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# Drinking the 800 MHz “Kool-Aid”: to drink.....or not to drink

by Steve Flaherty, Chief - Grand Rapids Fire Department

Ahhh! There’s really nothing like a good controversial subject that involves change in the fire service to keep our blood pressures boiling, is there? No matter if it’s over a hot cup of coffee at the fire house, or a cold can of beer after a working fire, firefighters throughout Minnesota continue to have the discussion regarding the change to 800 MHz – or something other than VHF radio communications.

According to Wikipedia, the phrase Drinking the Kool-Aid means “to become a firm believer in something, to accept an argument or philosophy wholeheartedly or blindly.” The term originated with the Jonestown Guyana Massacre, where Jim Jones, leader of the Peoples Temple, persuaded more than 900 people to commit suicide by drinking a flavored beverage laced with potassium cyanide.

Now, before you get too deep into this article, let me say that I am not suggesting that change – in any form in the fire service – forms the likeliness of suicide, and please know that I am very sensitive to the long-reaching effects that something as tragic as a suicidal event has on many people. That being said, I seem to find myself involved in more and more conversations about the switch to the 800 MHz system wherever I go throughout the state, and quite frankly some people make it sound as if they are going to be forced to drink the “800 MHz Kool-Aid.”

The Grand Rapids Fire Department, along with the rest of the emergency services and some other public entities within Itasca County, made the change to 800 MHz in January of 2009. This change didn’t happen overnight by any means; in fact, our Sheriff, Pat Medure, came to all of our respective departments and regional meetings and stated that because of the upcoming changes in VHF system, he would be willing to take the lead on this effort for Itasca County and look into something that will meet our needs. He also stated that he was looking for volunteers from each agency and/or discipline to form a Radio Users Group who will help

decide which system will be of greatest benefit to each of our agencies within the county. This group, formed nearly ten years ago, is still functional today – a year and a half since we’ve made “the change”. Luckily for me I got to sit that one out and my former chief has served that committee the whole time!

“Change” is a word that makes most of us roll our eyes – or even shake in our bunker boots – when we hear that there will be a “change” coming in anything that’s going to affect how we do our business! Furthermore, allow me to admit that I am no different than the rest of you when it comes to change, and when Sheriff Medure was explaining this VHF change, my eyes were probably rolling pretty good at the time. I didn’t fully understand the need to “drink this kool-aid” that somebody (actually, it was the FCC) was now telling us that we needed to do by 2013, nor did I really take the initiative to care! All I knew was that it meant there would be some changes forthcoming.

As the months passed in the aftermath of the I-35W bridge collapse, I attended several conferences and meetings where discussions and critiques took place regarding the incident. I listened intently to Mpls. FD Asst. Chief John Fruetel, Fire Incident Commander of the I-35W bridge collapse, speak about the lessons learned at this high-profile event. What I kept hearing him say was that, of all things, communications using the 800 MHz system contributed greatly to the success of the incident. I kept asking myself – and others – “when was the last time communications contributed positively to anything, especially when it was something big like the I-35W incident?” Could this 800 MHz thing be for real? Maybe I needed to stop rolling my eyes as much so that my ears can hear what’s actually being said about this change that I knew was coming to my department!

The words of Charles Darwin began to resonate in my brain about our upcoming divorce from VHF: “It is not the strongest of the species that survive,

nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.” Here was our Sheriff, leading this visionary Radio Users Group, vowing to survive by being responsive to a change that we all knew was coming by educating themselves and the rest of us about the communication options that existed for our agencies. Ultimately, they decided on the 800 MHz system for our county.

Itasca County was one of the first counties outside of the metro area to take on the 800 MHz project. Being that Itasca County is the third largest county in the state, there was a lot to talk about regarding this change: What about the cost of the entire system? Who’s going to pay for it? How many towers will need to be erected? 800 MHz won’t allow us to talk to each other; or other agencies; or other communities! How will we maintain our radios? Who pays for that? Who decides how many radios we get?

