



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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The Checklist Manifesto

by

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Just how important is the concept of a checklist? In conversation with various parties in my career, I have heard people make the argument that checklists are for dummies. In other words, if you don't know what you are doing, you use a checklist. The argument goes that a person who needs a checklist doesn't know enough about the subject to be able to adequately cover it. What nonsense.

Have you ever heard the stories of surgeons leaving sponges and even surgical tools inside of the bodies of their patients? Have you ever heard any stories about air plane crashes where some failed to follow a specific procedure? Or, on the other hand, have you heard the story about the Miracle on the Hudson? There, Sully, the pilot fell back almost instantaneously on his checklists and started going through them with rapid fire mentality resulting in a satisfactory outcome. There is also an excellent book on this topic written by a world class surgeon that helps to make this point. Written by Atul Gawande the book is called "the Checklist Manifesto."

One of his book reviewer's states:

"Gawande believes that modern world requires us to re-visit what we mean by expertise; that experts need help, and that progress depends upon experts having the humility to concede that they need the help."

Personally, I agree with that assessment.

The reason for generating this discussion is to place a lot more importance on the use of checklists and formal structures for conducting fire inspections. It may well have been appropriate at some point for us to go in the field with nothing but a clipboard and a card about occupancy to conduct an inspection. I can actually recall a point in my own career where that is exactly the way we did it. We had no formal structure. All we had was an address card and a point of contact. Today, we have an app for that. But I am not going to make the case for the computerized version as much as I am going to make the case on why total quality improvement requires that we look at those checklists rather than just act as if they are automatically being done correctly.



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If you are reading this article and you utilize checklists in your own department, I would strongly recommend that you grab a hold of a copy of one you use for conducting inspections as we proceed down this article. Why? Because I am going to ask you a few questions about that form and you and I will develop a sense of whether or not that checklist is helping you or hurting you.

If you stop reading at the end of the last paragraph and went and got your form fine. If you don't have your form in front of you, we will continue nonetheless. Here is what I am getting ready to suggest. As you look at the checklist that your department has identified, exactly how many of the components on that checklist are mandatory to be complete? Is it conceivable that an inspector can go into the field and look at part of the form and not look at the other part? Is it possible for an individual when they return home to not check off the box that might have been appropriate for the inspection?

If the answer to any of those is yes, then the next question is how often are you aware of the inconsistencies between what your inspectors are reporting on and the spirit and intent of your inspection program. This is what we refer to as total quality improvement. You see filing those forms in the file folder when they return back to the fire station is not quality improvement. To the contrary, what the forms may reveal is that there have been components of the inspection that are either not examined thoroughly or not reported on properly.

Who looks at your inspection forms when they come back into the office? Is there someone with authority who will use it or is it a clerical person who merely filed it away? That is the essence of the beginning of this concept. Making sure the checklist did not result in mediocre inspections.

To make my case more thoroughly this is the time to consider reading that book that was suggested earlier. You may want to read as part of your vocabulary to become more qualified to evaluate quality improvement measures.

Gawande makes the case that using the checklist manifesto is absolutely essential as you become more and more focused on the criticality of an outcome. So, what he is basically saying is the smarter you are, the more you should probably use a checklist to make sure you don't miss something because of a memory lapse, not a knowledge lapse.

In pursuing this particular point of view, I have had conversations with individuals who feel this is intrusive. Do we need to be looking over the shoulder of our fire inspectors? My answer is yes. We should be looking over the shoulders of our fire inspectors because they are



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representing the expectation of the outcome that we desire and that is a high level of compliance with the code. How else will we ever know whether or not we are making a difference or not?

That doesn't necessarily mean you have to look at every single inspection. This leads to a concept called random sampling. If you have not engaged in random sampling in the past it is pretty simple. Instead of looking intensely at every piece of paper, you select a random number from the pile and look at those with more scrutiny.

Another term that might be applied here could be completing an internal audit. As you audit the outcome of an inspection, the checklist should give you direct reflection of what is going on.

I recall a conversation once in my own department where we had a scenario with a specific occupancy that the same violations had been cited multiple years in a row. To me that was a red flag. If the same violations still exist then we are not mitigating the problem. In conducting an interview with the fire prevention personnel about that scenario, I discovered that the inspection had been done by five different inspectors over a period of time. Each felt bound to identify the non-compliance but was somewhat unaware of the track record of non-compliance.

To do a really professional job of inspecting fire departments occupancy, you need to have an internal audit process that reviews those things on a periodic basis. It is not my position to suggest that there is anything wrong with your department if they don't do it but I will make the observation that departments that do it, tend to have a much better control over the inspection process.

This type of an audit can also be an opportunity to identify training and education issues. Are your people looking for the right things when they are in the field? This internal audit process could include periodic ride-along in which you actually go in the field with your fire protection personnel to see what they see and then see what they do about it.

My last suggestion if you have that form still in front of you is: What are your expectations regarding recommendations? Are you expecting your fire prevention inspectors to give specific recommendations or general ones? One of the best ways to determine what they are doing is to review that on the checklist to find out what they have done in the past. It is not uncommon for inspectors to get into a routine where they use standardized terms or what some might refer to as code clichés. What you should be looking for is whether or not those recommendations were actually followed and whether or not the next year's report revealed the different findings.

My last suggestion as you are looking at that form is to ask whether or not the form is truly relevant any more. One of the problems that I have witnessed in examining fire prevention



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bureaus are that many times the forms themselves are several generations older than the actual code itself. There needs to be a process in place so when codes are updated and amended that someone takes the time to assure that the quality control goes down through the checklist also.

Hopefully you are ending this article with a smile on your face because you have been doing some of these things all along but never realized how important they were. Take satisfaction if that is the way you feel at this moment. If you have a few questions that are nagging in the back of your head right now, then it is time to spend a few more minutes looking up the concept of total quality improvement and create a few more tasks to be accomplished in your monthly endeavor to make your community safer against fire.

Happy hunting.

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