



In my opinion...

DEAN SAYS:

Another "sandwich" alarm

I live in a town served by two volunteer fire departments. Two, you see, because the town is divided into two fire districts. Each district has the power of taxation to raise money to pay for the public fire defenses offered by the departments.

Each of these two fire departments has a chief and the usual bevy of officers. The town has a full-time fire dispatcher who operates out of what I suppose serves as the public fire service communications center. The citizens are served by enhanced 911 which terminates in the police department.

For years I have listened to the fire radio. Starting way back with my first days in the fire service 24 years ago, I owned a *Lafayette* tunable vhf fire radio. By carefully tuning that unit during the nightly radio test, I was guaranteed to be able to pick up almost all of the calls. I soon graduated to a crystal-controlled receiver, and, more recently, to a synthesized scanner. As we've moved, my wife and I have listened to whatever department served our community, plus the most busy metropolitan area nearby.

About three years ago, my wife began to listen to our local police department. As a public school teacher, she soon became fascinated by calls to the homes of some of her students. For the first time we had an opportunity to compare the police dispatcher with the fire dispatcher. What a comparison—or, actually, there is NO comparison.

The police dispatchers, most of whom are women, are clear, concise, professional, helpful, courteous, resourceful, and on and on. The fire dispatchers, a mixture of men and women, often appear to be loud, confused, unprofessional, discourteous, and on and on. Who makes this contrast such a bold one? It has taken me a while to figure it out, but I think I have the answer.

The Chief of Police is a highly-skilled professional peace officer who has served in that capacity in at least one other suburban community. He seems to have a leadership style that is based on consultative supervision, because the police department is noted for innovative solutions to their problems. He has attracted a force of officers, most of whom are college graduates, and many of whom are pursuing advanced degrees at local universities.

The fire chiefs of the two departments appear to be long-term blood-and-guts volunteer fire fighters who have repeatedly been elected to their office on the strength of making few demands on the citizenry's pocket books. One of the chiefs has a unique way of notifying the

fire dispatcher of the seriousness of the blaze. Other chiefs might ask for mutual aid. Our chief exhorts the dispatcher to make certain someone is preparing sandwiches. "Better have quite a few bologna and some cheese, too." He intones over the radio.

That this occurrence marks any serious fire has prompted Shirley and I to refer to major fires in our town as "sandwich alarms." This philosophy is appropriately in keeping with some other standard operating procedures. For example, for any and every alarm, EVERYBODY GOES. Now I realize that these volunteers give a significant amount of time drilling to be ready to put the wet stuff on the red stuff. But, please, chief, I am paying for every rig that rolls on an alarm. Sending every engine and the ladder truck to a car fire is a bit much.

All around our town, neighboring communities are implementing graduated response programs based on the type and nature of the alarms. I rather suspect that we'll still be sending "all hands" to that paper box fire for some time to come.

In case you haven't guessed by now, this little opinion piece is about professionalism in leadership. Having set the stage with my little town tale, now comes the moral and its application. The character of the leader of an organization really does shape that organization. It's true for a fire department or a police department, and it's true for an alarm company or a consulting firm or an insurance company or for whatever kind of an organization you are a part.

As a wise leader, strive for professionalism. Strive for professionalism by making every effort to become knowledgeable of those resources that impact the organization you lead. If there are publications that explain the history of the business you are in, read them and immerse yourself in what has happened in the past, so that you may better understand the present and be better able to plan for the future. If there are people who are forecasting ideas that may impact your industry tomorrow, get to know those people, listen to them and

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learn from them by absorbing their wisdom.

How is this important to the fire and burglary alarm industry? Ours is an industry plagued by an apparent lack of professionalism. Every time a storm breezes through my town, the police department is deluged with what they call "10-65s"—burglary alarm signals from systems that cannot tolerate the electrical disturbance. Fortunately, the dedicated officers in this community still respond promptly to every signal. But who could blame them if the cry of

WOLF someday is ignored? Installation after installation viewed by countless Authorities Having Jurisdiction are found in substandard condition. How many alarm installers do you know who actually read, understand and follow Article 725 and 760 of the *National Electrical Code*®.

The moral of the story is that the leader needs to lead. The manager needs to manage. With a hallmark of professionalism, let us vow to raise the image of our beloved industry above the mediocrity that has marked us for far too long. Let us determine to take every opportunity to bolster our knowledge of how to specify, recommend, purchase, install, maintain and use standards-complying fire and burglary alarm systems. We'll be the better for it! □

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