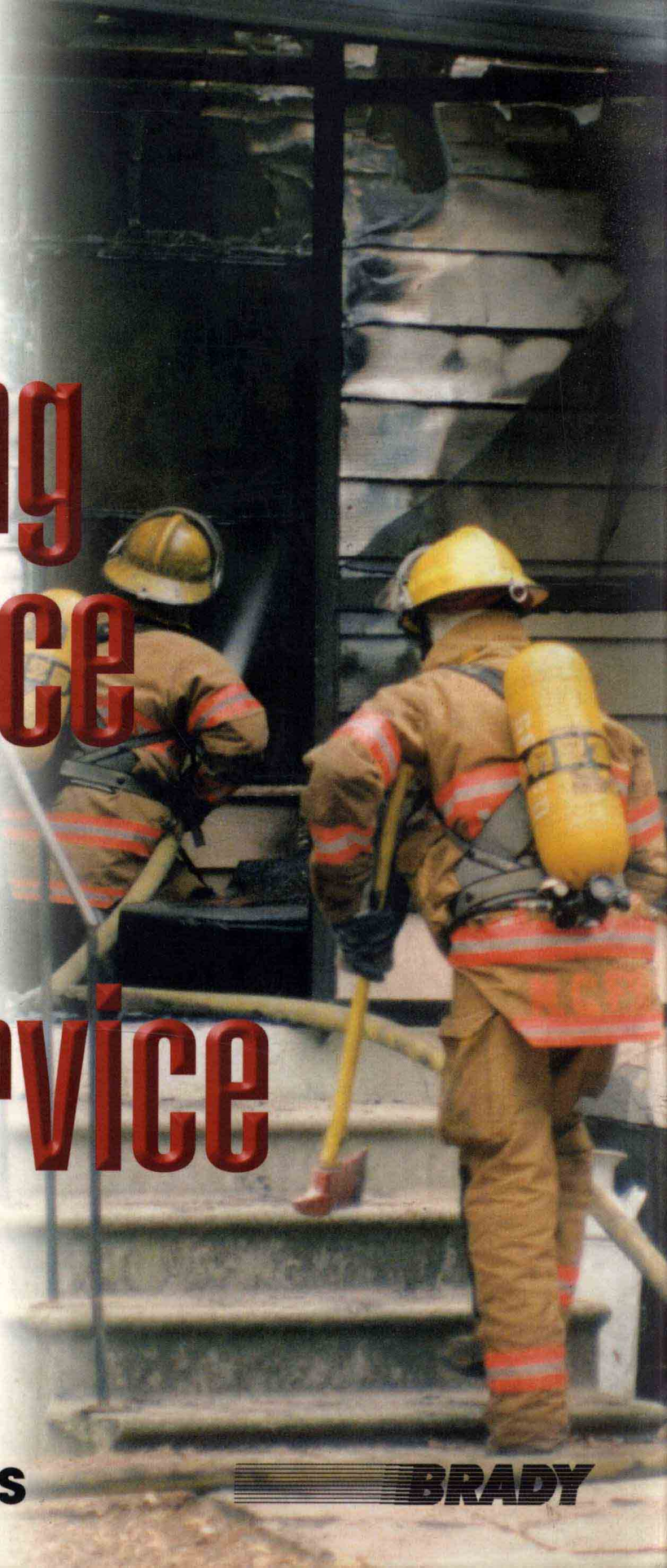




Achieving Excellence in the Fire Service

Judy Janing
Gordon M. Sachs

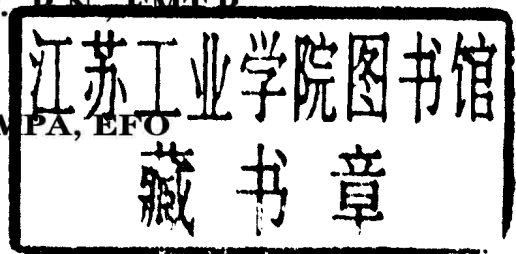


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Achieving Excellence in the Fire Service

Judy Janing PhD, P.N., EMT-P

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Achieving Excellence in the Fire Service

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, who not only taught me, but lived by, the philosophy of “being the best you can be.” She inspired me throughout her life and her memory has inspired me for all the years I have been without her. Although she never held an “important” position, she was a true leader, touching many lives with kindness, recognition, encouragement, and love.

