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R.E.C.E.O. Re-visited: Overhaul

Who ever said “holding court” was going to be easy? It is much easier to talk with my hands, than type with my fingers. I need to find one of those programs where I can talk with my hands, and it will type it for me. Oh well! It has been so long since my last session that I had to look up what we were talking about. Now I remember! This will be the last in the series of RECEO. Then, I will go back to those “another article” I have listed in the last sessions. Let’s finish the big “O”!

I thought this would be just a simple little article on Overhaul, but realize that maybe we need a little more about the history and tradition of Overhaul. Plus, where we should be today?

I received a call from a friend of mine up North the other day, and he was complaining about his Department’s commitment to Customer Service. He stated that it was going so well that they had 5 re-kindles in the last 2 months. Indeed! They must like their customers so much; they want to go back for seconds! I think we would all agree that most of our citizens would be “pissed-off” if we had to return to put the fire out the second time which resulted in more damage to their personal property. Fortunately, this is where an “old” tradition works in our favor. Company PRIDE! Most of us take too much pride in our job to suffer the embarrassment of a re-ignite in our first-due. Although Overhaul always has been associated with the prevention of re-ignite, it now has taken on a new meaning with the commitment to Customer Service. So, here is what it looked like!

A long time ago, when company and staffing levels were where they should be, Overhaul looked like a re-model. The pressure not to embarrass your company or the Fire Department was so high that a re-ignite was the ultimate sin. Officers had the firefighters remove every piece of burned material in the building to the outside of the building. The rooms were gutted by us. Sometimes all the way down to the framing. Long Overhauls were the norm! Chief Officers said, “Not in my Battalion”! Obviously, the investigation to the cause and origin was done, and re-ignite was the enemy. Some consideration was given to salvage during Overhaul, but salvage was also a higher priority, and complete before Overhaul due to the staffing levels of the time. As a side-bar, it shouldn’t surprise you that due to staffing levels, 2in/2out policy, and RIC policy, it is my opinion that an aggressive fire attack and aggressive ventilation is our best initial salvage consideration. Get the fire, heat, and smoke out because that is causing the most damage to people’s property.

Then, control the water damage. Looking back, it was a strange thing. The inside was so clean that when you took the occupants inside to look at the damage, it looked better than before the fire. Plus, the damage was removed to the outside of the structure, so the inside didn't look to bad. Psychologically, it probably worked in our favor. Over the years I learned through my father and brother, who are in the insurance business, that it sure saved the insurance company tons of money because we did their demolition work for them. I always thought we should get a kick-back from the insurance companies for the money we saved them!

This type of Overhaul did cause some problems though. First, the insurance companies had to rely on our investigators for cause and origin. Additionally, our investigators had the only pictures of the fire damage. Disputes between the policy holder and insurance company drug in the Fire Department. The only thing that saved us at the time was the fact that Fire Departments were exempt from litigation due to the nature of the public service we provided. Loosely, Fire Departments were tied to the Good Samaritan Law as long as we acted in good faith which was a given back in the day. As a side-bar, some fire experts (Psychologists) felt that due to our Overhaul techniques there was a real disconnect between the damages of fire and people perception of fire. This was evident several years ago when there was a movement in the Fire Service to hold a public "Open House" in buildings where there was substantial fire loss. In this program, Overhaul was held to a minimum so the citizens could see the real damage caused by fire. I'm not sure what happened to these programs, but I haven't heard of them in the last few years.

Overhaul evolved as with anything. The biggest impact to overhaul was reduced staffing levels and reduced truck companies. Additionally, although fires have decreased, calls for service have drastically gone up requiring companies to become available sooner. Once where we had multiple trucks assisting with Overhaul, we reduced it to one. Although Overhaul appeared to be taking as long as before, one company was doing most of the work. Overhaul was taking just as long, but the quality of work wasn't the same. There was a period of time where re-kindles were the talk of the day. Additionally, the City has a new role with the use of Dangerous Buildings as the mediator for restoration of the property to meet the proper building codes with the property owner after we are done. Lastly, which could be good or bad, we have the technology of the thermal imaging cameras (TIC).

So, how does it look today (should)? After we have made an aggressive fire attack with aggressive ventilation, we check for extension, and make sure the fire is out. This is all done before re-rehab! Then, we hold the scene for the investigator. While we are holding the scene, we can continue with salvage work as long as we don't disturb the evidence. If the building is inhabitable, we call for Dangerous Buildings. Someone needs to hold the scene at all times due to flare-ups and preservation of evidence. Once the investigation is completed, and an agreement is made with Dangerous Buildings, we can continue with our Overhaul. Based on the size and occupancy of the fire building, we need to get back to using 2 trucks and 1 engine for Overhaul. This is more efficient, and in the "big" picture returns all our companies to service quicker. If you have 1 hour of Overhaul using 1 truck and 1 engine, some people think that using 2 trucks and 1 engine reduces the Overhaul time by half.

This isn't necessarily the case. Due to the nature of most of our people, the more people we have sharing the workload the better the morale during Overhaul. Therefore, people compete to get the work done, work more efficiently, and expand less energy.

All of this improves the quality of work done which is reflected in better Customer Service in the end.

In today's environment, we can protect people's property better inside the building than outside after the fire is over. Additionally, people don't like it when all their personal belongings are exposed to the world. So, much of what we move to the outside of the building is things that we feel might cause a re-ignite. It is this change in philosophy that creates the same urgency to prevent a re-ignite today as yesterday. Plus, the "old" tradition regarding re-ignite is still alive today. This is where the TIC needs to be used. The TIC doesn't replace good common sense; however, it can identify areas that might need to be exposed to make sure they don't present a problem later on.

Not everyone would agree, but today we are moving to a more balanced use of Overhaul. We have created an environment where citizens can see the damaging effects of fire. Insurance companies can view and/or investigate the fire for their own. We have protected property during and after the fire by aggressive fire attack, aggressive ventilation, and securing the property inside the building. We have spread the workload, and returned all the companies to service quicker. Plus, we have helped to restore the building quicker with the use of Dangerous Buildings.

Overhaul will continue to involve based on philosophy, staffing levels, and technology. However, the thing that will remain the same is our commitment to protect people's property after we are on-scene. Plus, the "old" tradition of "Company PRIDE" is still alive today. As a side-bar, PRIDE stands for Personnel Responding to Incidents Dedicated to Excel (another article). Re-ignite is still considered a sin, and is unacceptable in the business we are in.

Well, so much for a simple article! That is the great thing about "holding court"; any place, any time, any subject! Until next time; stay safe.