Thankfully, Sheriff Medure had the vision and the understanding that we couldn’t afford to do this alone, and our county was awarded several regional grants that helped to offset the cost of adding new towers (11 of them), purchasing radios and installing the trunk system. There were other federal, state, and local contributors that played a significant part in funding a good portion of the project.

Each city and/or municipality was also approached by their emergency service agency about contributing to a depreciation schedule for radio maintenance and replacement. These funds are collected by the county auditor’s office. Each fire department or law enforcement agency’s contribution amount is determined by the number of portables and mobiles that they have in their inventory. This budgetary commitment ensures that each department has the funding mechanism in place to maintain and replace the equipment uniformly throughout the county on an as needed basis; the number of radios needed for each agency was determined by the leaders within each respective agency.

The Radio Users Group of Itasca County was very proactive in communicating with every agency about this new 800 MHz system, including providing designated trainers who worked with our department on how to use it. What? Training on how to use a radio? Yes! This was a critical component to this new system, and if it was going to be successful we were going to need to adhere to a new way of using our radios or it would end up being a colossal communications mess like that which happened on 9-11. (Some of you may know that the leadership of the FDNY admitted that they “shelved” the 800 MHz project prior to 9-11 because there was “resistance” to this communications change from within the department. The NYPD and the Port Authority had already embraced the 800 MHz system prior to the WTC event. Partly because of their resistance to “drink the 800 MHz kool-aid”, many members of the FDNY who perished never received the VHF message to evacuate the buildings.)

The roll-out of the 800 MHz system in Itasca County began in December of 2008, with departments being brought on-line in a staggered schedule. As I mentioned, our department came aboard in January of 2009. Taking our first “sip” involved a couple of additional training nights of just working with the radios to get used to a new way of communicating.

In the old VHF days, the GRFD had their own frequency where we rarely had to switch channels to communicate; because of that, many times we plugged communications on-scene with too much radio traffic on the same channel. Likewise, other agencies who mutual aided with us couldn't communicate with us unless they had our channel programmed into their radios. This would force us to move to the county fire channel which happened to be shared by 15 other fire departments for their radio traffic!

The way we work today in the 800 MHz system, all fire departments are paged on one fire channel – or “talk group” – then the dispatch center acts as the “quarterback”, delegating the appropriate talk group for the incident to work from when they arrive on scene. This allows for paging of the other fire departments without interruptions to the ongoing incident, and vice-versa. All agencies within the county have several shared talk groups so that we

can all talk to each other, and each has their own talk groups (called “Administrative”) that are exclusive to all other agencies. This Admin channel (sorry, “talk group”!) is great for relaying the non-emergency information that doesn't plug-up operations by asking about bringing more coffee to the scene from the fire hall, or the requesting of needed replenishments for the trucks as they are returning from an incident.

Have we had our challenges with this new system? Of course, but most of it has been self-inflicted! We certainly have not had a major incident on the scale of the I-35W bridge collapse, but we have had many multi-agency incidents that have given us the opportunity to use the 800 MHz system to our advantage. We are able to communicate with everyone on the scene - regardless of their agency affiliation, and when communications begin to sound as if they are “plugging-up”, someone in command will designate other talk

groups for crews to work from, thus relieving a particular talk group from trying to tolerate too much communication. All in all, it forces us who are in command to operate out of an incident command structure – the way that it was designed to be used.

I believe that James Humes, bestselling author who has written speeches for five US Presidents, said it best, “The art of communication is the language of leadership.” Although still considered to be in its infancy, drinking the “800 MHz Kool-Aid” has not been suicidal for us in the least; in fact, it has given new life to the Grand Rapids Fire Department, and to the public safety agencies of Itasca County. We may never know what the ultimate communication package consists of, but one thing is for sure, change is constant and leadership needs to embrace change. Are you willing to take a sip? ☼

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