

# Performance Analysis Where it Counts

By Larry Mullikin, City of Salina Fire Chief

Chatter in the room subsided as the captain stepped toward the projector screen. In the room were all of the department's chief officers and the city manager. The captain's task would be to describe the fire station's response area; address the demographics of the area; deliver the station's performance data; explain the circumstances surrounding any large loss or complex incidents; highlight response times outside the department's norms; and justify the station, equipment, and staffing.

The future of the fire station on all three shifts rested on this one captain's shoulders. At the end, the captain would be questioned extensively by the chief officers, fire chief, and city manager on how the station was performing. The captain would then be asked what the officers had done at the fire station with regard to fire prevention and emergency medical education activities in the response area.

Sound like an easy day at the office?

This is what occurred at the Salina, Kansas, fire department in February 2009. The process involved four fire stations and required the participation of 15 captains to achieve the final product. This was a radical departure from the annual reports of the past. It was in real time.

On the fly, fire captains responded to questions on station performance from chief officers and the city manager. Captains addressed questions on station location, response barriers, staffing, alarm loading, target hazards, condition of fire apparatus, and station maintenance.

From 2000 to 2004, the prime time television show called *The District* highlighted the law enforcement analysis process of Compstat, which is short for either computer statistics or comparative statistics. Compstat originated in the New York City police department in 1994. The NYPD modified conventional community policing ideology after realizing that to reduce crime and respond to communities, needs many operational decisions should be made by commanders at the precinct level. The NYPD reasoned that the precinct commanders were in a better position than headquarters executives to appreciate and meet their communities' needs.

What interested the Salina fire department in the Compstat process was the fact that fire captains, assigned to fire stations, also have a precinct of sorts, only it's called a response area or district. Further, it made sense that the use of computer data analysis and the "crime strategy meetings" would be a natural way to build leadership within the department and distribute accountability for the department's performance downward in the organization.

This has been the ongoing effort. What we have found is that when fire captains are asked to evaluate the performance of their stations, the community reaps some surprising results.

When the community holds its field officers directly accountable for their performance across their peers, it is possible to find out pretty quickly who the true leaders are.

Comparison drives competition and results in better performance. Great employees love that kind of accountability. It allows them to shine and demonstrate pride.

Conversely, employees who aren't good at their jobs don't want to be measured or have their performance scrutinized or compared. Today, I think Compstat has evolved into more of a community policing concept; however, using demographics, response data, and event data and holding managers accountable for their performance and area of assignment never goes out of date.

The fire service has long used computerized statistical data to quantify where emergencies are occurring, how fast the department is responding, how much damage has been done, and on and on. In the past, this type of analysis usually existed at the administrative level and within the realm of chief officers. It was highly compartmentalized and used at the executive level for planning and forecasting.

Captain Bill Srna, a 14-year veteran of the department, says, "The performance analysis process allowed entire engine companies, as well as myself, to actually get out in the district, literally see where the rubber meets the road, and gain a firsthand visual understanding and appreciation for the area, structures, the people whom we serve. In doing so, we were also able to obtain data supporting how well we are, or not, serving the community. We will be the first ones to notice a problem or opportunity on the rise."

Morphing the crime strategy meetings of Compstat into a fire department setting accomplished a couple of goals the department had long had: (1) increasing the accountability of mid-level managers in meeting the needs of the community and (2) identifying and building leaders within the department.

During the meetings, police precinct commanders were called on to present their initiatives to address the ever-changing patterns of crime. During their presentations, members of the executive staff frequently asked commanders probing questions about crimes and arrests, as well as about specific cases and initiatives they had undertaken to reduce crime and enforce quality-of-life offenses.

Commanders are expected to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the crime and quality-of-life problems existing within their commands and to develop innovative and flexible tactics to address them. Fire captains who are assigned a fire station, fire response district, equipment, and personnel are certainly capable of being held to the same standard.

So often we promote competent people into the position of fire captain; give them a fire station worth millions of dollars, fire apparatus worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and personnel worth millions; and hold them responsible for the lives of thousands of citizens but don't expect them to be the resident expert on service delivery or performance analysis. But they in fact should be the most knowledgeable person for that section of town.

Most people don't realize it, but the fire captain position is the most important management position the fire department has. Captains are the people who set the tone for the department.

They are the ones who deliver the service. They are also the ones who should be held accountable for their areas in terms of response, performance, prevention, and education. Nothing should happen in that district without them knowing it. The mere fact that we expected them to be knowledgeable and responsible for fire prevention and education changed the entire landscape compared with the past.

The department's fire marshal and public education specialist also attended the performance analysis as part of the audience. Some of the material that was presented spurred new thoughts in public education. Questions turned into ideas. When the captains were asked what they had done in their districts about fire prevention activities, that question alone signaled a shift for the department.

