



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Your Annual Checkup: The State of the Department

We just finished another calendar year. What did you accomplish last year? What do you intend to accomplish this coming year?

The answers to these two questions are extremely important to a fire chief. To the first question, the answer is the chief's *experience*. The answer to the second question represents the chief's *potential*. If a chief officer is unable to respond to either question in anything other than vague ambiguities, he may be suffering problems in controlling his own destiny. There is a simple solution. Basically, it is the discipline of establishing and evaluating goals and objectives on an annual basis.

Like the cliché, "If you have no idea where you are going, then any path will take you there," a fire department without measurable goals and objectives is an organization that is wandering aimlessly. Furthermore, the peripatetic fire chief on that path is anything but a professional.

Establishing a goals and objectives program in a fire department is one of the first steps to provide structure and productivity in that organization. To be effective, the program has to be utilized as both a short term and long range planning device.

The Mission Statement

First, a fire service agency has to have a mission statement. In my review of organizations, I have been surprised to find that many fire departments do not have any form of mission statement. There is only the assumption that the organization exists to fight fire or some other vague or altruistic responsibility. Unfortunately, the lack of a mission statement can create both ambiguity and conflict for the organization.

One might visualize the mission statement of an organization as being like the top of a pyramid. The statement is the capstone of the organization, basically stating why that organization exists. It delineates the differences between one department and another. It also defines the community's needs, because the organization would not exist if the problem or problems described in the mission statement did not exist in the community.

A fire department without a clear-cut mission statement may find it is dealing with responsibilities that do not fall within its purview. The worst case scenarios involve fire departments in conflict with law enforcement or emergency medical services in dealing with emergencies that have not been clearly defined for all the agencies.



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A mission statement should exist within the enabling legislation that forms the organization. When a fire chief assumes responsibility for a fire department, one of the first things he should do is to check the enabling legislation to determine two things: A clear-cut definition of the department mission and that it is up to date.

While I was performing a management audit of a fire department, I found the mission statement for that organization had not been changed in the enabling legislation since 1928. The department had assumed a wide range of other responsibilities, including emergency medical services, paramedic EMS activities and hazardous materials situations. Yet the municipal code clearly stated that the mission of the fire department was restricted to responding to fires, explosions and fire-related emergencies. An immediate revision of that mission statement was suggested to encompass the scope of duties the department was currently delivering.

I have heard many debates over the question of the difference between goals and objectives. Everybody has their own definition. Some people regard them as being synonymous, while others consider them as being significantly different. Probably the best way of describing the difference between goals and objectives is to look at the old saying, "Win the battle, but lose the war." An individual battle in a combat situation represents an objective. Frequently the military is sent out to capture a specific piece of terrain that has been given a number and that number reflects an objective.

On the other hand, when involved in warfare, winning is everything!

You might make the case that it is possible to win many small objectives and yet lose the war. Goals are what you want to see accomplished and objectives define who is going to do it, as well as when and where they are going to do it. Goals are end results and objectives have end results. Both goals and objectives tend to be long-ranged.

It is axiomatic that you must achieve a majority of your objectives to accomplish your goal. On the other hand, it is also true that you may fail at one or more objectives and still achieve the goal. The corollary is that if you fail at all of your objectives, the goal will never be achieved.

If all this sounds like a game in mental gymnastics, it does have a point. In the fire service, we don't have as many goals as people think we do. In fact, if you look carefully at most fire departments, one of the goals is to prevent fires. Assuming that all fires are not preventable, another goal of an organization may be to perform effectively in combating fires when they occur.

I think most of us would agree that we would like to reduce the number of fires through fire prevention. Being realistic, we realize we are still going to have fires. But we all can agree that a major goal of a fire department is to prevent those fires that are preventable.



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Fire department objectives should be specific statements that contain information on who is going to do what, including where and when it is supposed to be completed. Objectives should contain specifics - names, locations, dates and tasks. Objectives also contain a verb that describes the behavior that links all four of those elements together. Action verbs such as produce, deliver, create or remove can be used to make an objective statement into a definitely measurable event.

For example, let's use the idea of a goal statement describing the public attitude in the community. The statement might read: Achieve a high level of public awareness of fire safe behaviors. One objective that could support that goal would state: Inspector Smith to produce a stop, drop and roll program for the first to fifth grades in all elementary schools by December 31, 1987.

