

# The Meaning of Responsibility

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Often times and in many circles we hear of persons in our field that worry about being held responsible for bad acts whether conducted intentionally or not. So worried are some that they have completely lost sight of, or have been removed from arenas wherein individual responsibility plays a role. So let's consider what the word responsibility means.

Responsibility by definition is associated with someone or something for which a person or organization is responsible. It can carry the weight of one's accepting blame for something that has happened; and it is also a role wherein a person is authorized to make decisions independently. Some synonyms include liability, accountability, and duty; but my favorites are conscientiousness and trustworthiness. It is within these latter words that I focus our attention on in this article.

There are many venues that we as representatives of government play a pivotal role such that the results of our decision making reflect our view of responsibility, conscientiousness and trustworthiness. In what ways? One example may well be in the area of our most fundamental approach to life safety; our autonomous authority. Autonomous, yes that's right autonomous for the Life Safety Code (LSC) confers upon us that autonomy when it says, "The authority having jurisdiction shall determine whether the provisions of this Code are met." (LSC 4.6.1.1) That's fairly broad is it not? However, it's not without constraint because subsequent to the above provision, chapter 4 continues, "Where it is evident that a reasonable degree of safety is provided, ANY requirement shall be permitted to be modified if, in the judgment of the authority having jurisdiction, its application would be hazardous under normal occupancy conditions." (4.6.1.3; emphasis added)

Because the Code cannot foresee every conceivable variation, responsibility is laid upon us (see s.633.081) to be reasonable in our application of the Code. (see LSC commentary to 4.6.1.3 for an example) Responsibility is perhaps more of an issue when dealing with existing buildings than it is for new construction. When the latter is the case, we have a window of time to get out ahead of the problems, but here too caution is the order of the day. "It's the cost of doing business" is not a qualifier for a carte blanche approach to having it your way. That's irresponsible and 180 degrees out of harmony with the intent of responsibility.

Is it really responsible to coerce owners, agents and contractors just because you can? I hope that the men and women that are a part of this era's FFMIA answer that with a resounding "NO!" The fact of the matter is – if what we do as code officials is the right thing to do, i.e. the responsible thing, then coercion is not needed ever. Yes, the responsible approach to life safety will reveal itself upon its own merit, not in our authority.

My dear and late father routinely noted to his six children this – "In this life there are no absolutes...absolutely." I have found that and this to also be true; absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is why we do not have absolute power; it stands in stark contrast to reasonableness and thus it too erodes responsibility.

I hear of so many times when local authorities loose sight of the mission. What mission many ask? The mission known as Life Safety; which we accomplish through axioms of fire service gurus far more intelligent than me. Chief Alan Brunicini whose fire department routinely "[took] care of Mrs. Smith", or Chief Goldfeder of the Loveland-Symmes Fire Department who asked the question, "Do You Have The Courage?", and of course who can overlook Chief Rick Lasky of Lewisville Texas Fire Department. In his book "Pride & Ownership, a Firefighter's Love of the Job", he dedicated a whole chapter about "Our Mission". While all of these industry professionals dealt predominantly with fire operations personnel, one can hardly overlook the principle presented in the book as it applies to activities of fire prevention personnel.

Responsibility means our recognizing as an industry, things like the role of our State Fire Marshal's Office. Have we all read their documents about local amendments? During our preparation for FFMIA's seminar on that same topic, Tony Apfelbeck and I found an astonishing few who knew of and understood the whole concept. And yet, look on the web site of the Office of State Fire Marshals (SFMO) and see how many local amendments there are.

Is it responsible to adopt the attitude, "...well, I'm not the designer, therefore let them read the code and figure it out."? Alright, I'll yield here and stipulate that yes, they should know, but frankly they don't. When we "play-the-game" with agents and contractors, who is really being hurt? Isn't it the owners, yes the very people that fund our operations. What's worse, they pay a penalty for something they don't know about and if truth be told, they never will. So why not simply partner with these owners, agents and contractors and be responsible?

By really being responsible in action, not just in empty words, we can all comply with chapter 1.2 of the Life Safety Code by our assuring that we "...provide minimum requirements, with due regard to function, for the design, operation and maintenance of buildings and structures for safety to life from fire."

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