

## **How Organizational Learning Changed a SC Department**

By: Dr. David Griffin

We are continually changing in the fire service to offer the citizens we protect better service and to provide more innovative, safer practices for our personnel. Often times this can be a difficult task to undertake. So how can we make this process more streamlined to ensure that personnel understand the need for change, and actively participate in the change process? Simple....a concept viewed by many scholars as one of the most effective theories of leadership...organizational learning (Schilling & Kluge, 2009; Toulabi, Dehghani, & Reza Al Taha, 2013). Organizational learning is defined as an “organizationally regulated collective learning process in which individual and group-based learning experiences concerning the improvement of organizational performance and/or goals are transferred into organizational routines, processes and structures, which in turn effect the future learning activities of the organizations members” (Schilling & Kluge, 2009, p. 338).

Go ahead. Shake your head. I know that was waaaaaaaay too long of a definition. In a nutshell, this means that we learn from each other, and include what we have learned in our day to day operations. This increases individual learning exponentially. A perfect example of this type of learning organization is The City of Charleston Fire Department (CFD) in Charleston, SC following June 18, 2007 when nine firefighters perished in a warehouse fire.

Research indicates that utilizing the concept of organizational learning can increase the quality of decision-making outcomes from the previous actions of organizations (Lynn, Simpson, & Souder, 1997). So let's put this into perspective. June 18, 2007 was a solemn day for the CFD and the national fire service. I had the unfortunate opportunity of being the Engineer on the first due engine that day. As we arrived on scene, my mental model was not what it needed to be due to my lack of experience, training, and education...learning. I saw a dumpster fire that could

be extinguished quickly with a few lines. I didn't even think about the fire load, or the structure. What I saw made sense to me; however, it would not have made sense to a more experienced, better trained, and more educated firefighter. They would have recognized the possible grave situation. Why didn't I recognize this?

Well, let's dig deeper to find out. According to Laurence Gonzalez in his bestselling book entitled *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, he states that "You see what you expect to see. You see what makes sense, and what makes sense is what matches the mental model" (2003, p. 72). I did not have a mental model to draw upon for this type of incident. I constructed my own expected world from my level of experience, training, and education. This proved to be a monumental mistake.

Charles Perrow in *Normal Accidents* suggests that "We construct an expected world because we can't handle the complexity of the present one, and then process the information that fits the expected world, and find reasons to exclude the information that might contradict it. Unexpected or unlikely interactions are ignored when we make our construction" (Gonzalez, 2003, p. 75). I ignored the unexpected and unlikely interactions during the incident because my training, education, and experience had never allowed me to construct any other type of world. All I had seen was great outcomes time and time again.

When I heard MAYDAY from one of our brothers, I didn't actually think they were in trouble. I had never heard anyone say MAYDAY before. When I heard that we were missing firefighters, again, I shrugged it off because my mental model had everyone being ok. When the front of the structure collapsed close to the Engine I was pumping, still, I thought we would win the battle. I still felt like we would put this fire out the same way we had done on previous residential structure fires. Keyword in that sentence...residential. When the IC called for the

Captain of Engine 15 numerous times, I figured he was just outside of the structure and couldn't hear his radio.

All of the indicators of a bad situation were present; however, my mental model did not allow me to believe that something serious could happen. I had not been through any fire ground survival training, RIT training, or rescue the rescuer training. All of this was new to me, and unfortunately, I learned it in the most difficult of ways, real life.

So let's fast forward to a recent incident on April 2, 2013 that the CFD responded to. At 0100 firefighters arrived at a two story taxpayer in the historic district with heavy fire conditions showing. This building was attached to numerous other structures, and if the fire wasn't attacked quickly, the loss could have been exponential. According to Christina Elmore and Glenn Smith of The Post and Courier, a local newspaper, crews attacked the fire hard and fast. "But look closer and you'll see the department's attack on the fire...also demonstrated the fruits of hard lessons learned in the aftermath of the June 2007 Sofa Super Store blaze that killed nine city firefighters...While firefighters hit the building hard and fast Tuesday, they did with a coordinated plan, with the aid of other area departments and with an eye toward safety that resulted in everyone getting out before things got bad...The interior crews battled the fire as long as they could before evacuating for safety reasons around 1:44 am...In time the roof collapsed, but all crews were at safe distance by then, fighting the blaze from a defensive posture" (2013).

Let's reread that. In time the building collapsed, but all crews were at a safe distance. How different could this report have been if the CFD had not learned from not only the previous experience of June 18, but also other experiences of other organizations as well? I will go ahead and answer that question for you. Much different.

It all relates back to the learning environment of the organization. Research indicates that a dynamic and evolutionary organization, a learning organization, facilitates learning to its members, transforms itself continuously, and presents favorable organizational learning conditions (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008; Pedler, Bourgoyne, & Boydell, 1991; Lahteenmaki, Toivonen, & Mattila, 2001). Over the last six years, the CFD has worked hard to create this type of dynamic and evolutionary organization. The proof is in the pudding.

The statement that I always hear is, “Griff, why are we always changing?” Simple...we are ensuring that we are evolving with our external environment by facilitating learning at all levels of the organization. When this is done, an advanced degree of organizational learning is created, which includes the adoption of new mental models. I could have used the adoption of these new mental models on that hot summer night in June 2007.

In closing, General Robert W. Cone, commander of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) leads by the concept of “Victory Starts Here”. This means providing the right people with the right skills at the right time and place. This is organizational learning at its best. The right people must be everyone that is involved in an organization from the top to the bottom. Learning, knowledge, education, and training cannot be hoarded by specific people in an organization. Everyone has to work together to ensure the organization is collectively learning from each other and the experiences of other organizations. This is imperative for better service to our citizens, and safer, more innovative operations for our firefighters.

Do you and your organization embody this phrase and the concept of organizational learning? Think about it. It could change the face of your department. It changed ours dramatically after we lost nine of our brothers. Don't wait for a tragedy like this to wake you up.

Remember, “Victory Starts Here” with the utilization of organizational learning to make your organization dynamic and evolutionary. It could save someone’s life...maybe even your own.

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**\*This is the original article that was published with FireRescue. It is included on our website in pdf form due to the firefighternation.com link to the article not being available any longer.**