—J. J.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Fred and Cynthia. Were it not for them, I would not know what excellence is, nor would I have the inclination to strive to reach it.

—G. S.

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—J. J.

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—G. S.

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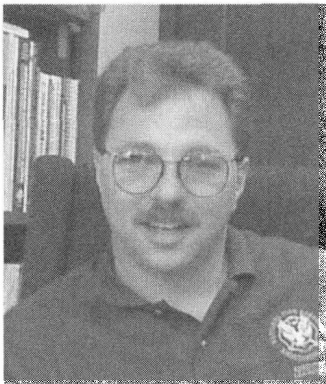
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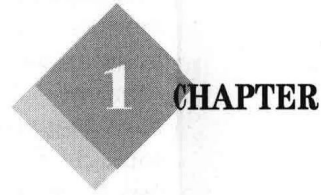
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Introduction



◆ HISTORY OF SYSTEM EVALUATION IN THE FIRE SERVICE

Webster defines *quality* as “degree of excellence; superiority in kind; a distinguishing attribute.” An often-used, more simplistic definition of *quality* is “conformance to standards.” To different people, *quality* means many different things. It is based on culture, training and education, experience, and knowledge outside their own environment. For example, a “quality car” to one person may be one that runs well and gets good fuel mileage, while to another person it may be one with a luxury package that provides extra comfort. Quality, in other words, is a function of expectations and perceptions. What is perceived is what the customer receives, or “perception is reality.”

In real life, quality is almost always defined from the customer’s point of view. For example, someone who calls 9-1-1 because her daughter is having trouble breathing wants emergency personnel to get there quickly, know what they are doing, be courteous while they are there, and take care of the problem efficiently. These factors will define the “quality” of care from the customer’s point of view. The caller likely will not care if help arrives in an ambulance, a fire truck, a police car, or an SUV, as long as it arrives quickly. If the team takes 20 minutes to arrive, or if they are rude while on the scene, the quality of service perceived by the customer will be poor. The customer likely will not know the difference between a first responder, an EMT, or a paramedic. As long as this person helps her daughter to breathe better, the perceived quality of care will be high.

W. Edwards Deming, a renowned authority on quality management and leadership, has written that quality management—managing the work environment to maximize both the external and internal expectations and perceptions of quality—is key to a quality organization. This approach is much more effective than “quality control,” which looks at individual processes typically performed by the members. Deming states that members typically work within a system that is beyond their control. The system, not the individual worker’s skills, determines how that worker performs. Only



management can change the system because management is responsible for it. Often, members are punished for accurately reporting system results, and are rewarded for providing the answers that managers desire; therefore, part of the internal politics on the job is doing what makes one look good to the boss. This is often more important than striving to look good to the customers.

In the fire service, it is often difficult for a firefighter to suggest to a chief officer that there might be a better way to do things. For one thing, how can a “rookie” know more than an experienced “smoke-eater”? Then, typically, a chain of command must be followed, and the suggestion can be stifled anywhere in that chain (especially if someone is reluctant to “step on toes”). Further, even though there are national standards that provide the information needed to conduct certain operations or programs, some chief officers may be reluctant to implement these because they contradict “the way things have always been done.” These are the types of “systems” that often stand in the way of quality, or excellence, in the fire service.

