

In My Opinion...

Dean Says:

Cooperating and Counting the Cost



Charlene Kidder

Many years ago, when I worked in the engineering support department of a large highly protected risk (HPR) insurance company, an account engineer dragged me off in his Volkswagen beetle to visit an office building/warehouse complex of a major book publishing company in New Jersey. This company had recently replaced its central station fire alarm system with a state-of-the-art proprietary supervising station fire alarm system.

The company had become disenchanted with the level of service and overall competency of the central station operating company, and had decided they could provide the fire alarm service with their own equipment and use their own personnel.

The reason the account engineer dragged me to the site became apparent as we discussed the new system during our trip. The company, I discovered, had made this replacement without any consultation with the insurance company, as an Authority Having Jurisdiction. Since the insurance credit depended on whether or not the new fire alarm system

met our very rigid and comprehensive requirements, I had to determine whether or not we would accept the new system as equivalent protection for the facility.

Once we arrived at the site, the facility manager took us to a beautifully laid out, secure proprietary supervising station to show us the new equipment. The new installation truly impressed me. But, looking around the room, I noticed one critical element missing: no operators occupied the state-of-the-art monitoring positions.

"Where are the operators?" I asked the facility manager.

"We only intend to staff this station during an emergency," he replied.

"How do you intend to handle signal traffic during the rest of the time?" I asked.

"A couple of times a day, someone will poke their head in the door to see if anything is going on," he answered.

I could barely suppress my laughter. This company had spent upwards of \$900,000 on a new fire alarm system and had left out one of the most important elements: the trained operators who would monitor the signals.

In contrast, about this same time, another account engineer contacted me concerning his client, a large grocery store chain, who also had become disillusioned with the central station operating company that provided the fire alarm systems at their many grocery stores.

They, too, intended to install a state-of-the-art proprietary supervising sta-

tion fire alarm system, including a proprietary supervising station at one of their large warehouse facilities. From this supervising station, they intended to monitor the fire alarm and security systems at their 170 grocery stores. But, before they began developing the specifications, they wanted to meet with us, as the insurance company Authority Having Jurisdiction, to determine exactly what they would need to provide.

Over the next four months, we worked closely with this client to develop a carefully crafted action plan. Within a year, they had installed their new fire alarm system, staffed the proprietary supervising station with trained operators, and converted all their grocery stores and warehouses to the new system.

Two years later, they upgraded their supervising station facility even further and sought listing by Underwriters Laboratories Inc. as a central station so they could issue central station fire alarm certificates for their stores and warehouses and receive an even higher level of insurance credit for their most excellent fire alarm systems.

The difference between these two approaches seems startling. On the one hand, the first company, perhaps with the best of intentions, forged ahead without tapping the resource we provided as the insurance company Authority Having Jurisdiction, and spent most of their project money on equipment, without considering the additional costs necessary to provide a fully operational and well-integrated proprietary supervising station fire alarm system.

In contrast, the second company had carefully planned the scope of the project, worked with us as the Authority Having Jurisdiction using our experience and knowledge to assist them throughout the project development process, created a detailed budget, and, after counting all of the costs, constructed a proper and comprehensive fire alarm system that would meet their immediate needs, as well as their needs for many years to come.

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Wayne Says...

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right things.” The designer, the Authority Having Jurisdiction, the installer, and the owner then have an obligation to “do things right.”

The “vision,” as I see it, becomes a living document called the *National Fire Alarm Code*. The action necessary to ensure that vision springs from the membership of the Technical Committees that write the various chapters of the *Code*.

Do you “see,” but have no “vision?” Are you part of the process or part of the problem?

Dean Says...

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The second company understood that the level of protection they needed to protect the valuable corporate resource that their warehouses and grocery stores represented, required them to spend the time to carefully plan the scope of work. They also realized that in our role as the insurance company Authority Having Jurisdiction, we could provide a wealth of experience that we had gained by overseeing many other similar projects.

As a manager told me during one of the early meetings, “Why should we have to make the same mistakes that other people have made. We ought to learn from their experiences and profit from their mistakes.”

That kind of attitude, and their determination to carefully count the costs, guaranteed that they would successfully meet the goals they had set for the project.

The lesson from these two companies seems obvious. Cooperation and counting the cost certainly helps assure success.

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