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Role of evaluation in fire service management

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Program evaluation should be planned in advance,
 not tacked on as an afterthought after the
 program has been completed.

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Any implementation of a new or modified program in a fire department should be accompanied by planned-for evaluation. Too often, evaluation is an afterthought—more of an "audit" that reconstructs later what happened, how well, and so forth. Evaluation of a program should begin before the new effort is initiated. It begins at the start of planning.

Evaluation should be an integral component of the fire department's program and planning. It should be built in, provided for step by step, and incorporated into the administration of any fire program, not an afterthought or belated attempt to measure outcomes.

This article will briefly address the concept of evaluation and show its proper use as a tool and technique in implementing virtually any fire department program.

The basic steps of evaluation are:

- To delineate evaluation criteria
- To select evaluation instrument(s)
- To select sample/population
- To administer instrument(s)
- To analyze results
- To make subsequent appropriate management decisions

Let us begin by examining three major purposes or roles of evaluation. I would like to explain these roles by comparing them with the work of three other professionals: (1) the pathologist, (2) the mortician, and (3) the preacher.

The pathologist studies the causes of disease (or even death), looks for reasons why systems malfunction, performs gross and minute examinations, including laboratory tests and chemical analysis. The pathologist studies the system as a whole, examines internal subsystems, even makes microscopic examinations. He or she is careful to observe abnormalities, wounds, departures from the norm or the expected.

Evaluation is a similar process in

the sense that a fire department program cannot be properly evaluated by only a gross examination. The evaluator must dissect, probe, manipulate, test, sample, analyze, and look into details to properly determine (evaluate) what is going on.

The mortician dresses and "packages" the remains. It is the mortician's job to receive the results of the pathologist, prepare the remains for

review and display, applying a bit of rouge here, a bit of paint there. Dressing the remains and providing a casket in which the remains will be viewed are also part of the mortician's responsibilities.

So, too, the project or program being evaluated must be cosmetically prepared for review. This may mean providing a bit of art here, a touch of graphics there. Great skill

EVALUATION

End results must be documented (track the project, accumulate records and statistics, and prove the actual outcomes).

Values (goals) enunciated at the beginning of the program must be assessed and described: Were they valid and proper objectives and purposes?

Accomplishment in closing the gap between "what is" and "what ought to be" should be carefully assessed. Did we actually accomplish what we set out to do? How well?

Leadership of the project should be assessed and evaluated. Did the people in charge have a positive impact? Did they make a positive difference?

Unforeseen events or incidents should be recognized. Evaluators should acknowledge circumstances that arose which weren't or couldn't be anticipated and that reasonably affected outcomes.

Assessment of the measuring tools themselves should be part of evaluation. For instance, were the survey instruments and survey methodologies sound? Was the sample random? Was the questionnaire properly pilot tested?

Test the validity of the results (outcomes) against known standards of performance or standards of accomplishment (be sure outcomes are valid and meaningful).

Include recommendations for future action. What have we learned from the results to date? How valuable are the results? How significant? Are there suggestions for next time? For others? What changes should be made?

Organizational behavior should be noted and analyzed. Did organizational behavior change as a result of the program? If no behavior is changed, one must question the worth of any efforts.

Norms and values of the particular organization should be—must be—incorporated into the fire department program. The evaluation must acknowledge these unique and individualistic factors.