Just about every good-sized fire department has a fire prevention division that works across the community to prevent injuries and fires. Putting creative thought behind fire and injury prevention, however, had never been considered a major priority for fire station personnel. After all, that was "Prevention's" job.

Until now, that is. In Salina, station captains are responsible for knowing what prevention activities are taking place in their district, why they are occurring, and monitoring their success. The captains can request help with a problem they have identified with the help of fire prevention staff. Captains also can design and implement prevention activities on their own.

Their efforts can be as simple as contacting the neighbors who live near recent house fires and asking

whether they have working smoke detectors or going to retirement homes and delivering a presentation on preventing falls. In the words of Fire Captain John Goertzen, "I believe it was a great opportunity to analyze our effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Because we are focused on our individual districts, we are able to gain a better understanding on who and what we are protecting and what impact we have in our community that goes beyond simply responding to calls."

### **IMPORTANCE OF DATA**

To construct their performance analyses, the fire captains had to ask for the assistance of the department's computer technology coordinator and the city's GIS department. Captains were encouraged to ask for any type of data that demonstrated the activity and performance of their stations.

It definitely was a surprise for the captains when they started gathering and analyzing the data. They discovered we had data errors. In some cases, the data they wanted was nonexistent.

When the data they wanted was not there or of little use, it changed the way they looked at data entry and management. Data took on a new importance. All the captains are now talking about how we can improve our data. Now they've taken ownership and that's refreshing.

### **IMPORTANCE OF TEAMWORK**

It is well known in the fire service that firefighters and officers naturally identify with their duty shifts. There are usually three shifts to each fire station, working a rotating schedule. Salina's performance analysis process required all three captains at a station to work together across shift lines.

A management team was born. All three captains would either sink or swim together. Their fire station would be evaluated on the whole; it would be fully responsible for all fire department activities within the station's response area, not just responding to fires or medical calls.

"Being a part of the performance analysis process was an eye opening experience," reflects Fire Captain Jerry Short. "I have been on the Salina fire department for 15 years and felt fairly competent in my knowledge of the district that we serve. Analyzing performance across all three shifts showed me how much more there is to know and prepare.

"Driving the district, looking at call volumes per zones, and identifying target hazards really put my profession into perspective. The days of sitting around waiting for the alarm to sound and flying by the seat of your pants when you get there are long gone.

"During this process we not only put numbers together; we identified areas in need of improvement. We looked at other areas that included citywide departments where we had not spent much time in the past: the city water department to identify the needs in water supply and working together to get these problems resolved in the future; the dispatch center to determine how we can combine efforts to make time stamping as accurate as possible; GIS to use mapping and overlaying of maps to get the information needed to improve response time.

"Our organization and the residents we serve will benefit many times over for taking time and effort putting this document/study together. During the process, I remembered

this quote from Alan Lakein: 'Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now.'"

Many fire captains enlisted their assigned personnel to assist in the assembly of the data. This very action began expanding the knowledge base of the entire department. Fire captains knew they would have all their chief officers of the department and the city manager as an audience, and this was an opportunity to express their concerns with their station, personnel, equipment, and method of operations directly to top management.

There was always the possibility that if a captain demonstrated a greater need for resources than another station, those could be reassigned as a first step in dealing with the problem or increasing workload.

#### **A CHANGED WAY OF WORKING**

In a nutshell, the performance analysis process resulted in open, multi-dimensional communication within all levels of the department and met a goal of City Manager Jason Gage, who has promoted the four characteristics of top-performing organizations throughout the city management structure. Open, multi-dimensional communication is one of the four. A clear ethical and cultural standard, a performance oriented environment, and implementation capability are the other three.

"Salina's fire department is stepping away from the rest of the pack with regard to how it addresses its performance and service value," says Manager Gage. "This starts with a broad-based strategic plan, guiding principles, and a desire to be the best of the best. The department then applies the

highest level of critical thinking to study its response area demographics, target hazards, and service challenges.

"This analysis is being integrated into the department's training, response strategies, performance indicators/benchmarks, and resource identification in order to determine the best possible preventative planning and emergency response approach. These efforts are truly reflective of a 'best in class' organization!"

The plans for next year's performance analysis will expand the audience and include the county administrator because the Salina fire department provides county-wide ambulance services. The department will also invite the director of the chamber of commerce and the local American Red Cross administrator. The questions will be harder. The sessions will be longer.

I'd like to conclude with the reassurance that this process can be implemented in any government or private organization. When supervisors know they will be standing before administrators explaining how well they are performing and held accountable for that performance, it will produce surprising benefits.

Fire Captain Mark Grosland summarizes it best: "Being able to bring our opinions and thoughts on new equipment and station ideas gives us a new role in the process of budgeting and allows us to have some ownership in our department. I enjoyed having the opportunity to help lead this process.

Larry Mullikin, "Performance Analysis Where it Counts" *Public Management*, August 2009, pp. 30-33.