



## Can you put out the fire?

By John A. Gentle, DLP

IMAGINE YOU'RE A FIREFIGHTER called to a home engulfed in flames. You race to the house, hook up the hoses, and turn on the water only to find that this is one of several low pressure hydrants in this area.

Finally your team manages to find and hook up to a high pressure water hydrant main on an adjacent street. The search takes too long and the house is lost. Your team is dejected and is now fighting off jeers from the family and neighbors. Such was the case recently in a municipality near ours. The public outrage was deafening: Who is to blame? The fire department? The mayor? The public works department?

The review panel reported that the fire department received the order and responded in good time, deployed its resources properly, and operated within "defined processes"—not their fault. The Mayor, who previously ordered color coded hydrants (signifying high or low pressure), actually had all the hydrants painted green to beautify the city. He said, "not my fault."

And the public works department said its primary job is to perform maintenance on all city hydrants and to keep good records, but mostly in handwritten books kept by their crews.

At best, I would classify this fractured effort the result of unconscious incompetence.

Unfortunately, there are too many similarities between municipalities and companies as they attempt to serve their customer base. In this case, there were specific flaws in process effectiveness and ownership; database structure and its completeness, timeliness, and intradepartmental access; false/theoretical capacity, risk management, and testing; and poor intradepartmental communications.

While any one of these shortfalls could be the focus of a Sage Advice column, let's take a quick swipe at each. We'll treat the transportation team

as the fire department because, in most cases, the transportation team has always been expected to pull the company's fat out of the fire. The planning department resembles the public works department because it knows where all the sources of supply are located. And the Mayor is like the marketing/sales team thinking of ideas to make the product and service attractive to clients—but generally indifferent about the unintended consequences.

It's inconceivable that any organization would knowingly react to emergencies relying on an incomplete database and be vindicated by a review panel which suggested it operated within a purported "defined process." Process needs to be tested for shortcomings.

So, your logistics team cannot be like the city with its disjointed operations that claims it has a process; but acts blindly and like a hero overcoming the incompetence of others. So what separates your team from the

disjointed efforts of the city in my example above? Here are seven things to test for:

1. When is the last time that you looked to see how many shipments were re-consigned because the customer database showed the wrong "ship to" address?
2. When was the last time you took your operating system down and demonstrated that you could manually—and cost effectively—assign and fax tender shipments to carriers and deliver on time?
3. Have you tested your ability to operate your process remotely with 80 percent of your staff operating from home? Did the last pandemic worry you?
4. When was the last time you reviewed the customer service and logistics processes and responsibilities/accountabilities at ground level? Were you in agreement?
5. When is the last time you asked for and received a review of the performance audit of your TMS and other operating systems?
6. Does the logistics team consistently celebrate "heroism"? It may be nice to recognize people that go over and above, but often it masks process flaws.
7. The next time something significant goes awry, will people wonder if you should have known better and whether you worked for a dysfunctional municipality in your former life? ■

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