

Mission statement storyteller

Although blood, sweat and tears do not a community-friendly mission statement make, you wouldn't know it from the amount of time we spend on them. Try the anecdotal approach instead.

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Nowadays, it seems that every fire department across our great nation has a mission statement, but sometimes they may raise more questions than they answer. These questions can point the way to some new thinking on how to develop and communicate what we do for our communities, to our communities.

For example, does anybody in the community care about what your mission statement says? Do your employees

need to read it to remind themselves about what they do? Do you have one because the fire department next door has one or because it's trendy to print it on the back of your business cards? Was putting one together as a group painful, or was yours developed in a vacuum?

Behind the scenes

When confronted with all of these questions, we may wonder if what we've been taught about mission statements is

still valid. If you look at any fire department management text, you'll read that a mission statement should provide a sense of direction to the department, and give the members a reason to perform at a high level.

A properly developed mission statement can keep the department focused and on track, defining the services it provides and specifying its functional role within the community. While these reasons emphasize the internal benefit of developing a statement, the external value can't be overlooked. We have an obligation to let our citizens know what our mission is, the importance of that mission and how the mission affects the community's quality of life.

With those goals in mind, our first step is usually to put together a committee to solicit stakeholders' input from both inside and outside of the department to develop the mission statement. In the writing, they attempt to reduce all we do into our major services provided, core competencies and customers — the what, how and who.

Sounds easy, but most of us are well aware of the dynamics of developing material by committee. Without proper facilitation and an understanding of group dynamics, what started out as writing a short statement can take on an unattractive life of its own. Depending on how the consensus-building process goes, you can wind up with a mission statement that nobody understands or remembers, written in the blood of the committee members.





What we've been taught

As a student of management and a graduate of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program, I was sure that I had a firm grip on what a perfect, or at least a good, mission statement should contain — until I attended a class by Dr. Hans Bleiker of the Institute for Participatory Management and Planning in Monterey, Calif.

Traditionally, we've been taught that mission statements are needed to plan the future of our departments and guide the daily decision-making of our members. Important tasks, to be sure, but Bleiker says that the fact that so many organizations are seriously debating the length of the ideal mission statement

shows how many have bought into the silly notion that a perfect one is somewhere out there, waiting to be written.

When we concentrate on the little things, we overlook a critical step. A mission statement also exists so the people we serve can understand what we do and why we do it. To write one that works, we need to look at things from the standpoint of our customers.

Unfortunately, says Bleiker, nobody is listening to our statements. We must get the public to understand why we exist — our *raison d'être* — and how our mission fits into the larger picture. What we do to accomplish that mission can't be overlooked. Who makes the decisions and what the problem-solving and decision-making processes are need to be communicated.

All of these actions need to be understood by the public and therefore have to be communicated to them. But we also must recognize that, in most cases, although the public needs to under-

stand these things, they really don't want to hear them. They don't want to be lectured about it. In fact, those carefully wordsmithed mission statements we slave over usually are received with cynicism.

The public's perception

Volumes have been written on the public's perception of the fire service and how we should be presenting ourselves to our customers. From the standpoint of communicating our mission to the community, we must wake up to the fact that nobody is listening.

Most fire service managers claim that a significant number of people in their communities don't understand the department's mission, its importance or how that mission is linked to their quality of life. We need to understand this dilemma so we can solve it rather than become a casualty of it. We must avoid having our mission communications efforts fall victim to this

Tell your community the story of how, why and when

Telling the public why we exist and why we do what we do is 10 times more important than telling them what we do. Using your history is the simplest and most reliable recipe for understanding and communicating your department's mission to the public.

In other words, simply tell the story of when your department was created, why it was created and by whom. Give the names, dates, issues and events that tell the story of your organization. Explain how the department and its mission have evolved since. The key is to do it anecdotally instead of analytically.

As an example, here's the Farmington (N.M.) Fire Department *raison d'être*:
 "On Tuesday the eighth day of July, 1924, the Board of Trustees of the City of Farmington, New Mexico, passed and adopted Ordinance No. 87 establishing the fire department under the jurisdiction of the board. At that time the officers of the department consisted of a fire chief, a first captain and a second captain, each of whom was appointed by the mayor with the consent of a majority of the board of trustees.

"In 1924, Tommy McGuire, a local telephone company manager, served as the fire chief. Chief McGuire led his force of five members with a hose cart and 500 feet of hose until 1930. That year Bill Andrews, a local painter, was elected fire chief.

"In 1934, a Ford 500 gallon per minute pumper was purchased, and the volunteer force was increased to 15 members. At that time the fire station was located on East Main Street next to the City Hall. Chief Andrews and his two sons were the primary response to fires, as they all lived within a block of the fire station. During his tenure, fire losses included the Presbyterian Church, Dutch Taft and the Perry Smoak Car Dealership. Following Chief Andrews was Bob Scribner, a safety-man for El Paso Natural Gas Co.

