

In My Opinion...

Dean Says:

“...Pull Together, or Go Around In Circles.”



Charlene Kidder

I am a great fan of the newspaper cartoon. It seems somehow that God has uniquely gifted some individuals with the ability to express in a single drawing ideas that would otherwise greatly challenge one's ability to express them.

I recently enjoyed a chair-rocking bout of laughter over a cartoon I saw. The cartoonist, Johnny Amundsen, had drawn the bowels of a galley ship. He had filled the rowing positions with well-tailored men dressed in three-piece suits. To create a "hook" for this particular cartoon, Amundsen had the oarsmen on one side of the boat rowing in a rhythm opposite to that of those on the other side of the boat. As a result, the "stroke-oar" was having trouble keeping his balance as the galley ship spun around in a circle.

With an obvious edge to his voice, the stoke-oar was shouting at his business men rowers, "Gentlemen, we've got two choices. We can either pull together, or go around in circles."

Amundsen made his point. Whether you find yourself in a galley ship on the high seas, entrenched in the day-to-day operations of a busy corporation, or

working in a field that purports to save lives and protect property, you can either pull together with all of your peers, or you can doom the venture to go around in circles.

Not long ago, I sat in the enormous meeting hall at the Minneapolis Convention Center and watched the membership of the National Fire Protection Association act on the report for NFPA 72-2002, *National Fire Alarm Code*. During the presentation, I listened with chagrin as some individuals who had participated in the committee process rose to their feet and made motions that could set the fire alarm industry spinning around in circles.

One particularly amazing motion called for the removal of all references to NICET Certification from the *Code*.

The certification program of the National Institute for Certification in Engineering Technologies has long received accolades as providing a means to help ensure the quality of the technicians who install, maintain, and test fire alarm systems.

Since the 1993 edition of the *Code*, Chapter 7 has referenced NICET Certification as one means of assuring the qualifications of technicians. The requirement does not single out NICET Certification as the only method, but simply as one of several possible ways of determining qualifications.

To remove this reference, and other references that had been added in subsequent editions of the *Code*, would serve

no useful purpose, other than to further weaken the forward progress of the industry.

Largely due to this reference, and the hard work of many in such industry organizations at the Automatic Fire Alarm Association (AFAA), NICET Certification has become a significant, positive force in raising the level of quality of installed fire alarm systems.

This should come as no surprise. Thousands of pages of research in a wide range of professional industries have shown that formal certification programs significantly raise the quality of services rendered. Formal certification also serves to give participants in the program well-deserved recognition of their professional achievement.

This is why the last 20 years has seen an enormous number of certification programs arrive on the scene. Every profession from trial attorneys to broadcast engineers, from surgical nurses to farriers have responded by developing formal certification programs to increase the knowledge and skill levels of the members of those professions.

I recently heard a neophyte in the fire alarm industry proclaim: "Fire alarm systems aren't magic, they are just another type of electronics." How wrong he was.

Fire alarm systems may use electronic components, but they are far more than "just another type of electronics." My defunct stereo system may irritate me that it no longer functions, but all I have lost is a bit of listening pleasure.

Fire alarm systems participate in the process of protecting lives and property. The very safety of individuals who occupy a building depends on the proper functioning of the fire alarm system. That's why such systems absolutely must be cared for by qualified individuals.

I truly hope the fire alarm industry will rise up with one voice to denounce this seriously misguided effort, and prevent any such change during the next revision cycle.

Do those who have made such motions have the right to do so? Of course

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least the term of the test and maintenance contract. And, if the system is properly maintained, that term can extend for the life of the electronic equipment, often 20 to 25 years.

The mechanical installation of the equipment and wiring by the installer I quoted at the beginning of this article was, indeed, excellent. He did not claim to know the *Code* from memory, but he did have a copy in his truck. It was obvious from his basic knowledge of the *Code* that his initial response to my question was made in jest. His installation had "quality" written all over it.

And quality serves as one of the most important ingredients in the reliability/performance mix.

The *Code* explicitly states the intent of the Technical Committee to include quality as a requirement. It is incumbent on all of us as designers, installers, owners, and Authorities Having Jurisdiction, to remember that "good enough" is not acceptable.

So the next time you are in a position to judge an installation's reliability, begin with an evaluation of its quality first. The rest should be easy. □

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they do. I wholeheartedly agree with Noam Chomsky: "If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all."

But, I, too, have the freedom of speech. So, to those who want to remove the reference to NICET from the *Code*, I say, "Phooey!" □

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