



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

What If?

What if? That can be a pretty heavy duty question. It can be used as speculative even hopeful thought process for some. For some people, it may even be a fearful question. The idea that we can contemplate consequences of things that haven't already happened is a mental game that many of us play in our lives. What if our budget is reduced by ten percent? What if we were to add an additional person to our engine company? What if the council voted this way or that way on a specific piece of legislation or regulation?

In the last paragraph I indicated that the game of "what if" can be speculative, i.e., we can talk about what might be. I indicated that it could be hopeful and that we can wish for certain things to happen. And, lastly, I indicated that it can be fearful because we could be concerned about something happening in which we have absolutely no control. For purposes of this article I would like you to consider the phase what if as a form of professional inquiry that we should all engage in when we can. By that I mean what if we use the "what if" game as a means of motivating change?

Recently, I read a book entitled "What If", written by a series Kaled Carr, John Lukas, John Keegan, James Bradley, Stephen Ambrose, and others (Putnam Publishers, New York, 2001, which describes numerous events in contemporary society, but with the twist of looking at them as to how the actions that have been taken in the past would have lead society. In other words, what if something had NOT happened? For example, what if our nation had not fought the Civil War? What if Nazi Germany had prevailed in World War II because the United States remained neutral? These are big what if stories and a lot of fun to read but they haven't got much to do with the modern world mainly because those things didn't happen.

What I am interested in is what if we ask some questions about how we can do things better, faster, quicker and perhaps change the nature of what we are doing in the world of fire protection. In the context of innovation and adaptation, the what if game is the world of the inventor, the early adopter and the entrepreneur. In the world of the pessimist, the late adopter and those that are technologically obsolete, what if is used as a form of professional paranoia. In the case of the mainstream, what if takes the form of what's the latest...

I was contemplating this concept the other day as I was looking at a magazine article called "Gadgets, Geeks and Gismo's". It was based on an examination of modern technology as to where we are all going with things that our society is starting to demand from the wonderful world of technology. Perhaps it is time for us in the fire service to sit back and take a look at what is happening in the rest of the world and ask ourselves, what if some of these things were brought into our world faster and in a well structured fashion.



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Let me give you a couple of real world examples. For example, what if blue tooth technology would allow every firefighter to wear an ear piece that would allow them to monitor radio traffic all of the time, not just when they are wearing PPE. Every firefighter could have situational awareness of everything that is happening while they are at the firehouse, without having to use their hands. I am not just talking about having a radio within a blue tooth device, but rather a mechanism that is worn by the firefighter when they are on duty so they can receive information on a timely fashion ranging all the way from updates from dispatch center to perhaps last minute warnings on safety issues. What if training lectures were made available on IPODS?

What I thought I would do in this article is to give you a series of what if's that you might want to contemplate in the terms of your own firefighting agency and/or things that you look for in the future. Some of them are pretty basic and some of them may seem to be so far out that they might be laughable. But, just remember this. That the concept of each individual firefighter having their own breathing apparatus mask and having it form fitted to their individual face was a pretty far out idea not to many years ago.

Let's start!

- What if every fire truck that is manufactured from this date forward is equipped with an on board GPS device that automatically updates the dispatch system regarding that vehicles location and describes the type of activity it is engaged with as being routine or emergency. The concept of automatic vehicle location is widely used in almost all forms of the transport industry and yet has only seen a minor penetration in the fire service. But, what if that same device could start being used to measure response time performance on a real time basis?
- What if every piece of modern firefighting apparatus was equipped with an on board computer that could talk directly to all buildings that are designated as target hazards in the community and can engage in real time daily exchange during emergency conditions.
- What if every fire truck in the United States came equipped with a DVD device in the jump seats that would allow firefighters to engage in reviewing training materials when they are not otherwise occupied going from point A to point B in their fire vehicles. This would be especially useful on fire companies being deployed over long distances for such things as mutual aid assignments.
- What if every fire truck in the country had a switch on the seatbelt that would not allow the apparatus to be started unless every passenger was belted up?
- What if every firefighter had a nationally issued data card that included all of his or her vital signs, all of their health information that was carried on their person every day they are on duty. In the event of an injury the card could be read with a device on the



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command officer's vehicle that would spell out every piece of information needed about the individual.

