DRUCKER’S AXIOMS FOR THE FIRE SERVICE

With the passing of modern management teacher, author and consultant Peter Drucker, the fire service would do well to reflect upon some his contributions. Drucker was known for quality improvement and best practices for the business community. While the fire service is not a for-profit business, some of Drucker’s management concepts have direct application to our profession both on the emergency scene and behind the fire administrator’s desk. The following quotes from him provide the progressive fire officer food for thought and perhaps a new light on how to do fire service “business”.

“COURAGE RATHER THAN ANALYSIS DICTATES THE TRULY IMPORTANT RULES FOR IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES.” (The Effective Executive)

The fire service is no stranger to the concept of courage. But how does the fire service manager identify priorities? Are they based on deficiencies in the organization, determined by political contingencies or selected by personal preferences? Most fire service organizations have short and long range plans for their organizations and have analysis to project growth and requests for service. “Rules” (the possession of authority) requires future-oriented recommendations of level of service dimensions that best serves the community. The fire chief needs to clearly spell out to all stakeholders including citizens, political and budgetary folks and members of the department various options with the concomitant budgetary requirements. Communicate clearly and frequently the priority items you see necessary to meet your community’s emergency service needs.

“GET THE RIGHT THINGS DONE.” (The Effective Executive)

Effective fire service leaders get the right things done and efficient fire service managers learn and know how to get things done the right way. The fire service values individuals who make correct emergency scene decisions with little information. On the administrative level, is not this same attribute a measure of an effective fire service leader? Rarely is there a lack of organizational goals for most fire departments, but Drucker would question if these goals are “the right things”. Most fire service professionals would agree that the emergency response capability would be one of the right things. After identifying fundamental level of service criteria, the effective fire officer needs methods to measure that capability. Remember that what gets measured gets done. Provide response times and staffing levels criteria for various incidents and/or timely measurable performance outcomes for bureaus/division of your organization. Drucker might have asked if other right things include incident management skill assessment for all officers. Most fire departments have standard operating procedures and tactically perform fairly well for most events. However, it is the infrequent, high visibility events that fire departments are required to address that receive the attention of the media; particularly if incidents go poorly. Keep the big, “right thing” picture in focus while paying particular attention to the details that have potential complications for your organization. “Right things” include all-risk disaster planning that requires multi-agencies and multi-jurisdictions to communicate, coordinate and work well together. Allocate resources to review, update and run the large incident plans. What is your confidence level that logistical and other incident management functions will run smoothly? Another “right thing” that Drucker may have agreed with would be scheduling time for “Chiefs” (white shirts) to spend with companies in the stations and in the field in order to discuss, interact, receive input from the “Indians” (blue shirts) who might have other ideas on what the right things are. Our collective mission is to save lives and property. Make a commitment to being open to other views in the fire service family and to being open to the invariable change that will result from that dialog. Drucker reminds us, “Executives are not paid for doing things they like to do. They are paid for getting the right things done – in their specific task – the making of effective decisions.”

“IF THE EFFECTIVE EXECUTIVE LETS THE FLOW OF EVENTS DETERMINE WHAT HE DOES, HE WILL FRITTER HIMSELF AWAY ‘OPERATING’”. (The Effective Executive)

As fire service professionals, we have the unique challenge of literally “putting the fires out” as part of our job description. The often fast-paced activity of fighting fire is different than the daily management and logistical “fire fight” that executive fire managers face. The definition of fritter includes “to reduce or squander little by little”. How often have you heard it said, “I don’t know where the day/week/month/year went?” Let others do activities that they may do just as well or better than yourself to free you up from the daily “operating” emergencies. Drucker would have asked the effective fire executive, “Is this work necessary to your main task? Does it contribute to your performance? Does it help you do your job?” Lastly, “Gear efforts to results rather than work”.


