



By RICHARD B. GASAWAY, Ph.D.

Firefighting: It's a Whole New Ballgame

Tips for Getting Your Department Ready for "The New Normal"

There is little doubt the recent recession has had a significant impact on the nation's fire service. Hardly a day goes by when there's not some news about an organization that has downsized, rightsized or capsized. There are all kinds of terms being attached to what is happening. One I heard recently was "The New Normal." This term seems to be fitting as the fire service faces changes unlike anything most have experienced and it's likely to stay this way for a very long time.

Is this a pessimistic view? Or a realistic view? Many fire service leaders are not confident that fire department budgets or firefighter positions are going to return to their pre-recession levels. If they do return, it may be a very slow process. Thus, the situation many fire departments find themselves in is "The New Normal" or what some might call a "paradigm shift."

Joel Barker, credited as being the person who popularized the concept of paradigm shifts, shares a story about Swiss watchmakers – renowned crafters of some of the finest timepieces in the world. As the story goes, the person who discovered digital watch technology first pitched their idea to Swiss watchmakers who shunned the inventor's idea, quipping, "Who would ever want a watch that did not use moving parts to ensure precision?" The dejected inventor, with his head held low, left Switzerland and traveled to Japan to see whether anyone there would embrace his digital watch technology. The rest, as they say, is history. The

paradigm for watch wearers changed and the Swiss watchmakers found themselves in tough times.

The paradigm for the fire service has also shifted and unless ways are found to improvise, adapt and overcome, there may be consequences. The consequences most concerning are those associated with firefighter safety. The do-more-with-less edict can only go so far. Can fire departments find ways to be more efficient and effective in response to these trying economic times? In many cases, the answer is yes. When economic times were good and budgets and staffing were increasing at healthy rates, some organizations capitalized on those opportunities and became resource abundant. However, the economy has dealt many communities some tough cards that now require a tightening of the belt and has created a call to find new or different ways to provide service.

However, there is a limit to how much better an organization can become based on the benefits of becoming more efficient. That point (termed the point of diminishing return for the economics-minded readers) is where each incremental decrease in a budget (or staffing) will result in a corresponding impact on the organization's ability to safely and effectively serve the community. The size and complexity of the organization and the services it provides, coupled with the complexity of the community, means the point of diminishing return can be different for every organization.

Depending on these factors, the point of diminishing return may come with the reduction of a single line or staff position. In very large organizations, the point of diminishing return may not come until a dozen or more positions are reduced. Whatever the size of the organization, however, that point does come. It is at that

point that bad things can begin to happen if the organization does not fundamentally change the way it does business.

The safety impacts of a budget or staff reduction cannot be evaluated in a vacuum. There are other forces in play. For example, lightweight construction and hydrocarbon-rich contents are contributing to earlier rates of flashover and earlier building collapse – a significant safety concern for firefighters. There are also growing challenges

being faced by fire-based EMS organizations as their aging communities increase the demands for medical services. High-volume demand for EMS services may reduce the number of firefighters available for a structure fire response – another significant safety concern for firefighters.

Sometimes when looking at an issue that can be as emotionally charged as safety to the community and safety of firefighters, it is beneficial to use an analogy. The analogy chosen here is to compare a fire department to a baseball team. Granted, the consequences of a bad outcome in baseball (the loss of a game) pale in comparison to the potential consequences of a bad outcome (injury or loss of life) at an emergency scene, but follow the analogy through before passing judgment.

Can fire departments find ways to be more efficient and effective in response to these trying economic times? In many cases, the answer is yes.

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CHIEF CONCERNS >>>

On a baseball team, each player fulfills a specific role on the field and performs specific tasks assigned to each position. Each role is so specialized it prohibits the positions from being interchangeable. Further, it is impossible for any one player to effectively fulfill multiple roles on the field at the same time. It is common, however, for two or more players to work in tandem to perform a task or to back each other up. At no time does a baseball team ever operate with fewer than the prescribed number of players – nine.

Hypothetically, say the team's owner and management have determined the revenues collected were not going to sufficiently cover the team's expenses. The fiscal shortfall facing the team can be addressed in essentially two ways – increase revenues or decrease expenses.

To increase revenue, the franchise could take several courses of action or combine several simultaneously. The club could increase ticket prices. While this

would increase the revenue per ticket, the overall revenue may decrease if fewer people buy tickets and come to the games. Less attendance may also impact the revenue from concessions and merchandise. The club could increase the price of concessions and merchandise. Again, this may increase the revenue per hot dog, but the overall revenue may remain constant (or even decline) if fewer people buy hot dogs.