It follows that for every one of the major goals that support the mission statement; there will be a larger number of objectives to achieve that goal. This building block approach has a multiplication factor to it. One mission statement might produce four goals; each goal might produce our objectives for a total of 16 objectives.

What comes next? How are those objectives going to be accomplished? What tools, resources, materials or time allocations are required to achieve each objective? You might consider these as the raw material of objectives. In one sense, we could look at a fire department's budget and characterize it as being a material of raw supplies. When we budget for manpower to be in fire stations, fire apparatus, communications equipment ready to serve, and so on, we are essentially creating a reservoir of potential activity. That reservoir can remain dormant and react to events as they occur. Or, that reservoir can become active to shape the problem the organization exists to solve.

The task level in an organization is where most of the money, manpower and materials are located. However, it is not automatic that these raw materials produce anything. A conscious decision has to be made in an organization to further subdivide these raw elements into allocations directed toward achieving a specific objective. The multiplication factor sets in again.

In our example of Inspector Smith creating a program for elementary schools, we know he is not going to be able to do that overnight. It will take x-number of weeks of his time, an allocation from the budget to purchase materials, an allocation of time to meet with school officials and an organization of plans to schedule and carry out these events. Each task must follow one after another in a chronological fashion until the objective has been achieved. The task level is what we do every day.

Objectives are somewhat like milestones along a highway, marking off how far you have moved toward a goal. Unfortunately, goals are much more elusive. And, it is not uncommon for us to set goals that are ultimately beyond satisfaction. But that's okay. I once heard that a man's grasp should exceed his reach.



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Those things that are forever beyond our acquisition are a source of motivation. Every once in a while we achieve that goal - a goal - and we drastically improve the quality of life for everyone.

Let's say in the fire service that our goal is to eliminate all fire deaths in the United States. There is ignorance, apathy, indifference, even malevolence that will result in people dying from fire. However, just for the sake of argument, what will happen when we achieve that goal? What if we only achieved 75% of it? Would we be winning the war?

These are interesting hypothetical questions, but let's get down on a more realistic basis. Are you losing the war in your own area? The purposes behind setting mission statements, establishing goals and creating objectives are much more realistic when used on a local level. The World Future Society admonishes those who wish to change the future to "think globally - but act locally." The purpose of this article is to encourage you, as chief officer, to use goals and objectives to resolve local needs.

It is important to document a goals and objectives program once it has been established. It should form some type of an action plan that starts at the top of an organization and filters down to the lowest level. Before anyone reacts to this concept by stating "I've seen all these management by objectives programs and they end up being a paper nightmare," let me characterize an effective MBO program as being one that is succinct and readable.

An effective program starts with the chief, who must establish the mission statement, develop goals and write objectives for the function of the fire chief, thus providing structure to the chief's daily tasks.

Only then can a fire chief ask the subordinate officers to look at that snapshot of the future and develop their own goal statements, objectives and work plan based on those criteria.

An effective MBO program is growth from the top down and works from the bottom up. In addition, the most effective MBO programs are those that are captured on a single - or at most - double-sided sheet of paper. I favor a system where the officers engage in a brainstorming session with key chief officers just prior to setting the annual calendar of events. This allows everyone to fit their goals and objectives together like a gear train, so that the organization begins to function in synchronization.

Once goals and objectives have been reduced to paper, they can be typed, collated and shared with one another. A written document outlining the goals and objectives of the supervisory personnel of an organization is a measurable device that can be reviewed periodically, with successes or failures clearly identified. This kind of a system helps to make sense out of the often trivial and seemingly irrelevant details we carry out on a daily basis.



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Michelangelo was once asked, "How do you make a beautiful statue out of such an ugly piece of stone?" He responded, "I begin to work on it by chipping away everything that does not look like a statue. Sooner or later the image begins to emerge" And so it is with the tasks we perform on a daily basis. We chip away at something almost invisible at first, but then as it becomes more sharply in focus, we chip away in a systematic and structured fashion.

The plan is everything. The plan shapes the future. A goals and objectives program in an organization is not an exercise in paperwork, it is a prediction. It is the future.

At the beginning of this column I stated that if one does not care where he goes, the path will take them there. As a college student, I once engaged in a little game with my roommate. We'd take off for the weekend and provide our direction by a flip of a coin. The objective was that every time we reached a major intersection, we would flip a coin. Heads we would go left, tails, we would go right. We soon found ourselves heading back to where we started. We changed the rules of the game.

You are the person who is in the position of making the rules for your organization. Is it coin-flipping time - or are there goals and objectives in your future?