“STRUCTURE FOLLOWS STRATEGY.” (Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices)

Biologists would word it as “ontogeny follows phylogeny” (or so a B-shifter once told me). Be that as it may, as firefighters we know strategy as the art of command as applied to the overall planning and conduct of operations. It is “The Plan” or goal and we build the structure to meet it. Effective fire managers would do well to mimic this biologic truism. Start with the desired outcomes for your department. What is the department you envision? What does it look like? How does it function? Are the goals/needs such that it requires a repurposing of your mission statement? In teaching, one creates learning outcomes and the lesson plan takes shape from there. The strategic plan for your department will probably not need to be revolutionized. However, the effective fire manager may need to restructure a program, plan, policy or organization to “get there”. Drucker stated, “Management tasks/jobs are not absolutes, but are shaped by the tasks to be performed.” Examine your strategy from the perspective of repurposing, reinventing and redirecting. Drucker suggests that strategy changes and that it is on-going. Much like many of our emergency scenes, one needs to constantly re-size the incident with the mobilization of resources and actions. The fire service “structure” works well; it works well because it has been tested by the dire consequence of poor organization and ineffective actions or lack of actions.

“THE SIMPLER THE STRUCTURE THE LESS THAN CAN GO WRONG”. (Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices)

A structure is something made up of a number of parts that are put together in a particular way to form a whole. In nature, there is good reason that nothing is done uselessly. Without attempting to create the final reunification of physics in this article, firefighters well know that any tactical activity on an emergency scene requires time and energy. What makes a “good” emergency scene or a “good” fire service organization? “Good” may be thought of as that which serves a purpose, is maintainable, looks good and works good. The “good” emergency scene or well-managed project utilizes the same foundation of appropriate front-end loading of resource organization. Next time your department reviews an incident (critique, evaluation, etc), consider the ways “The Plan” could have been organized better. Well-run and organized emergency scenes are easy to identify. Review the well-run incidents in your jurisdiction and dissect the reasons why. One may find a common denominator in that it is the plan without a lot of complexity that works best. Drucker pointed out to business managers that “what is needed is right strategy not razzle dazzle tactics” (The Effective Executive). The fire service is a uniquely human social institution that while simple in principle, has complex redundant elements that are necessary for the overall success at emergency scenes. Historically we know that communications has been a weak link (both on the emergency and non-emergency levels). The fire service improves its emergency scene communication through additional tactical and command channels in order to monitor the increased number of resources and meet the need for accountability and mandated safety procedures. This is an appropriate and simple measure that provides the fire service a way to do better work. Administratively officers face increasingly complex issues with regards to apparatus, flexible staffing deployment, labor/management contingencies as well as increasingly varied standard operating procedures and protocols for firefighting, EMS, hazardous material, weapons of mass destruction and technical rescue. How does one keep it simple at emergency scenes? What are some of the things you know do not work well at emergency scenes? Remember, good organizations and emergency scenes are also characterized by the problems they do not create.

“KNOW YOUR BUSINESS, STAY CLOSE OT IT. UNDERSTAND IT.” (Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices)

Effective fire service leaders need no encouraging in this area. Increased demand for service with static or diminishing resources is not a new challenge. However, does your “fire service world” tend to stay within provincial boundaries and thinking? Consider a shift in organizational mindset that focuses “outside” fire stations and administration doors. Is your department truly a community service organization or does it display self-serving perspectives and priorities? Discuss with other officers how they keep up with the latest fire protection technologies. How about fire service delivery services? How often does your department review the fire problem components of response, fire deaths and fire loss? Beside the number and types of fires your department responds to each year, has anyone done the analysis to project those numbers in five years? Our “business” also extends beyond just the fire component. What is your organizational capability for additional services, or is a decline in quality and quantity of service now the norm? This encompasses two related yet divergent concepts; understanding the “big picture” and recognizing that “it is in the details”. Just as there is more than one way to fight a fire, fire managers understand that there are many ways to “get there” (although the philosophers on the C shift say “one never really gets there”). Maintain solid, verifiable service delivery measurements and be available for opportunities and the invariable change the future will bring.

“THE ONLY THING PEOPLE DEMAND OF MANAGEMENT IS COMPETENCE”. (Technology, Management and Society)
Competence is defined as “the state or quality of being properly or well qualified”. Professionally this is achieved through education, training and experience. Personally this occurs from the inside out and involves creating our own “ethos” or personal credibility. Both are on going and are a matter of perception. The perception of most communities is that their fire department has a high degree of competence. This may be quantified by training records, incident statistics and “productivity” standards that many jurisdictions utilize. Consider tying your department’s management competencies to best practices outside our fire service world. Create performance evaluations/appraisals that tie into sound fiscal, personnel and productivity measures. As training officers we do that with recruits. Company officers may be asked to run simulated emergency scenes in order to assist in creating standard “best practices” performances. Incident commanders are continually measured by the competency ruler with measures of accountability, safety, and successful incident conclusions among others. Sound command, control and coordination have been the hallmarks of successful incident commanders. What about administrative management competency? How important is this in your organization? Excellent management is needed to run excellent departments. Institutionalized “substance” (Graham’s five pillars of good people, good policy, good training, good supervision, good discipline) is more important than a fire chief’s charismatic style. Next officer meeting review what large-scale events (large loss fire, multiple fire fatalities, high visibility incidents, etc) have the probability to overwhelm your fire service management team. Take one step toward improving the quality of response, communication and particularly incident management now.

