

Long Range Planning for Future Fire Department Success

I have been tasked this morning with speaking to you about the importance of long-range planning. Let me suggest that planning for the future is something which has been ignored for far too many years now. Let me share a line from an old 1940's movie classic. The picture is entitled the Treasure of the Sierra Madre and the works are vintage Hollywood. The Mexican bandits in the movie are being deputized to help in the search for an outlaw and they were offered badges to prove their authority. Their reply is a classic piece of Hollywood history. "We don't need no stinking badges."

My friends, that is the same sort of attitude which we are facing when it comes to strategic planning. I have been in this fire and emergency services business for a long time now. I started riding the ambulance back in 1964 and have been involved in one way or another since that time. That would be more than 47 years of career, volunteer, and military experience. Having said that, let me suggest that long-range planning has been one of the most overlooked aspects of our operations. It is as though fire chiefs and municipal administrators across the country have been uttering a corollary phrase to mimic the movie bandits. Long range planning: We don't need no stinking long-range planning.

Let me suggest that now is one of the worst times in history to begin looking to plan for the future. Fire departments all across the spectrum are struggling just to get their vehicles on the road today. Forget about

the future, we cannot get the job done in the here and now. We now have a fire service which is facing fiscal cuts all across the board. We are seeking to build a solid future upon a foundation of sand: Sand being the state of flux we are seeing in far too many places. What some places are offering as fire protection is almost criminal.

Let me share two distinct examples with you. **Georgia and Detroit.**

I think that we can see a trend here. It is examples like these which tell me that we are seeing our base of support eroded by the economic forces at work in our nation. Each of our fire departments is a subset of the overall beast known as public sector government. Let me suggest that the first part of getting ready to plan for future success is to get a real handle on where we are in the here and now.

Let me remind you that the public always expects someone to come when the call for help. It is up to the strategic planners within your fire department to allow for this fact of life. It has been stated that it is important to produce a written plan for your current and future operations. I have long believed that the strategic plan is the fire department's roadmap for the future. It is also critical for a fire department to conduct an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing their agency. This is what I will refer to as a SWOT analysis.

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) spent well over two decades developing their series of community strategic planning courses. The USFA defines strategy as: a process that is tied to the goals or

mission of an organization. Experience has taught us that the focus of strategy is planning. Strategic analysis is the use of the planning process to craft a vision, mission statement, goals, and objectives, with which an organization can strive to reach the future in an orderly manner.

There are many different ways to look at the concept of strategic planning. One school of thought suggests that the process of developing and implementing strategies has been described over the years by various terms, including budgeting, long-range planning, strategic planning, and strategic market management. Key among these for purposes of this visit with you today is the concept known as strategic planning. Its focus is on anticipating growth and managing complexity.

It is important to look at the many parts of the process that must be used in order to create a truly effective strategic plan. In my strategic planning text I speak to the fact that strategic planning is a concept with deep roots in the corporate world. Further, let me suggest that strategy is often portrayed as a means of reaching a goal or set of goals. Before any organization can begin to plan for the future, they must first have a solid base in the present. Here is where I see a real problem with today's fire service. Let me suggest that if we are to succeed, we will have to develop an organizational structure that lends itself to measurement. Most of us just live life as it comes with our budgets serving as our only planning documents.

In their 2003 text covering the topic of strategic planning Thompson and Strickland lay out a five-step approach to structuring an organization:

1. Develop a strategic vision
2. Set objectives
3. Create a strategy that allows the organization to achieve its objectives.
4. Implement and execute the strategy
5. Evaluate, monitor, and initiate corrections

These seem fairly simple, but are they really? It is never easy to craft a vision. Far too many people are trapped in the here and now. Many authors suggest that the first step is to create a mission statement. Thompson and Strickland suggest that a strategic vision is more important than a mission statement. "A strategic vision generally has much greater direction-setting and strategy-making value." (Thompson and Strickland, p. 7) On the other hand, a mission statement is portrayed as addressing what a company is doing today. (p. 7)

My co-author Erwin Rausch and I lay out a view of this subject in our text *Management in the Fire Service* that is pertinent and timely. We suggest that, "...at the highest organizational level, the long-range goals of an organization are often referred to as "vision. (Carter and Rausch, 2008). The creation of an organizational strategy through the strategic planning process can be favorably compared to the use of a roadmap for traveling. Who among us would consider embarking on a trip to North Dakota without a roadmap? The vision could be as simple as seeing ones' self seated upon a rock, enjoying the solitude of a quiet North Dakota trout stream. The goal would be a successful trip to the west. The objectives

could be as simple as driving 450 miles per day until the trip is completed. This would seem to be a plan, taken to its simplest level.