Another example might be fire inspections by engine companies. The department may require that a certain number of these inspections be performed each year, and that the company officer is responsible for getting them done. The department may not provide the training necessary to perform the inspections effectively, or the company may be too busy with responses or training to perform all of the inspections or to perform the inspections thoroughly. So, while the paperwork at the end of the year may indicate that the inspections have been completed, they may actually not have been, or, if they were completed, they may have been second-rate. Records might also show inspections have been completed just to protect the chief officer’s reputation and to prevent disciplinary action. This is another example of a “system” that may stand in the way of quality.

Some of the fire departments recognized today as quality organizations have eliminated, or at least minimized, the roadblocks that stand in the way of improvements and advances. Other departments live by the axiom of “two hundred years of tradition unimpeded by progress.” While tradition has an important place in the fire service, tradition alone cannot effectively or efficiently carry any department into the future. Again, perception is reality; if internal customers only see what is done within their own organization, they have no way to judge whether they are performing quality services. They have nothing to compare themselves to. In effect, they are being stymied by ignorance (not knowing any different) and apathy (not caring that there may be other ways of doing things).

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending upon one’s point of view), the public is neither ignorant nor apathetic about today’s fire service. While the public may look at firefighters as today’s heroes, television reality shows and on-the-scene, real-time news have provided the public with perceptions and expectations that fire departments should be striving to live up to. Similarly, the American fire service in general knows and understands the consensus standards-making process, and recognizes when other fire departments are not following national standards. For example, letters to the editor of major fire service trade journals regularly address the fact that photos in those journals depict firefighters “doing things wrong” or not in conformance with national standards. The public often recognizes much of this as well.

The problem with this is simple: when the public—the primary customers—perceive that their tax dollars or donations are being spent for a less-than-quality service, they become dissatisfied. That leads to many problems. For example, word of a department’s poor quality—whether an accurate perception or not—can spread



quickly. Data collected in a 1978 study by the White House Consumer Affairs Panel showed the following.

1. A satisfied customer tells three people.
2. A dissatisfied customer tells 11 people.
3. In one study, 13% of dissatisfied customers complained to over 20 people.
4. Consider that each of the 11 people who heard a “bad experience story” told 11 others.
5. Ninety-six percent of all unhappy customers never tell the company.
6. Of those who do complain, between 54 % and 70 % who feel that their complaint was resolved will do business again.
7. This increases to 95 % if the customers feel that the complaint was resolved quickly.

Such complaints cost money, even in this day of “do more with less.” Research on quality management shows that poor quality costs the service: often 20% of service goes to fixing bad quality. Fire departments that have to spend time and money on damage control often do not have the time or money to move forward toward progressiveness, yet those that focus on quality often have extra funds to put toward new ideas or projects. Further, city and county managers are often reluctant to provide extra funding to departments or agencies that show a lack of concern for quality and improvement, and that often cost the city or county in terms of liability or settlements. The same can be said of elected officials or candidates for office, especially if support for an agency or department with a poor reputation might cost them votes.

Complaints from customers are not always based on poor system quality and do not always need to be addressed with wide-scale changes. Still, feedback from both internal and external customers can help a department move in the right direction. Stu Leonard, another quality management guru, put it best when he said, “Customers who complain are our best friends because they give us the opportunity to improve.”

◆ CURRENT PRACTICES OF SYSTEM EVALUATION

Customer-focused organizations, including fire departments, create predictably positive experiences by continually striving to exceed their customers’ expectations. Fire departments today do much more than extinguish fires once they start, and the public knows that. They expect more than that. Most of today’s workers—the “Generation X” and “Generation ME” folks—want more than that. It is up to management to create and support an environment where this internal desire to exceed and external desire for quality services can be realized. This requires a balance of two factors: human resources and physical resources. Both must work together if success is to be achieved.

Five keys ensure that human and physical resources are balanced, resulting in distinctive quality service.

1. Listening, understanding, and responding to the evolving needs of customers.
2. Establishing a clear vision of what good service is, communicating that vision to everyone, and ensuring that service quality is important.
3. Establishing concrete standards of service and regularly measuring against those standards.



