understood by those we expect to support our efforts to limit the fire problem. This is not the first time I have talked about the concept. I once wrote a column about the Rosetta Stone, where I compared the three perspectives of how we look at fire issues. Perhaps this is just an extension on that concept. This time I would like to use this reality type of a discussion of how our nation's fire problem suffers because of this phenomenon.

To do so, I will use some more jargon. How many times have you heard the phrase "room and contents"? How about structural fire? How about working fire? Ever heard those phrases used in the context of a debate with those that are making budgetary considerations involving fire protection. What do those terms mean to them?

Unfortunately, I believe that we need to make those terms much more specific to gain support. For example, we should say "single family dwelling, room and contents" rather than "structure fire." Or, large area commercial buildings with fire spreading beyond room of origin rather than building fire. As a student of biology early in my life, I got familiar with concepts of genus, species and subspecies. This is the same idea. Let's call fires what they are to the occupant, is it a home fire, a business fire, or a community asset fire?

Let's go back to the idea of room and contents and IDLH. How can those terms be applied to the following explanation to provide a better visualization?



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

A fire in a bedroom that produces a toxic atmosphere that could not be controlled by the occupants that eventually resulted in sufficient heat of fire gases that it killed someone. Can you close your eyes and imagine that fire? If a fire is a person's bedroom what makes that scene so personal. How about if it occurred in a hotel room? Paint a picture of it in your mind and then use that description when talking to the press

Here is another one.

A fire in a kitchen produces toxic products and results in a fire's growth to the point that it will flashover and migrate throughout the entire building. A firefighter goes into that atmosphere because she was told there was a child in there somewhere. What can happen in that scenario?

Last sample;

A fire in a commercial building that will result in the production of toxic products of combustion, resulting in the destruction of all of the contents, with eventual destruction of the structural stability of the building. The loss of jobs from the building causes an economic downturn. How is that best described?

Ever responded to any of these scenarios? Could you finish up the word picture by actually giving a time and a place where that has already happened? I have no doubt we can all provide real world examples of such an event.

All of these word pictures help our civilian contemporaries to "see" what we are seeing. If we call all structure fires just structure fires the visualization does not occur. But by developing the picture and making it more personalized the image goes further in the mind of the observers.

To us, IDLH is immediately dangerous to life and health. To our audience, it should be called a poisonous gas that can kill. It is flashover to us, but to a civilian it is a rapid spreading of an interior fire that kills and destroys everything in its path. We call it back draft; they need to know it as an explosion caused by flammable gases being able to find a new air supply etc.

By now, I may have worn out my point, but I hope it helps to explain why we need to stop talking to ourselves about these losses as if we understand our own jargon. We need to start talking to those whose support we need by getting them to visualize the problem by making the words into images.

Scientists and engineers are telling us every day that there are significant changes going on in that cauldron of flame, smoke and poisonous gas. Our domestic belongings are creating a hostile and lethal atmosphere that endangers them and us at the same time. That is our problem.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

What we need to do is take the science of the room and contents fire and turn it into a specific story that can have more lessons for the average citizen that is both understandable and personal.

Tell a better story, get a better reaction. It can't hurt our cause.