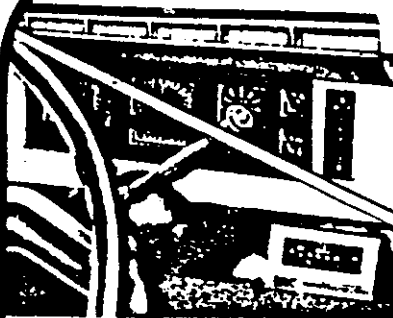
MANAGEMENT - EVALUATION

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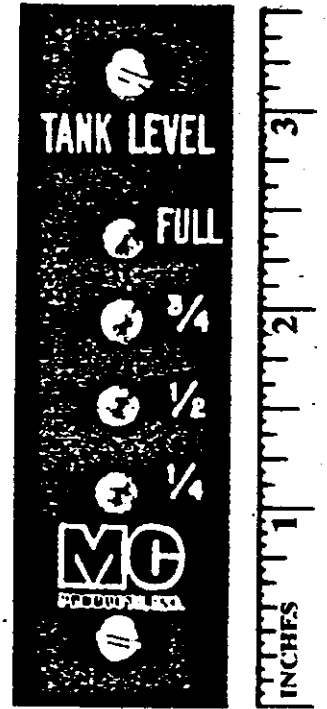
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may be necessary to get people to look at what could be an unpleasant package. At best, the evaluative package must be presented formally and in public. Various people will "parade by," each with a different motive for viewing the "package."

The preacher's responsibility at funerals and other such services is to preach a sermon, to draw conclusions, pronounce moral judgments, teach lessons—in other words, to help all who are gathered together to learn lessons from life, to counsel, uplift, and occasionally condemn and criticize.

Likewise, evaluation should teach lessons, draw conclusions, and help us learn from experience, whether ours or someone else's. The difference between "what is" and "what ought to be" needs to be taught, clarified, and expounded so that all can profit from experience, learn from mistakes, and share what works and what doesn't work. Thus, to evaluate is to teach and share, sometimes even or make moral judgments.

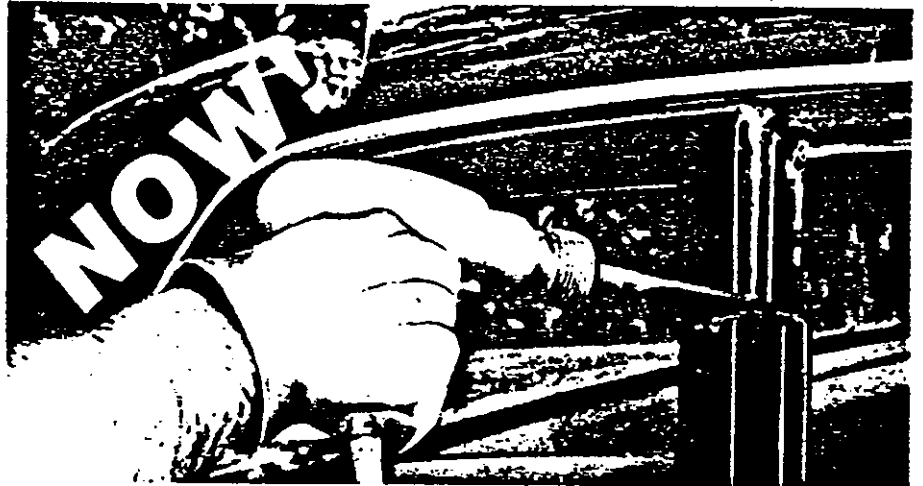
Evaluation, then, begins with identifying goals and objectives before a project or program even begins. Indeed, well before any fire department program is implemented, administrators should carefully develop

management objectives and define expected outcomes—what? who? how well? by when? within what restraints? and so forth.

Evaluation should be provided for, step by step, through the planning and implementation stages. Evaluative questions must be asked—Were time frames maintained? Did employee morale improve? Were budgetary constraints recognized? Was response time shortened? By how much?—so that the organization can correct and revise its course long before it is too late or ineffective.

According to the dictionary, to "evaluate is to determine and fix the value of or to determine the significance or worth of something by careful appraisal and study." Fire chiefs should pay careful attention to evaluation. To help readers conceptualize evaluation, I have developed a mnemonic device (see box) to suggest the purpose and process of the tool/technique of evaluation.

Those interested in fire service management should pay careful attention to evaluation in their planning and implementation. It should not be just an afterthought, but a serious, consequential, integral part of the entire management process from the beginning.



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