- What if you could attach a device to a burning building that would measure G forces and stress to predict when structural collapse is likely to occur?
- What if there was a national radio system like NPR that would provide a constant stream of free updated information to the American Fire Service that could be monitored in each and every firehouse in the country.
- What if there was a device that could be worn like a wrist watch that would provide biometric information on the physical and physiological responses of a firefighter when they are on duty.
- What if we had a voice controlled device that would allow a fire officer to fill out a fire report without ever having to type a word. The device would capture voice information into a system as the apparatus is returning back from the scene and transmitted wirelessly to a server that would update the information on an automatic basis.
- What if the fire service had a nationally recognized database similar to law enforcement that would allow fire departments to update fire and emergency experiences on real time basis? This system would keep track of trends and patterns on a minute by minute, day by day, at the local, regional and national basis to explore trends and patterns in the fire service.
- What if we had a satellite command post located in outer space that would be able to maintain constant communications across the entire spectrum of the United States and Canada to provide situational awareness and command and control on disaster operations.
- What if all future fire officers would have to go through an Academy that is similar to one of our four military academies such as West Point, the Air Force Academy, Annapolis, or the Coast Guard Academy in order to become eligible to be a fire officer in a fully paid fire department.
- What if fire departments starting going "green" by using alternative fuel based vehicles for everything except for the heavy apparatus used by the department.
- What if fire sprinklers were required in all single and multi-family dwellings of all new construction in the United States by federal mandate?
- What if every firefighting apparatus had a "black box" that would provide accident investigators with information regarding the previous ten minutes of driving of a vehicle that was involved in an accident.
- What if a minimum size of a recognized firefighting agency would be based upon the ability of fire department to assemble an effective response force of a minimum of 12 personnel within 5 minutes, 90 percent of the time?



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- What if a law suit were filed against a developer for failing to install a residential sprinkler system and they were found criminally negligent for allowing people to live in an occupancy that could have been made fire safe.
 - What if a college or university somewhere in the United States established a doctoral program based on the same premise of a doctorate public administration and criminal justice, except it would be a doctorate in fire administration?
 - What if we had a year in which the National Fallen Firefighter Foundation had no new names to put on the plaque nor any grieving widows or children to visit Emmitsburg except for those that had come from previous years?
 - What if 75% of the didactic information needed to become a competent and well trained firefighter were available to long distance learning over the internet and/or through other forms of distance learning process?
 - What if adequate funds were provided by the federal government to assure that every fire department in the United States has a full time training officer?
 - What if adequate funds were made by the federal government to assure that every full time fire department in the United States has a full time fire marshal?
 - What if on-board computers on fire trucks were designed such that no piece of fire apparatus could exceed the speed limit?
 - What if satellite drones currently used for military purposes were adapted for use by fire departments to provide airborne surveillance of major wild land fires on a regular basis.
 - What if the entire infrastructure of the American Fire Service was placed in a GIS database for purposes of nationwide evaluation of our capacity to perform in the area of response coverage?
 - What if the actual alarm processing time from 911 systems was reduced to 30 seconds 100 % of the time nationwide?
 - What if a national database was created that could correlate response times with fire loss.

Well, if you waded through all those pie in the sky what if's you probably think I am either crazy or over medicated. I don't think I am either. All one has to do is look back into the past of the fire service and realize that almost everything that we have aspired to do has been initiated by somebody with a dream. The steam fire apparatus, an icon in the fire service for almost 50 years, was resisted by the fire service when it was first introduced and mourned when it became obsolete.

There were hundreds, if not thousands of individuals, who felt the worst thing that happened to the fire service was to put an internal combustion engine on a fire truck and retire the horses. I can actually understand the context of that feeling because it was a challenge to the integrity of the people who saw themselves being valuable based on their physical prowess and their willingness to make a difference in



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their community by using that physical strength to protect the community. I still see some of that in our current generation of fire personnel, but brain power won out and it will likely continue to prevail in the future.

This theme of what if is going to go one for at least four different levels for the rest of your fire service career. You have the option of picking your own what ifs. They can become the goals and objectives that you are trying to accomplish for yourself. Then, there is a what if list that can be made up for your own fire department. These require a great deal of work to obtain consensus and to work towards common what ifs. Then there is the fire service what if list that I believe is driven a lot by the philosophy by those people who find themselves in leadership roles in the fire community. Then there are the what ifs created by invention and innovation in our society. We cannot step that from happening.

Who are these people? The makers of the what ifs are often our leaders - the Chiefs of our Fire Departments, the Presidents of our Associations. It is the Executive Director of those associations, perhaps the Chairman of a committee. Generally it is any individual who is willing to put their reputations on line to make things happen. Then I think there is a the example of the inspired and motivated individual that ask a question of what if, that sometimes creates a change, whether we want to occur or not.

It is my belief that there is not a single firefighter who has died in the line of duty that woke up in the morning of their final day anticipating that something bad was going to happen to them – it was always going to happen to somebody else. The same thing happens with society when it comes to dealing with change. There is not a single person who wakes up in the morning thinking their house is going to burn down or that they are going to have an accident or onset of a sudden illness that demands that they call for our help. And, as long as we keep providing a level of service that meets that societal what if type of need we will likely continue to be successful?

However, it is also true that the what if's in society drive us. I do not believe that we can afford to be 10 to 15 years behind in technological adaptation with society and still claim to be responsive to our mission.

Next time you read Popular Mechanics or Popular Science, Discovery or any one of the magazines that talks about the bleeding edge of technology just remember the admonition – what if? If you are successful at anyone of the four levels that we just described you can and will make a difference.