

What Can We Learn From The Past?

by Dean K. Wilson, P.E.

***Question:* My jurisdiction has recently appointed me in charge of all communications systems. I am expected to help the local fire marshal review plans and specifications for new fire alarm installations. I also have to take over the responsibility for all our communications systems, including our municipal fire alarm system. Suddenly, I'm in charge and I feel very much alone. Where can I go for help?**

Sometimes the very best way to begin a new responsibility starts with a determination to learn everything you can about the background and history of the various systems and operations, processes and procedures, or installations and information, for which you have responsibility. One of your best sources for information rests inside the heads of the fire alarm superintendents or communications chiefs who have preceded you. You will do well to tap this valuable resource.

For example, every month, after he receives his copy of IMSA Journal, I receive a telephone call from James W. Boyko, the former deputy chief of communications/fire alarm superintendent for the City of Hartford, Connecticut, who now lives in Rhode Island. I have had the privilege of knowing Jim for over 35 years. And, I greatly appreciate the insights and information that he shares with me whenever something in my article prompts him to call me. Jim has a vast knowledge of fire alarm systems and municipal communications systems. He represents many like him—scattered around the United States and Canada—who have much to contribute. If only someone would ask!

You will find a major source of help from those who have preceded you. Why? Because, to properly develop your own effectiveness as a leader, you must understand the importance of honoring the past. As a new leader comes into a position, some leadership training classes and certain business-oriented printed materials seem to suggest that he or she should “turn the place upside down.” Those sources urge the new leader to quickly discard as much of the organization’s connection to the past as possible.

This may include eliminating rituals or traditions the organization may have practiced under previous leaders. It may include discarding key staff members. It may include making all kinds of decisions, major and minor, with absolutely no consideration for how those same decisions may have been made in the past.

To justify this faulty practice, proponents often quote major business writings in a way that distort the intent of such writings. So, lacking any real basis, why do some leadership training classes and certain business-oriented printed materials—or, perhaps, just the new leader’s personal inclinations—prompt the new leader to cause disruption to the natural rhythm of an organization?

Obviously, I cannot determine the true motivation of every new leader who has chosen to behave in this way. But, I can make an educated guess. I think it generally stems from a sense of profound insecurity. The thinking goes something like this: “If I can break all ties with the past, if I can really turn things upside down, then the organization will not have anything to judge my performance against except those things I have created of my own volition.”

William Shakespeare in *The Tempest* wrote: “What is past is prologue.” The past has a great deal of influence on the present. In fact, as each person walks along the road of his or her life, every moment in the present has inexorable ties to the past. To try to discard the past, to minimize its

value and importance, can only end with an organization consumed by confusion and torn apart by unrest and discord.

As certain members of the organization push back against the changes the new leader makes, he or she will try to manipulate those individuals to leave the organization. He will begin to marginalize them, speak against them with other members of the leadership team, remove them from positions of authority, and generally try to turn others against them. Once a new leader starts down the road of breaking an organization's connection to the past, he or she has little choice but to do everything possible to justify his or her behavior.

George Santayana wrote "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I would modify this quotation slightly to assert: "Those who refuse to honor the past are condemned to be harmed by it."

Now I am not suggesting that a new leader should never introduce a new idea, a new program, a new process, a new procedure, a new concept, or a new whatever. Quite to the contrary, each new leader should not see himself or herself as someone who simply maintains what has gone before. Nor should the new leader take on the mission of turning the organization upside down to quickly establish himself or herself as the sole creator of policy and practice.

So, new leaders, in making changes in any situation where you assume leadership, let me humbly suggest you do the following:

1. Make every effort to learn as much about the past as possible. Talk to people who have been around a long time. Explore the reasons behind why policies, practices, and programs exist. Get to know the underpinnings of the organization. Find out what makes the organization tick. Find out what bonds the members together.

What are their traditions? What are their common values? What are their common experiences? Take a lesson from those who go as missionaries to foreign lands. Get to know the culture of your new organization. Find ways to assimilate yourself into the very core of the people who populate your new organization. Reach out with a gentle, thoughtful caring. Come along side your employees. Treat them with respect. Value their past.

2. Make changes very, very slowly and carefully. Don't change anything, even things that you view as trivial, for at least 12 months. And then, only make changes after carefully exploring those changes openly with your support staff and other organization leaders. Gauge and anticipate the response of the organization to the changes. In fact, involve as many people as possible in developing the scope and nature of the changes. A well-known, widely respected organizational consultant, Norman Shawchuck, has long asserted: "People tend to support what they help create." So don't be a "Lone Ranger." Don't make decisions alone or with just a "Tonto."

3. Whenever your leadership group does decide to make changes, do so in a way that acknowledges and honors the past. Give gentle and careful verbal assent to the value of the past practice. Provide a fully truthful, completely accurate, forthright, and totally transparent explanation as to why you have decided to make the changes.

Do these three simple things and you will prove the lasting value of your leadership. You will build harmony in the organization. You will win support for your ideas. You will also find that the care you exercise in decision-making will sometimes influence you to change your mind about some idea, concept, policy, or program.

After all, you should want to learn and develop, so that you can better serve your employer and the organization to which you owe your allegiance. Don't ever think that you alone have all the answers. The fact is you don't. You can't. You won't.

You will best serve when you form a thoughtful, careful partnership with the others who lead your organization and with your staff. You will reap significant rewards for the gentleness and caring you display when you make a conscious and determined effort to honor the past.

What does this have to do with fire alarm systems? Well, frankly, fire alarm systems don't exist in a vacuum. People manufacture them. People design them. People review and approve them. People install and maintain them. And, people use them. Far too many times, the failure to manage people dooms the overall effectiveness of a fire alarm system.

So while a column on a key principle of management may seem out of place, in reality the managing of the people who "make fire alarm systems happen" should, hopefully, have great value.

Will you receive it?

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