"While the department's fleet had increased to include 1942 and 1947 apparatus with 500gpm pumps, Chief Scribner specified and purchased the

first piece of 'modern' fire apparatus — a 1952 American LaFrance 1,000gpm pumper. Soon, El Paso transferred Chief Scribner to another city, and Bob Randolph became the chief.

"The first two career members of the department were hired in 1955, and in 1957 Chief Randolph was hired as the first career fire chief. George Miller succeeded him in 1961. William E. 'Mac' McFarland, who came from the fire department in Los Alamos, replaced Chief Miller in 1963.

"Chief Mac brought with him numerous changes, including uniforms, a personnel increase to shorten the work week (firefighters had been working a 96-hour week), fire prevention and increased training. He is credited with creating the *esprit de corps* that remains with the department to this day.

"From 1976 to today, the citizens of Farmington have been served by eight different fire chiefs. Each has left his mark on the organization. The Farmington Fire Department now operates out of five stations with 73 members. The department will respond to more than 4,000 alarms this year. Over 70% of these incidents will be for emergency medical assistance, including assaults, traffic accidents and heart attacks.

"All Farmington firefighters are trained as emergency medical technicians. Most department members are also trained in other specialty areas. These include airport rescue and firefighting; technical rescue, such as high angle, water and confined space; fitness; EMT instruction; and hazardous materials response. Under an agreement with the state, the department functions as a regional response team for chemical emergencies.

"The department's support services division provides fire prevention, code enforcement, public education and fire investigation services to the community. The coordination of new technology to assist department operations also falls under this division.

"From our humble beginnings to the professional career department that exists today, we remain ready to serve the community in any situation."

perfectly manageable predicament.

If we think that this is only a problem with the public, ask some firefighters if their departments have a mission statement. I would expect their answers to be yes. But if you were to ask for a recitation of that statement, I would expect the large majority could express the intent but not the specifics of the statement. This may indicate that we've lost sight of why we put together a mission statement. We're only going through the motions because everyone else is.

The role of the mission is much bigger than most fire officials realize, and consequently you can hurt or help yourself depending on how you deal with it. If you're going to succeed in getting the community to understand who you are, what you do, why you do it and how you do it, you need many different mission statements. Some will be short, others long. Some may be technical and others will be easy to understand.

If you think that there can be one perfect mission statement, then you're confusing the mission with the mission statement. Our mission is a set of responsibilities that reside in the courage and culture of our firefighters. A mission statement, on the other hand, is a bunch of words, a verbal sketch of that mission.

For example, Bleiker compares this to confusing a dinner menu with the meal. Although the menu describes the meal, the menu is not the meal. That same meal can be described in many different ways; there is no single best way to describe it.

It's the same with our life-saving and property-protecting responsibilities. If we're going to communicate to the public what those tasks are and how they're changing and evolving, we're going to have to be willing to find many different ways of explaining them. Just like a big fancy meal, no single statement, no matter how cleverly wordsmithed, can do complete justice to it.

Pitfalls to avoid

Don't get trapped into trying to craft the perfect mission statement, because it's not going to happen. Try to avoid using scientific information, facts, data,

analyses and conclusions, because anecdotal information is a more powerful tool and easier to understand than statistics and technical jargon. (See sidebar, opposite.)

You also need to watch your language, as it's your most important tool in getting your point across. For example, Cortez Lawrence, the Auburn, Ala., deputy director of public safety, says that mission statements shouldn't be so unwieldy that the average citizen can't easily read and understand them in a relatively short period of time. [Ed.: See "Sins of omission," Aug. 1996.]

While we're serious about our missions, we also need to let the people of our communities know that we understand their problems, lives, worries and concerns. Don't lose sight of some of the other issues that affect people's lives. Be prepared to demonstrate how the mission of your department fits into that bigger picture.

This relates to some of the same strategies that we should be using to market our departments. We have to take advantage of all the opportunities that happen to present themselves to communicate the mission. Take all of those accidental and unscheduled occasions to let folks know who you are; why you exist; what your mission is; how, when and why you got it; how it has evolved since then; and what it is you do to accomplish that mission.

When it comes to providing leadership for our organizations, especially in times that may be tough, the mission must serve as the compass for guiding our decision-making. For the mission to serve in this capacity, fire service leaders need to have a profound understanding of the mission — not just of the words in a mission statement, but of the responsibilities inherent to an understanding of that mission. **FC**

A 25-year veteran of the fire service, Thomas Aurnhammer is the chief of the Farmington (N.M.) Fire Department, where he also has headed the fire marshal's department. He has been an adjunct faculty member at the National Fire Academy and the New Mexico Firefighters Training Academy, and he holds an associate's degree in fire protection. Aurnhammer also is a graduate of the NFA's Executive Fire Officer Program.

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