

The Road to Excellence Starts Here

During the past 18 months, the continued decline of the economy has hit home locally, and in many cases has had devastating impacts on the local fire service provider.

The fact is, as budget discussions play out, we in the fire service often are at a loss to clearly frame our message in how the loss of staffing or the loss of a piece of equipment will impact the services provided to the citizens in a real and meaningful way. To this day, we still continue to attempt to tap into the emotional nerve. We say, "if this engine is lost or this ladder company is closed, buildings will burn and lives will be lost," which may or may not be the case.

In the climate of local government today, two things are important for the fire service to understand. First, politicians and the general public are much more astute than they were 25 to 30 years ago; second, we have cried wolf so many times people do not believe and/or react as they once did. They are not buying the scare tactics.

What is needed today is the ability to show how the investment in resources impacts the outcome when 911 is called. What is needed today is a system that can clearly articulate, through the use of metrics, data analysis, and GIS presentation, the ability for the department to clearly frame the picture for the elected officials and the public on the impact when resources are lost or added. It all comes down to justification, cost benefit, and the ability to clearly bridge the investment to the outcome. Frankly, we as an industry do a horrible job of this.

This period in time should serve as a wake-up call to our industry. If we do not change how we model ourselves to the general public and elected officials, we may very well find ourselves experiencing the same thing as the big three automakers and the United Auto Workers.

Whenever our country has experienced such significant events, it has a tendency to reset the foundation from which we build upon in the future. I believe this will be the case for the fire service in the next five to 10 years. If we continue to approach our problems with the same level of thinking,



which brought us to this point, we are destined to an uncertain future.

What is interesting to me — and note I am rather bias on this subject — is those departments that have been able to salvage most of their resources and will climb out of this much more quickly than others are accredited, going through the accreditation process, and/or have a fire chief and an executive team who have CFO or CMO credentialing. I think it paints a picture of what the future is to be, as these are the individuals and the departments that have focused on pursuing quality and excellence in everything they do. When we are faced with challenges, such as these, they are much more adept at being able to articulate the true impacts of the loss of resources. Conversely, as funds become available in the future and our economy begins to rebound, they will be the departments and the chief officers who are able to acquire the resources to reposition their organizations for the future.

Every department, whether it is the smallest volunteer organization or the largest metropolitan department, should be undertaking the fire emergency self-assessment process. It is a critical element of what a credible fire department is today. By not doing so, a clear message is sent that our industry is second class and substandard as compared to our public safety counterparts in the police service. Every fire chief should be a chief fire officer, whether it is through the Commission on Professional Credentialing or a state certified program. Why? Because every police chief is. How in the world can we continue to compete with our counterparts in the police service when the

requirements for their leadership and their organizations are so much higher than ours? Well, in many cases we are not. This should be the message this crisis leaves the fire service — a message that should resonate through the entire industry and cause us to rethink our strategies for the future.

The accreditation process and the credentialing of senior leadership are critical elements in laying the foundation for what our industry will become in the future. This special section provides an overview of:

- How to be an excellent organization and leader.
- What are challenges facing leaders today and into the future?
- What are the benefits of agency accreditation and individual credentialing?
- What are the practical tools to use to better your organization and yourself?
- How to become an excellent chief fire or medical officer through credentialing with the Commission on Professional Credentialing. Laying out those challenges and describing how the model can help shape you as a leader in your organization and prepare you to be more successful in the future.

There are so many examples of agencies that have been accredited and truly are defined as excellence in our industry and many chief officers who when credentialed found many new opportunities opened for them. As importantly, they received a new level of respect within their organization not only from their internal peer group but from the entire city management team.

While this has been a very challenging time, it is also a time of opportunity. The opportunity is to reset the clock on what the fire service will become in the future. It will require strong leadership, which not only understands the dynamics of our profession and the environment we are currently operating in, but also understands the achievement of excellence is never an easy task, but one that the health and longevity of our industry, as we know it today, is dependent on.

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