



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

SCANNING THE HORIZON

If you want to read a book that will really mess with your mind, try reading the one by Steven Hawking on "The Origins of Time." Physicists have been going through all sorts of mathematical calculations for years trying to determine when the universe was created and making some predictions about how long it is going to last. This is sort of a good news, bad news type of scientific endeavor.

The good news is the world is probably going to last for millions, if not billions, more years. The bad news is we have absolutely no idea what is going to happen next week.

Or do we? Predicting the future has been the topic of a lot of fantasy by authors, movie producers, and speculation by even the most primitive of societies. Hawking would agree, however, that regardless of what we say about the future, it is still something that will occur as opposed to something that we can accurately predict. We are literally trapped in the present. As this article is written, a certain set of circumstances exist in my life, in my fire department, and in the fire profession. The same with you. By the time this article is typed by my secretary, submitted to Fire Chief's Magazine, and edited and ultimately distributed for you to read, any number of things could have occurred, both to you and to me.

This puts those of us in the role of being a fire chief in somewhat of a predicament. If things keep on changing, then how in the world can we be adequately prepared for all the eventualities that could occur? We've talked in past columns about the concepts of planning for or predicting events. This is not exactly what you call a strange field for most of us in the emergency services business. As a matter of fact, most of us in one way or another are constantly predicting things that we postulate will occur. These might include predicting major calamities, disasters, and destruction of buildings or property.

More importantly, fire chiefs have to have a good grasp of the things that are predictable that will affect them right here and now. In other words, while we may not have a crystal ball, we should have some kind of a road map as to where we are going. That's the focus of this month's column. I call it focus on the future.

It is folly to attempt to predict the way things are going to be. In one of the magazine clippings I have in my file, there is an entire list of predictions that have been made by very prominent scientists, theologians, and politicians that turned out not only to be inaccurate but to be patently absurd. This month's column will not deal with predictions. It will deal with the process of focusing on the potential for our future.

There are three dimensions of our jobs as fire chiefs that deal with the focus on the future. The first of these is the ability to identify trends and patterns, the development of policy of preparing for change, and the forecast of potential scenarios.

Let's start with trends and patterns. Generally speaking, things are happening all the time. That may sound like a ridiculous statement. Yet, it is not uncommon for people to not observe what is going on in the here and now with regard to potential impact for the future. Trends and patterns are made up of



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

small events and activities that, by themselves, mean nothing. It is only when they are displayed against some contrasting background that they begin to make sense. There are many ways we have of identifying trends and patterns but most importantly we have to focus on the fact that they are occurring if we ever wish to see them.

Many of you, perhaps, have seen some of the optical illusions that have been used in classes on creativity. There is one classic example that if you view it one way it looks like a vase, and if you view it another way it looks like two women. There is another one that is essentially a drawing that can be viewed as either a lovely young lady with a necklace or an elderly woman wearing a shawl.

One does not see trends and patterns unless one is looking for them. The way to look for them is to have a constant focus on the activity level that is going on at a level that is two to three times removed from your own day-to-day operations. Granted, there are trends and patterns going on in our own fire departments and perhaps in our own city. These types of trends and patterns are usually a result of much larger influences at play in society as a whole. Therefore, in order for us to see what is going to occur in the future, we must look beyond our own backyard. This means reading what is going on in the professional journals, maintaining a certain amount of professional inquisitiveness regarding what is happening at the state, national and international level with regard to either the fire service or politics, and last but not least, making some sort of conscious effort to place events and activities into categories of recognition.

I often characterize trends and patterns as following the model concept that I have explored in articles in previous columns in Fire Chief Magazine and elsewhere. Models are representations of the real thing. For purposes of this article, for example, the model that one has to look at trends and patterns in is based on a minimum of two different activities. In other words, something is happening and there is a specific outcome.