“EFFECTIVE EXECUTIVES BUILD ON STRENGTHS”. (The Effective Executive)

Superior performance will produce outstanding results. Intuitive? Tie it in to personal performance appraisals and annual target goals for bureaus/divisions and see what happens. List your strengths. List your co-workers strengths. List your department strengths. If need be, get a third party to do that assessment. Professional sports teams are well acquainted with this concept, why not your department? Optimize not maximize because ultimately it is quality of service, incident by incident, that you and your department will be measured by. Building on strengths has the added component of building upon success.

“LEADERSHIP IS THE LIFTING OF A MAN’S VISION TO HIGHER SIGHTS, THE RAISING OF A MAN’S PERFORMANCE TO A HIGHER STANDARD, THE BUILDING OF A MAN’S PERSONALITY BEYOND ITS NORMAL LIMITATIONS.” (The Practice of Management)

Leadership is also defined as “the capacity or ability to lead; one that leads of guides; in charge or in command of others; one who has influence or power”. Note that this definition does not require the wearing of a gold badge. All officers have the responsibility to set the tone for the attitudes, behaviors and performances of crewmembers and companies. Recall the one fire service leader that most influenced or set high expectations for you. Regardless if you met his or her demand, that person enabled you to act. Good chance you made progress and went forward with improved skills or knowledge. The fact is each of us has a place in our organization. Remind your people to be good and to be good for something. As a chief, be aware of your words and actions and develop others to find their place or niche in the organization. As an officer, you have the trust of the organization and temporarily fill a fundamental leadership role. This position is one of stewardship, not personal ownership. Renew a commitment to care about something larger than yourself in our fire service. This is a rare privilege and honor that is too easily missed.

“MAKE PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT COMPATIBLE WITH ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND VICE VERSA.” (The Effective Executive)

If your department has performance appraisals (and if they are not poorly written or of little value), create viable, predictable standards with performance and behavior based consistency. Tie desired organizational outcomes with personal goals. Choose what it is you are to contribute to your department. Understand that the fire service selects the cream of the crop of applicants, trains them to be the best they can be, and then turns them loose. In some organizations they get lost or lose interest. Each of us can name a creative, energetic talent that went elsewhere for greater challenge, encouragement or development. Many other folks improve, create, instill value and contribute greatly to organizations. Nonetheless, the fire service has an exceptional pool of talent. Your job is to tie into those resources. Do it formally through performance outcomes that are measurable and realistic as well as informally by creating a culture that values personal ethos. List the best of what the fire service is all about within your department. Unleash the horses at your next recruit graduation and challenge young firefighters to make one improvement in your organization that is aligned with their personal interest.

“PUT THE COMMON GOOD OF THE ENTERPRISE ABOVE ONE’S OWN SELF-INTEREST.” (The Practice of Management)

Consider first what is best for the organization. As firefighters we are instilled with the precept of looking out for the group before looking out for oneself. Great firefighters are willing to do the right thing even when it is not in their own interest.
Our collective fire service culture is what we do, think and remember. It encourages us to be generous with our time, energy, actions and spirit. We reward firefighters for valor and bravery when their actions are clearly above the norm. We expect this, are proud of this and enable this to continue. Engrain in your organization this larger cultural view through recognition awards and in the promotional process. Discuss with other fire service leaders how to shift from personal achievement and success to organizational contribution and significance. Our fire service culture includes a quality of thinking and foresight that extends beyond the business world’s bottom line. Drucker wrote that good managers consider, "...every action and decision in the bedrock of principles; lead not only through knowledge, competency, and skill but through vision, courage, responsibility and integrity. What is decisive above all is neither education or skill, it is integrity of character."

Create heart in your organization. Stay sharp, stay strong.