Organizational Integrity

As with the revenue options, to reduce expenses, the franchise could take several courses of action or combine several simultaneously. The club could cut operating expenses by controlling utility costs or by reducing the quality (and subsequently the cost) of food, merchandise and supplies. It could reduce personnel costs with staff reductions in a variety of areas, including administrative staff, ticket sales, concessions, merchandise, field maintenance and parking attendants, or reduce the number of play-

ers on the team.

I want to focus my discussion on the hypothetical reduction in the number of players. While reductions in other areas bring their own issues, if a team makes significant cuts in the number of players and subsequently begins to lose games, the core purpose for the existence of the organization begins to erode.

When a team cuts players, the decision as to which players get cut may be based on contractual obligations. Therefore, it may not be the poorest performing players who are the first to go. Rather, it may be the newest players on the team if, say, the contract says cuts are made in reverse seniority order.

If the team cuts players whose performance is marginal or cuts players who see little field time, the impact may not be so significant. However, what happens when the cuts are so deep that the team can no longer play the game with nine players on the field? Maybe the team has to take the field with eight



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In some fire departments, the cuts have been so significant that core services are being provided with less than adequate staffing – the equivalent of a baseball team taking the field with eight players.

players. Such a short-staffed situation would surely have an impact on the performance of the team.

In some fire departments, the cuts have been so significant that core services are being provided with less than adequate staffing – the equivalent of a baseball team taking the field with eight players. This team is not going to be able to perform the same as it did when it had nine players on the field. The vacant position is going to lead to an impact on team performance.

The team is going to have to assess the impact of the loss and determine which position it is going to leave vacant. It is hard to imagine any position on the field that is not vital to team success. Arguably, there may be a few positions that are absolutely essential for the team to even be functional. For example, a team without a pitcher would forfeit the game immediately when they took the field. No pitcher means no game. What about a team without a catcher? Under this scenario, every pitch thrown would become an opportunity for runners to pass the bases with no concern of being picked off by the non-existent catcher. Perhaps the team cuts the first base position? If a ground ball were hit to the infield, there would be no one at first base to receive the throw and runners would most assuredly earn a single. It's easy to see these three positions are absolutely essential to team success. All other positions are up for reduction consideration.

It could be argued that on a fire scene, like on a baseball field, some positions may be more essential than others. For the sake of this analogy, let's say the proverbial field positions (key roles) at a structure fire are command, safety, vent, entry, search, attack, backup, salvage and overhaul. Isn't it ironic that it's the same number of essential key roles whether it's for baseball or firefighting – nine. The fact that there are nine key roles is not saying a fireground



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can operate with nine people. Each of the key roles identified above requires a team of players, not one individual. How many players in each essential team role is the subject of much debate. If each role were staffed with just two people (which is woefully inadequate for all roles except perhaps command and safety), that would set the bogey at 18 firefighters (minimum).

So which roles on the fireground are the essential ones – tantamount to the pitcher, catcher and first base position in the baseball example above? Again, this could be the basis of much debate and since it is not the point of this column to identify the positions that are essential and which ones could be eliminated, hypothetically positions of command, search and attack will be identified as the essential ones. All other positions are subject to reduction consideration.