4. Hiring good people, training them in service delivery, empowering them to work on behalf of the customer, and ensuring that they have the tools and skills to meet the service standards.
5. Recognizing and rewarding high quality service; celebrating and acknowledging those who “go one step beyond” for customers.

Fire departments that recognize these keys are often the ones recognized by their peer agencies across the country as being progressive or models for other departments to follow.

Another important approach that coincides with the concept of modeling other departments is “benchmarking.” This entails identifying the highest achievable standard, and then attempting to meet or exceed that standard. To identify this standard, fire department managers must go to all levels of the organization for input, and must get input from customers, from those outside the fire service (this is called *functional benchmarking*), from other fire departments, and from stakeholders. The fire service manager must “become” the customer.

National consensus standards, such as those produced by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), are often a good place to start the benchmarking process. NFPA standards typically are the “minimum standard”; that is, they cite the criteria or components that must be met or exceeded in specific areas. Three of the most influential, if not controversial, NFPA standards related to the fire service have been NFPA 1500, Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program; NFPA 1710, Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, 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. These standards identify the minimum levels at which a fire department should operate in terms of safety and deployment when such levels are not established by other legal entities. There are compliance matrixes available for these standards in the form of checklists, which can then be turned into implementation plans. Departments can use these standards to identify what needs to be done in order to meet minimum standards, as well as those areas where the minimum is exceeded.

While national consensus standards often cite the minimum acceptable standard, the desire of local customers (internal and external) may be higher than the minimum. Or, they might not even know that such a minimum standard exists! Similarly, external customers may have moved into an area from a place with a more progressive fire department, and may expect that all fire departments are the same. Internal customers—fire officers and firefighters—may never have seen a fire department more than 50 miles from their home. Thus, education is an important part of this process as well. Some of the questions in this process might be: What are the minimum standards? What are similar size fire departments across the country doing? What are other industries doing? Can we adapt what they are doing to meet our needs?

Many fire departments have identified benchmarks—where they want to be, so to speak—and have used those as a starting point. They often practice the Kaizen concept—a theory of continuous improvement where a department practices slow, gradual accomplishments moving toward being the best they can be. They are, in effect, in a race for which there is no finish line. While this can be very effective, there is one caution: do not equate the theory of Continuous Quality Improvement with the concept of “It’s not good enough,” especially if using committees. Instead, consider using the concept, “Can it be made better? If so, how?”

One fire department in Florida made the “never-good-enough” mistake—establishing CQI committees for many different areas—and once a plan for that area was developed and implemented, a new committee was established to improve upon that plan. Because all members knew that whatever their committee came up with would not be good enough, the committees stopped trying, and members started losing interest in the process fairly quickly. Fire department management then started making mandates for the committees—deadlines, required deliverables, and so forth—and the process then became a burden. Any resemblance to Kaizen or continuous quality improvement disappeared.

Organizations that strongly value customer perceptions as they relate to quality service typically do the following.

1. Think about and talk to their customers (both internal and external).
2. Continually assess their customers’ perceptions.
3. Value goodwill versus economic stake.
4. Make amends for poor treatment.
5. Employ a “whatever-it-takes” policy.
6. Redesign systems and kill sacred cows when they obstruct service quality.

Sometimes, when starting out with this process, comprehensive changes must take place. This often occurs when a new fire chief is brought in from another department, or a progressive individual is appointed from within a department or elected in a volunteer department. Change can often be difficult in a fire department, especially when tradition or traditional values are being confronted. Still, to improve quality, significant change must sometimes occur.

Many fire departments are turning to agency accreditation as a measure of quality. Much like consensus standards, criteria are established for a fire department in many different areas. Unlike standards, however, the criteria are not “minimum,” but rather could be considered “preferred,” and must be met in order to be “accredited.” The ambulance industry has a similar accreditation process, and there is now an accreditation process for the position of fire chief as well. (Specific information on these accreditation processes can be found in Appendix C.)

