

Dealing with change & transition

By Larry L Pierson Jr.

Introduction

Beyond large fires, complex incidents and other challenges we face daily, change is or can be the toughest challenge to our service. Every member of your organization holds a responsibility and in some form or fashion holds degrees of accountability for the positive effects or ill-effects of change.

If you have been in emergency services for a while you may reminisce to times of great triumphs or great trials as change happened. As a newer member you have probably witnessed several changes to your organization which is difficult when your learning that “this is the way we do it” and yet change is happening at the same time.

Regardless of positions & experience, there are three rules that never go away:

1. Change is inevitable
2. Change is constant
3. Change is stressful

What I hope you get out of this article is accepting those rules and finding ways to deal with change successfully.

Historical perspectives

Each agency has their own history of change and challenges of future change. We have learned lessons from loss of life and lessons of success in other cases. Regardless of the details, the most stressful times during a career could mostly be attributed or associated with some type of change.

Are you one who is passionate about firefighters being there for one another, about firefighter survival or one who gets emotional during firefighter documentaries or movies and memorial ceremonies? If you said yes, I hope you understand there are several agencies who make changes for our service that have the same passion.

OSHA, NFPA, NIOSH, DHS, NCDOT-FRC and countless other acronyms, agencies, websites and periodicals help all of us lead better careers. They have helped us transition through many changes.

On local and national levels we could fill volumes about changes that have happened but from a narrowed scope there are some key moments we may recall. Some happened years ago but also took years for some people to accept the change.

No more beards

Must wear SCBA into fires

Must use seatbelts

Must wear nomex and have a fire shelter on wildfires

Certification classes and degrees required

OSHA and 2in-2out (The rumors were crazy about what that standard meant until someone actually read the standard and it's interpretations)

That is just a few but at their inception... they were huge issues. Members quit because they had to shave, resistance was strong from some regarding SCBA, nomex hoods and other PPE and rumors went rampant about OSHA requirements and other policies. Some issues should have been accepted right away while others required patience while budgets evolved or funds were reprioritized to meet the fiscal responsibilities of the change.

Finding out real facts (*some time ago*) **we know we were the protected, not “the regulated”** when it came to laws and other guidelines from agencies. After the fog cleared, a reasonable person could read these standards & codes, learn more about the big picture and say “This just makes sense”..... and change become standard practice.

Old School vs. New school

What does that mean and why do those two terms exist. Simple.... it's still about change. It can have a negative or positive tone in either direction. It can be stated in appreciation or aggravation either way.

Many experienced members once served their community with fewer resources, equipment and technology which brought about critical thinking and some true creativity in problem solving without today's tools. Integration of modern technology has been step by step and a constant change. Newer members have been challenged with an immediate assumption their generation X and Y know how to use all of this newer technology since they were exposed to it at earlier ages.

The questions that can bring generations of emergency services together.....

Old school-“How do I use this newer technology or procedure?”

New school-“What do I do when my technology fails?”.....

The answer: “Old school ask new, new school ask old”. Everything we change from is old, everything we change to is new and later in your career, you will be considered

“old school” by someone. Whichever it is, the right school is one that’s best for safety of our personnel and the people we serve.

Types and areas of change

Regulatory

State & Federal law, OSHA, NIOSH

NFPA codes, county ordinances, Standard practice changes (EMS protocols, NWCG recommendations)

Internal policy

New rules, procedures, By-Laws, operational SOGs

District Change

District growth/shrinkage, adding new stations, tax income or budget priority changes from local government, demographic changes, plants closing/opening, response orders different.

Personnel

Members come/members go, hiring/firing staff, hiring pools are full and then their dried up, promotions/demotions, capabilities & experience of staff, changes in member’s lives such as marriage, divorce, birth of children, deaths in families.

Technology

New software & communication devices, mechanical devices becoming electrically controlled etc.



Once you realize it, we are engulfed in change and it’s not going to cease any time soon. Don’t think of change as the bull in the china shop scenario. Sometimes change is good, sometimes it’s bad but each change or attempt to change should be treated on it’s own merits. Don’t react negatively just because it’s change. Whether good or bad, change is stressful but how we go through change will be the key.

There are some simple rules to follow when dealing with change.

1. Flow of Information is key - It doesn’t matter what kind or size of change, lack of information will create great stress and may cause a well needed change to fail. Having meetings, one on one conversations, e-mails, posted notices, web announcements and phone calls or just a few but you should assure that all related personnel are informed. The more directly an issue of change will affect a person, the more directly you should be communicating with them. The information may need to be discussed between a small group as they decide how to announce the information about change or gather fact & data. Issues may need to remain confidential regarding personnel decisions or needing time to gather fact & data before bringing the issue out into the membership. Every department has the member who “has the inside track” and if you want the “Classified info” you can come to them. If they are releasing “classified” information they will eventually end up in their supervisor’s office for a friendly discussion. These members create more headaches by having to deal with the inaccuracies and rumors they started instead of the issue at hand.

2. Be open to change - You may disagree with an issue or part of an issue but don’t disagree with it just because it’s change.

3. Be open to keeping things the same - Don’t keep changing things just for the sake of changing things. Change should be about progress forward not just making it different.

4. Find fact & data - Research, analyze and base the needs for change and the solutions to it on real information and materials.

5. Be patient, humble and know your organization’s process to change - Some issues need immediate action, others need time for research, planning, budget timing and a chance to move through your local process or chain of command.

6. Trust - If you follow the rules above, you are more likely to maintain trust while you propose or handle change. If you have lost trust of members, needed changes may be rejected and it will take a long time to regain that trust. Who can I give information to and who can I get information from? The rumor spreaders will eventually have their trust dissolved.

Resources for change

Locally I give great credit to the Employee Assistance Network of North Carolina (www.eannnc.com/). Aside from many cost effective member assistance benefits, they have provided our department with guidance for dealing with change.

“Who moved my cheese”? This book from Dr. Spencer Johnson has sold over 40 million copies to all types of people and businesses. It’s an entertaining look at how change is handled and won’t take long to read. Several of our personnel have read it and we commonly use some references from the book. You can go to www.whomovedmycheese.com for other information and materials to help you or your department.



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Summary

Out of all the important issues facing emergency services locally and nationally, change will remain the number one issue that challenges us.

Consider these quotes on every shift:

“When you are through changing, you are through”

Bruce Barton

“If you don’t like something change it; if you can’t change it, change the way you think about it”

Mary Engelbreit

“If you want to make enemies, change something”

Woodrow Wilson

“Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine”

Robert C. Gallagher

“The only difference between a rut and a grave is their dimensions”

Ellen Glasgow

Good luck with your changes.