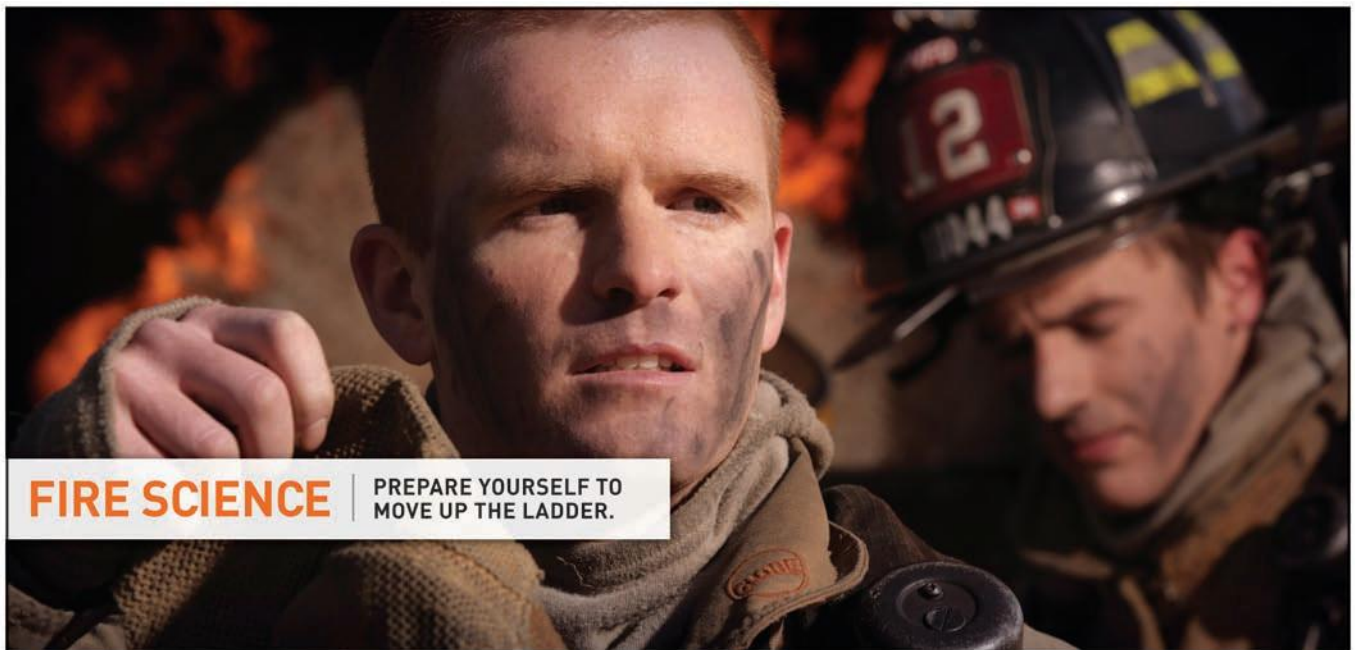
If the baseball team reduced some field positions it could, arguably, make

adjustments for the losses. The physical expanse of the field does not afford one player the ability to cover two geographic positions at the same time. It simply is not possible. However, the infield or outfield could shift, physically, to provide coverage for the lost position. The shift, however, would create a hole in the standard line of defense for the baseball team – a hole the opponent would surely identify and quickly exploit to its advantage. This scenario makes it relatively easy to predict the team is going to suffer losses.

On the fireground (setting aside the three hypothetically essential roles of command, search and attack), the roles subject to reduction are safety, vent, entry, backup, salvage and overhaul. Reducing staffing for any of these roles creates holes in the fireground operation the same way holes are created on a baseball field. Firefighter responsibilities can be shifted to provide coverage for the lost

roles. However, as with the baseball example, this shift creates deficiencies in the department's standard line of defense for a firefight, a hole the opponent (in this case, the fire) will surely identify and quickly exploit to its advantage. As in baseball, it becomes relatively easy to predict there are going to be losses.

On the baseball diamond, when a team loses a game, there is little significance to the overall well-being of players, fans, owners or the general citizenry. The sense of loss is only temporary because the impact is so minimal in the big picture. However, on the fireground, the significance of a loss can be very substantial to firefighters, the city, the citizens and the overall community. As a fire department reduces resources that impact core services, the opportunity for bad outcomes increases exponentially as the opponent (the fire) finds ways to exploit the department's shortcomings.



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The Strategy

Some organizations may be able to survive a reduction in resources by focusing on reducing non-core services. During abundant times, when organizational budgets and staffing were growing, some departments sought opportunities to start new programs and services and perhaps in the process created new staff positions. Some of those programs and services may not be directly tied to the core mission of the department.

Now, as times have become lean, organizations may be forced to determine whether there are any non-core programs and services that can be shed (perhaps only temporarily). Applied to the baseball analogy, this might be the equivalent of making reductions in concessions.

The first task may be to figure out what the core services are and try to preserve those. But who gets to make those decisions? This question can raise a host of potential challenges as cities contemplate their priorities. Is planting flowers in the parks more important than a fast paramedic response? Is snow removal on park pathways more important than having police officers on patrol? Unfortunately, in some cities, flower planting and pathway cleaning are higher priorities than public safety. The debate on the fairness of this disparity can rage on, but the reality is you have a limited impact on the decision making of elected officials.

Fire department leaders should try to engage city management and elected officials on this topic. Doing so may result in limited success, however. Some elected officials and politically minded city managers may balk at the notion of having to prioritize the city's services. For them, such a task may be the equivalent of asking parents to identify which of their children they like the most. They're going to be reluctant to reveal the answer and divulge which programs are their favorites (with emphasis on favorites versus priorities).