◆ NEED FOR QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN THE FIRE SERVICE

Is quality really needed in the fire service? Is there a need to achieve excellence? If a fire department can extinguish fires, or at least keep them from spreading beyond the building of origin, is there really a problem?

To successfully evaluate the quality of a fire department, managers (or evaluators) must look at products, services, and communications first separately, then how they operate as a whole. Fire suppression services are just part of a fire department’s responsibilities. If a fire department provides emergency medical services, these services are certainly more visible because EMS incidents occur about four times more often. Regardless, records are likely kept on the types of fires and types of EMS calls to which the department responds. Public fire/injury prevention education activities are also very visible (because they are meant to be). All of these services—fire suppression, EMS, and public fire/injury prevention education—need to be looked at individually. But they also need to be looked at as a system: Are fires and injuries being prevented, or are fire/injury prevention education programs being run simply for the sake of running

them? Are they addressing specific fire or injury problems in the community, based on the fire and EMS call types recorded? Is the department making a difference? Is it the right difference? Can the department prevent more fires or injuries?

Many private fire and EMS departments, such as Rural Metro, do evaluate their services this way. Certainly, they include cost-effectiveness in this review—but every fire department should. Running a fire department *is* running a business, whether or not the bottom line is a profit margin or more funding for additional or improved services. Private fire departments tend to focus more on prevention because the fewer calls they respond to, the fewer expenditures they have. Most municipal fire departments have a mission statement (or some semblance thereof) that says in some way, “to prevent fires,” yet focus much more on fire suppression.

Within EMS, another clear example can be shown. Many more lives can be saved with prevention programs aimed at reducing sudden cardiac deaths than can be saved with cardio-pulmonary resuscitation and automatic external defibrillators, yet look at how much the fire service spends (in time and money) on CPR training and equipment. If, nationwide, the fire service were to spend the same amount of time and money on programs like cholesterol screening, blood pressure checks, and heart-safe education, many more people would avoid sudden cardiac arrest than are successfully resuscitated after an arrest occurs (Dyar & Sachs, 1998). Obviously, this is not feasible—people will still have heart attacks, and the fire service needs to be ready to treat them. Still, the concept remains sound. Similarly, if all fire departments were to provide bicycle helmets and promote their use, the incidents of traumatic brain injury would drop significantly (Dyar & Sachs, 1998). This would save millions of health care dollars and rehabilitation costs. Is this important to a fire department manager? Probably not, but it should be. In addition to the positive exposure received from such a program, fewer public dollars spent on health care may mean more dollars available for public safety programs, including those conducted by a fire department. All of this adds to the level of excellence in the department.

Quality is often based on the image of the organization. Again, perception is reality. This is sometimes referred to as the “Disney Model of Customer Service.” This model focuses on “moments of truth”—actual interaction with the customer. Fire departments have these moments of truth all the time. Any time the public comes into contact with members of the department—at the grocery store, on the highway as an engine or ambulance passes, at an EMS call for a loved one, as a neighbor’s garage burns—is a “moment of truth.” Stories in the media can be major moments of truth. These instances can make or break the reputation—perceived quality—of a fire department.

Consider, for example, the major metropolitan fire department’s firehouse sex scandal in the late 1990s. Did the events portrayed in the media relate to the quality of service provided to the citizens of the city? Probably not. However, the reputation of the department was significantly tarnished, and the general public may not have viewed the fire department as highly as they had before the stories broke, especially if this was their moment of truth. Similarly, the fire service as a whole, and particularly the Fire Department of New York, gained a solidly heroic reputation after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Was anything really done differently that day to deserve such a change in public perception? Again, probably not. However, it was a true moment of truth for us all. It also pointed out that the greatest motivator of all is pride. Starting out with a positive reputation is obviously better than overcoming a negative one, especially if neither has anything actually to do with quality except for that ever-present “perception”—which can mean everything.