

WHO IS IN CHARGE?

In this column we have discussed a variety of topics including wildfire, crime prevention, public health issues, storms and flooding, economic challenges, weather and your family's safety and have made a serious effort to not pick sides, offer speculation or conjecture. All points of view have been presented without reservation. It is not my intention to cast dispersions or judgment. It is what it is.

However, we cannot ignore or deny the obvious. It is a form of intellectual dishonesty that cannot be tolerated in any discussion of substance. The truth is not always pleasant or what we want to hear. Nonetheless, denial is a terrible affliction particularly when addressing problems that impact all of us.

I was recently asked by a well-known official what I thought were the primary issues confronting the fire service today. After considerable thought, I developed the following list:

- Leadership-Leadership vs Management
- Strategic Planning-You are Nowhere Without a Plan
- Privatization-Outsourcing is a Must
- Training-Training vs Education
- Hiring-You Hire your Problems.

I suspect that none of these issues are unique to the fire service. It appears they relate to many public agencies and institutions.

Communities elect people who become public officials. These officials hire those who administer the departments that provide the services we need and want as an organized society such as police, fire, public health, libraries, parks, airports, harbors and our roads.

Local businesses provide services that help and support us all too. This includes trash pick-up, hospitals and urgent care facilities, the utilities, transportation services, public works providers, the media; the list goes on and on. Public or private, we collectively rely on others to keep our community safe and productive.

Alas, the difference between public and private organizations has become quite clear over the last year. It seems the public world is finally learning what those of us in business learned ten plus years ago, the free ride is over. In the real world, a business that is having cash flow problems cuts costs by reducing staff and associated administrative costs. It may increase advertising and marketing. It may find other cost reduction measures. Business may also increase charges, but it is as a very last resort, business cuts services. After all, it is the services that create the income to keep the business financially productive. Anyone who has had to meet payroll knows of what I speak.

However, in public institutions we see an interesting and very disturbing trend that should alarm everyone. Unlike business that thrives on services or products, government seems to think that keeping employees is the way to go at the expense of services. It is as if the public (read you) are here for the benefit of the public employee. I am not naive; this is not a high school civics paper. However, the basic concept of government and public service is to support the community, not suck from it.

The obvious question to ask is who is in charge? Look around and try to find a public official who takes responsibility and speaks out on the obvious. No question, they are some out there, but you have to look. And it is not just the public who is steamrolled by this pervasive attitude. Agencies bulldozing over each other is also common place today. One department attempting to hijack or bamboozle another is a growing arrogance impacting on all of us.

It does cause one pause. Who is in charge?

We spend without reservation of mind to the point we don't even know what it is we are getting in return. Why? We want, want, and want, but are unwilling to pay.

Have you ever wondered where the money truly goes? Leadership and accountability are terms not frequently used by government officials except on the campaign trail. The City of Bell is currently the best example of our government running out of control. It did not just happen and be assured that it has not been a secret to those within governmental circles. Moreover, it is the tip of a huge problem of public compensation and benefits.

Without a doubt, leadership is lacking in local, state and federal government. There is no shortage of examples of this. The lack of any strategic planning also shows. Planning requires working together and of course leadership. To hope that this will change is reckless in today's world.

This lack of leadership and strategic planning is laying a solid foundation for the privatization and contracting of public services. This trend has been growing for years particularly at the federal level. The reality of outsourcing is growing quickly. It is a solution to many of today's problems. It reduces costs and overhead, removes current labor issues, frequently improves service delivery and is much more accountable. Nonperformance can be quickly replaced.

Obviously privatization does not solve everything, but it is a start. No doubt that if today's public employees knew that their positions were not as secure as they thought the arrogance in government would quickly change. Fire some people and see what happens. Prove me wrong.

The question is who is in charge; the public who pays the bills or the elected? Who is in charge, the elected officials and department heads or the employees? Who are these employees to dictate to management how things shall be? Who is the management who so quickly capitulates their authority to those in their charge? Is this leadership? What kind of strategic plan supports the tail wagging the dog?

This returns us back to the issue of past columns of who is going to pay? We get what we pay for. Yet, what are we receiving for what we are paying for? Why is the compensation, benefits and retirement more important than the service provided? If public safety is so important, why are city police officers willing to instruct its members “to do what their job description required and nothing more?” Could it be that it is because many of them do not live where they work so there is no commitment or investment past a paycheck to the city they are charged in protecting?

Has law enforcement been reduced to just a job? Do you want to continue to pay people to protect you who think like this? What about the people in charge who are allowing it to happen? No one needs to put up with arrogance. Why do we as a community tolerate it?

I have written on how you need to take action to protect yourself, your family, your property and the community. Without question, our community has embraced many of these concepts. However, many of those who are responsible to support this effort are suffering from profound arrogance and self-serving agendas.

The day of accountability is near and it is not going to be pretty for any of us. Disagree if you wish. But do not complain about the continued degradation of public services, whether our law enforcement, fire protection, public health, schools or streets.

To be clear, this is not an article about government or public employee bashing. Do not misunderstand. I have been a public employee myself. I appreciate the realities of such employment.

In truth, the situation today is not the byproduct of poor leadership or management of public officials. No this article is about you, the voter who is so disengaged in what is going on about you that the situation we find ourselves in today exists.

Mediocrity is pervasive. This did not just happen; we almost willed it so through inaction, disenfranchisement and pure compliancy. Like the brush around our hose that some self-appointed potentates do not want cut, there are others who do not want the status quo changed either. To answer the question, you are in charge, you are paying the bills and you can do something about it. Quit complaining, take charge and get engaged.