The key is the vision. Without a vision, there is no destination for an organization's journey. An important part of the planning process involves conducting and analysis of the external environment wherein an organization operates. A similar analysis must be made of the organization's internal environment. Aaker (2001) provides an excellent framework for conducting this sort of strategic analysis. In each case he suggests that analysts must look at the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that an organization faces.

The external analysis includes:

1. A review of the needs of the community to see which are being met and which are not
2. A review of the competing forces that are working against the fire department
3. The creation of a municipal review that shows what a community demands of its fire department
4. A review of the external problem areas with which a fire department cope, i.e. technology, regulatory, cultural, demographic, and information needs

The internal analysis includes:

1. Performance analysis of staff, apparatus, facilities, and finances

2. A review of past successes and failures with regard to an internal review of the impact of each of the problem i.e. technology, regulatory, cultural, demographic, and information needs

The object of SWOT analysis is to identify as much information as possible regard the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, as it interfaces with the community it serves. Aaker (2001) provides a list of those areas that should be studied in the outside environment.

1. Technology to assist in service delivery
2. Government regulations that may create new operational requirements
3. Is the economy strong enough to support an organizational expansion?
4. Is the culture of an area changing?
5. What are the demographic impacts upon the provision of service?
6. Are there any trends developing that will work against the fire department?
7. Are there any areas of uncertainty that must be monitored by planners? (Aaker, p. 97)

Aaker (2001) also provides a list of those areas that should be studied in the internal environment of an organization. He suggests that such things as the following be studied:

1. Financial status
2. Customer satisfaction

3. Staff qualifications (p.111-117)

There is one big difference between performing strategic planning assessment of a corporation, and that of a public sector fire department. The fire department is not charged with making a profit. One aspect of its various functions is to prepare for unwanted events. Another aspect involves using preventive efforts to mitigate the possibility of something happening.

In order to achieve strategic planning success in the public sector fire service, it is necessary to understand the benefits that come to those who actively plan for the future success of their organizations. How does one count the number of fires that never happen because of an effective fire prevention program? How can the people who are alive today because of public education efforts ever be known? As Aaker (2001) asks in his text, "What is good performance" (p.113)? I suggest that good performance is much like beauty, in that it is best seen through the eye of the beholder. Strategic planning is an important part of creating a successful future for any organizational entity. An early warning about the need for good planning was laid out for all to read in the First Century B.C., when Publilius Syrus stated in Maxim 469 that, "... a bad plan admits to modification." (Bartlett, p. 99)

Although some effort has always been made in the planning arena, usually in the area of budgets, a greater emphasis has emerged over the past four decades. Beginning with the Wingspread Conference in 1966, the concept of planning for future operations began to grow in importance.

The report of the conference proceedings specifically stated that, “...(t)he traditional concept that fire protection is strictly a responsibility of local government must be reexamined” (Wingspread, p.15). Prior to this point no one spoke of fire protection in any way other than parochial, localized terms. This was the first look at the fire service as something that lived within a larger world.

Experience has shown, Cote (1997), Carter (1985 and 1989), and Coleman (1978) that there is a correlation between diminished funding and increased danger to the customer who expects the service, owing to the lack of a well-thought-out strategic plan for future growth and development. If the service is not delivered in a timely manner lives are placed at risk. Hence the search for funds to provide the lifesaving services of the fire department consumes a great deal of time. This serves as the basic rationale for the use of strategic planning. In order to request proper funding, it is critical to know what risk is going to require the protective efforts of the public firefighting agency. In the absence of a realistic picture of what is expected to transpire, it is not possible to create a proper funding package for the fire service.