Let's use, for example, the trends and pattern relative to automatic fire protection. The trend over the last couple of years is for two things to have occurred. Many fire departments are starting to use automatic fire protection as an alternative form of fire protection. Many of these same communities are experiencing a relatively steep decline in the frequency and severity of fires. There is a relationship between the two, i.e., more sprinklers, lower fire loss. If one looked at that in the sense of where were we in 1965, it would be a relationship between the number of sprinkler systems out there and the American fire loss record. If we look at that same relationship in 1989, the correlation between the number of sprinklers and reduced fire loss will probably be quite obvious.

To repeat what I said earlier, the only way that you know there are trends is you have to look for them. What you need to do once a trend has been identified is to continue to plot its course. The work done by John Nesbitt and many of the other so-called "futurists" consisted of basically taking newspaper clippings and magazine clippings over an extended period of time and plotting them in relationship to changes that were occurring incrementally. You can do exactly the same thing.

This leads us to the second concept. Once again, I'd like to use the modeling concept to provide an explanation. There is actually a concept called the scanning formula that is used by futurists to determine whether we should be ready for an actual change. This model has two dimensions. The first



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

of these is how likely is it that something is going to occur. This ranges from low to very high. The second dimension of our model is just exactly how severe will we be impacted if this actually occurs. This, too, goes from low to high. In other words, if something is very unlikely to occur and even if it did occur, it would have a very, very low impact on us but chances are we are not going to be too concerned about it. The other end of the spectrum is if something is extremely likely to occur and it will have tremendous impact on us, then if we are not prepared for it, we will literally be destroyed by it.

If you look at the model that we displayed to accompany this article you will see that this puts us into four potential sets of circumstances. The first of these is if something is very likely to occur but have a relatively low impact on us, we may wish to consider it and monitor it but chances are we won't get too concerned.

If something is very unlikely to occur and will have a low impact on us, chances are we can choose to ignore it. The far right hand box contains a set of circumstances where it may not be too likely to occur but if it does it can have a severe impact. In that case, you'd better have a plan. You'd better be monitoring for that event for when it does occur the consequences will be severe.

That leaves us with our last box which is highly likely and with severe impact. There is only one strategy that a manager can have to survive in that box. That is to control the decisions.

In the final analysis, what we are stating with these models is that future focus depends upon us doing two things simultaneously. The first of these is we have to constantly be scanning the environment to determine what is likely to impact us at some point. Then, once we have identified the potential of something occurring we must take a look at ourselves and assess what its impact will be on us as a profession. Failure to do that periodically will result in an organization that is essentially blind.

Which lends itself toward our last topic and that is long range forecast analysis. As you will recall earlier in the article, I indicated you should not attempt to predict things. It's not exactly what we were stating. What I was emphasizing is that you should not try to predict specific events that won't occur. Instead, you should be attempting to predict those things that are very highly likely to occur. The most fallacious of all predictions are the ones that state, "it just can't happen." And, then it happens. Remember! Man was not supposed to fly. Many predicted that it could not happen.

The most cautious of predictions are the ones that are based on the premise that something can happen and the predictor does everything to prepare for it if it does. Long range forecast analysis has its limitations. It is extremely difficult for you to be able to have any idea of the assessment of conditions in the year 2089. That is 100 years from now. How many people who were alive in 1889 would have any concept of where we would be today?

The focus has to have different horizons to it. Long range forecast analysis has basically about three ranges. The first is three to five years. This might be considered to be a tactical horizon. It is the period of time that most of us recognize and can react to changes as they come toward us. The second level is between five and ten years. This might be considered a strategic horizon. It is not without reason for us to be able to anticipate certain changes that will occur ten years from today. The third horizon is ten to 25 years. This is called the visionary horizon and it requires an assessment of a much larger picture.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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There we have 3 different types of long range forecast: 3 to 5, 5 to 10, and 10 to 25. Accuracy is not important, process is.

There is an actual methodology that has been encouraged in the past that is a reflection of all three concepts. The first of these was the U.S. Fire Administration's plan for master planning. A more recent iteration of this concept is called strategic planning. In the old days, being prepared for things that were going to happen to you was just called good common sense.

As fire chiefs we may never be given a crystal ball to go along with our gold badge, but that certainly does not prevent us from planning ahead for change.