While it may not come as news, it is important to acknowledge that some elected officials and politically minded

city managers are single minded. For the electeds, they are focused on doing what will ensure they remain popular enough to get re-elected. For some city managers, their focus may be on doing what will ensure they remain popular enough with the elected officials to stay employed. It would

not be fair to lump all elected officials and all city managers into the category of being narrowly focused on their popularity, so long as it is acknowledged that such persons do exist and they may be the very people you are trying to get to prioritize city services.

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There can be some risk to engaging elected officials in the discussion of priorities. If they are focused on maintaining their popularity, the programs that are most popular in the community, not the ones that are most essential, may rise to the top of the list. Recently, a group of elected officials threw their support behind building a new library while withholding their support for a levy to build a new fire station (even though the fire station was reportedly in much worse condition). Why would this happen? From the standpoint of supporting popular funding options versus essential ones, many more voters are going to use the library each year than use the services of the fire department.

It's always wise to engage your elected officials in these important discussions as they represent the citizens. Just remember the potential risk and do your best to educate them on the potential impacts. Alternatively, the task of determining the core services to be maintained in each department of the city might be left to the professional staffers who possess a better understanding of the impacts based on an established standard of service and the safety to personnel versus politics and popularity.

By whatever means it is accomplished, the department should make a list of non-core services that can be shed and prioritize that list based on public and firefighter safety. For example, say the department hosts birthday parties; while nice,

shedding this program will have a comparatively low impact on public and firefighter safety. Such programs can be hard to give up, though, especially when they have been on-going programs whose success is based on the hard work and dedication of loyal members. Deciding which non-core programs or services to discontinue may be the baseball equivalent of having to decide whether to close the concession stand or souvenir vendors. Both are popular, but something has to be cut and the status quo is not an option.

After all the non-core service cuts have been identified and implemented, the next task is to determine whether the core services can be maintained at the same level with the remaining resources. Strategically, this task addresses how to make cuts while preserving safety. If the next round of cuts involves reducing the very resources that provide core services, then the service delivery model must change as well. This can be an emotionally charged decision. Anytime a fire department has to reduce its core services, the loss can hurt – deeply. A loss of this magnitude can also result in members going through a grieving process that entails five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Many fire departments have experienced reductions that impact core services – including staffing reductions that result in fewer front-line personnel providing services, which impacts safety. The cuts have been tangible and department members are grieving. Some are in denial. Others are angry. A few are trying to bargain their way out of their situation and others are depressed.


What there seems to have been far less of (at least to this point) is acceptance of the losses – a curtailment of the anger, bargaining and depression. Perhaps members are still working their way through the grieving process. Experts have not agreed on a pre-scripted schedule for how long a person should spend in each step of the grieving process, though it is generally accepted among mental health professionals that extended periods in any step leading to acceptance can have unhealthy consequences.

The losses many departments have experienced are not going to be restored. As department members work through the grieving process and get to acceptance, they can begin determining how to adjust to the current situation – their “New Normal.” This will be a watershed moment for the department and the starting point for a meaningful discussion about how service delivery should change as a result of this new paradigm.


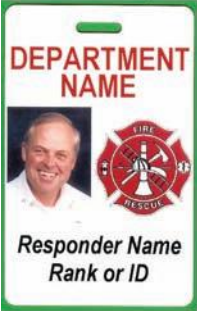
As core services are cut, the mantra of do more with less is not possible. When the cuts are deep, the only possible outcome is do less with less. If reductions mean having one less truck company on the street, having to close (or brown out) a station or reducing the number of firefighters on a company, there is going to be a corresponding reduction in service. Back to the baseball analogy – a team with eight members on the field cannot play the same game, the same way, as when it had nine. While firefighters can be shifted and their roles shared, strategic decisions must be made for how to avoid overex-

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tending firefighters, how to avoid taking dangerous shortcuts and how to manage the increased risk of loss.

A discussion among operational staff about how to accomplish this is essential. The expectations of members must be adjusted and there should be a healthy dialogue that results in an understanding among operational personnel about what the new expectations are and how they impact street performance, the customer and firefighter safety. Expect this to be a difficult discussion.

No firefighter worth the boots he or she wears is going to want to cut street-level service to the customer. But all the pride or denial in the world isn't going to put nine players back on the field when the team has been cut to eight. Your fire department did not create the economic issues you are facing and, therefore, you should not feel guilty about managing the impacts in a way that ensures firefighter safety.

If responses to emergencies are going to be slower or entail using fewer firefighters, there is going to be an operational impact. Discussing the impacts and concerns openly and gaining agreement on what the new expectation should be is an excellent step toward reducing overextension, shortcutting and excessive risk taking.