This problem is not one of recent making. In a previous discussion of the historical evolution of fire service in America, I spoke to the fact that fire protection issues have, “... evolved as a result of changes demanded by (the) social and political pressures of the 20th Century. Carter, p.3). I also discussed the issue of continuing problems in delivering fire services. The issue of increased taxes is exacerbated by a concurrent decrease in the availability of taxable properties. Problems like this are a part of what

strategic planning seeks to address. (Carter, p.10-11)

The twin issues of increasing taxes and decreasing taxable entities are being played out against the issue of increasing costs in fire protection service delivery. As an example of this, in 1972, the Howell Township Fire Company #1, in Adelphia, New Jersey purchased an aerial ladder vehicle for the sum of \$75,000. When that vehicle was replaced in 1997, the replacement cost was \$750,000. However, it is important to note that the funding for this new unit was spread out over several years, and that planning sessions for its acquisition were spread out over a period of five years, whereas the 1972 unit was purchased with a five-year bond note. The 1997 unit was purchased through the use of a seven year lease-purchase arrangement. Let me suggest that apparatus acquisitions and maintenance matters should be addressed through the use of a defined apparatus replacement schedule. This is an area where planning for the future allows for the orderly acquisition of apparatus and the prudent assumption of municipal debt. Should we wish to replace this aerial unit today, we anticipate that the cost would be in excess of One Million Dollars.

Research into the demographic and development trends within your communities serves as a solid foundation for future strategic planning efforts. It forms the basis for future anticipated growth. This is an issue exacerbated by populations-related issues that I addressed in my strategic planning text. This particularly important in any discussion of the need for more career firefighters. As the need for more staff increases, there will be a consequent increase in emergency service costs. If this issue is not

addressed at an early enough time, critical problems can occur, literally overnight. Proper strategic planning will anticipate such things and allow for a smooth transition.

It is important to note that fire departments are but one among many different local government services. The annual battle for fiscal resources pits them against the other agencies in the search for adequate funding. It is within this environment that need becomes apparent for some way in which fire departments can differentiate themselves from their fiscal competitors. Therein lies a critical long-range planning problem. If people are not creating fact-based plans to prepare for future budgetary battles, they will be beaten by those agencies which have done this critical task. Sad to say, you have probably seen this at work in your areas.

Public Sector Planning - The Evesham Experience

Evesham Township is a community located in Burlington County, New Jersey encompassing 29.53 square miles. Less than fifty percent of the land mass area has been developed to date. The greatest portion of this undeveloped land is located in the central and southern portion of the Township. The area of greatest developmental density is in the north and northwest of the township.

The fire district in Evesham Township has long been a believer in strategic planning. Members of the board of fire commissioners included a number private sector business people. Their experience with the planning process was brought to bear on the fire and emergency service system in

Evesham Township. This group has seen the beginnings of a growth spurt, along with the simultaneous decrease in the number of volunteer firefighters during the critical daytime response period. The services of a consultant were retained in the 1989-1990 timeframe. The charge to that consultant was to create a ten-year plan for fire protection master planning. The consultant was brought back in 1997 to assess the progress of the department against the recommendations made in the earlier report. The board wished to have an outside advisor come in to assess their efforts at implementing the recommendations of the consultant after a period of seven years had passed.

During the original 1989-1990 reporting period, literally hundreds of operational changes were suggested. Key among these changes were:

1. A new fire and emergency medical station in the central area of the community
2. Increase career staffing during the daytime period
3. Apparatus standardization to a common brand to limited training problems and assist and maintenance issues
4. Increase the level and frequency of training opportunities
5. Increases in the size of the fire marshal's staff were recommended

Each of these major recommendations was achieved. Similar improvement occurred during the period of 1990-1997. There was a steady increase in the number of runs and the capability of the department to address their workload.

A review of the historic context in Evesham Township tells us that

strategic planning is an essential element in creating future success in the fire service. Far too many departments leave their operational futures to chance. More agencies need to develop an understanding of what strategic planning is, how it is done, and its potential for generating success. The example of Evesham Township makes a strong argument for the level of success that can be generated by an honest, forthright attempt to attack the future.

In conclusion, let me suggest that you not put off the need for strategic planning in your communities. Should you ignore the future and the development of a plan to travel towards it in an orderly manner, the future will occur any way and your fire department will be blown about like a leaf in the autumn winds. It really is that simple.

It is critical to remember that we can only plan for what we know. How could you and I possibly know what we don't know? We must train for what we plan for and it is our training that will let us be flexible. Thank you..