The True Impact of Resource Reductions

As your organization engages in these discussions, it might be worthwhile to work through some scenarios. One example might be a residential fire, using the resources the department enjoyed when times were good (i.e., pre-reductions). Chart out how long it took each company to arrive, how many members were on each company, what each company did, how long it took to perform each task and what the result of each company's efforts were. Then do the same scenario over again applying the resource levels of your new paradigm.

Realistically, the scenario should change and depending on the degree of reductions your organization has sustained, it may change significantly. Staffing levels and response times are two key factors likely to change. These, in turn, impact the pre-arrival fire progression, the risk profile of savable lives and the stability of the structure. This changes everything – or at least it should.

Resource reductions change the rules of the game and your beloved fire service is facing a whole new ballgame. It is vitally important to the safety of your members to accept your new paradigm and discuss how significant reductions in resources can impact street-level performance and make the changes necessary to protect the safety of your firefighters.

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By JEFFREY PINDELSKI

The Rapid Intervention Reality of Your Department

Part 1 – Understanding the Need and Obstacles to RIT Operations

The sound of “Mayday, Mayday” heard over the radio on the fireground will bring a sense of uneasiness and urgency to every fireground commander, no matter what the commander’s level of experience or expertise. One of our own is in trouble. Are we prepared at all levels of our organization to bring that member home safely? (Figure 1.)

Let’s begin by reflecting on why we need rapid intervention teams (RITs). Sadly, there are many misconomers when it comes to the true answer to this question. But let’s begin with the obvious.

As a fire service, we are bound by various regulations and standards, one of the most relevant being the Respiratory Protection Standard developed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which was revised in 1998 to include a provision known as the “two-in/two-out” rule. Basically, the rule states that if personnel are to enter a hazardous atmosphere, at least two individuals are to remain outside the atmosphere while maintaining visual or voice contact. One of the two individuals must not be assigned any additional duties that would be vital to the safety of the firefighters in the immediately dangerous to life or health (IDLH) environment and the other individual may be assigned to other firefighting activities as long as they do not interfere with that person’s ability to perform an immedi-



Jeffrey Pindeliski

Figure 1. When it comes to rapid intervention and fireground survival, there may not be a second chance and there is minimal room for error. How ready are your members for this challenge?

ate rescue if needed. An example of the latter would be a pump operator.

In 2001, the National Fire Protection Association published its NFPA 1710, Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Opera-

tions, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments, and NFPA 1720, Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations and Special Operations to the Public by Volunteer Fire Departments. In these standards, the term “Initial Rapid Intervention Crew (IRIC)” was referenced. This was a valiant attempt at getting the rapid intervention concept recognized and implemented on the fireground.

Unfortunately, these standards did not address the skills and performance requirements needed by the individuals filling this role on the fireground.

RIT Standard

In 2006, a committee began working on setting a standard for the basic skills and performance requirements for training firefighters in rapid intervention. The result of this is NFPA

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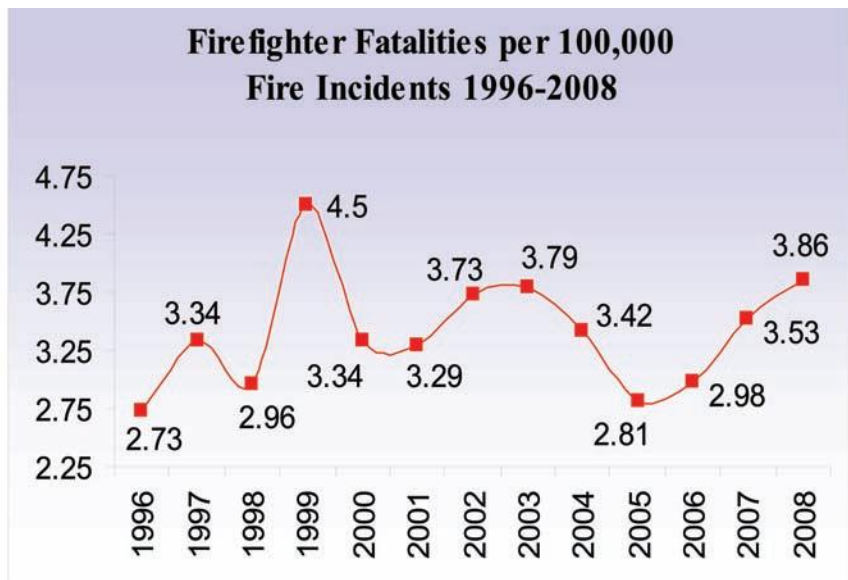


Figure 2. Firefighter fatalities per 100,000 incidents

Source: USFA Firefighter Fatalities Historical Overview