



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Battlefield Commissions

Congratulations! I think! You just got called into the office of the fire chief and he has advised you that after your twenty seven years of being involved in the operations of your fire department you have been selected to serve as the departments fire marshal for an unspecified period of time. Depending on how you see that, it can either be an exhilarating or absolutely panic inducing experience.

On the one hand, the reason you are probably being asked to consider that job is that you must be a competent individual in your organization with a reputation of credibility, communication skills and the ability to make a decision. – or the chief is trying to put you into a spot to make you so aggravated that you will seek that early retirement that people have been talking about. What is it going to be? And moreover, what are you going to do if the reality is that you need to remain in service for several more years.

This phenomenon happens a lot more in the fire service than many people will acknowledge. It is not uncommon for individuals to receive a lateral transfer for the purposes of balancing out the structure of a department that result from a person going into the bureau with absolutely no background. If you were a member of your bureau and you actively sought this as a promotional opportunity this column is not for you. No, it is for the individual who has received that transfer because it is in the interest of the department not in their personal interest.

Where does one start becoming a fire marshal and what are some of the steps that you might want to consider if you were confronted with that scenario. Well, probably the most important thing that I would like to state in this article is that almost all of the experience that you had in the past in the fire suppression division is relevant to fire prevention when it comes to understanding why things are being done. However, I would also state that almost all of the body of knowledge about how things are actually set into place is going to be totally foreign to you.

Most fire suppression officers are used to operating under the umbrella of essentially three things. The first of these is the whole concept of command and control. You give orders, people do things. That command and control is driven by standard operating procedures and guidelines that represent best practices in the field. The last thing that drives fire suppression operations is a combination of experience and feedback that is almost instantaneous at the scene of fires and/or while it is delayed comes back to you through critiques.

That is not what happens to the fire marshal at all. The fire marshal lives in a world of three other things. The first of these is a set of codes that are nested from the local through the state all the way up



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

to the federal government in which there is a legal relationship. You can't make it up on the fly. If it is in the code it must be true.

Secondarily, the fire marshal operates in a world of interpretation rather than black and white decisions. The job of a fire marshal often requires that the person who is ultimately responsible be able to fill in the blanks between where the code stops and where the problem begins. This is an entirely different decision making process as compared to fire ground operations. Lastly, a fire marshal operates almost totally in an external environment. Your new constituency is not the people on the floor. It is not what is said or done in the firehouse. It is reflected in the community's attitude through the elected officials, the community influence leaders, and moreover by those individuals who you are going to impact when you make decisions that are going to cost them money.

So where to start? The best place to start is to clearly understand what authority you have as a fire marshal to carry out the business of your fire department. The number one thing that you ought to look at is the municipal ordinance that actually creates the fire departments and subsequently the authority of the fire prevention bureau. The fancy term for this is governance. The more earthly term for it is authority. You need to understand clearly what authority has been vested in the fire department before you begin to exercise it. Examination of your city ordinance may point out to you that there are either strengths or weaknesses to the manner in which you are going to be asked to do business.

For example, in some states local jurisdictions are not allowed to make any modifications to their fire and building codes. These are often referred to as mini maxi states. Whatever the state adopts then becomes the guideline for the local fire marshal. Other states are called local control states. In that case the state may adopt a statewide minimum standard for a specific occupancy such as those with high life safety factors that allow individual communities to amend and otherwise modify the code. This is a very important distinction. It is likely something that you could probably care less about when you are in fire suppression but it at the root of your authority to do things in terms of your department.

The second biggest responsibility that you have is to look at what your state mandates to be done by a fire prevention bureau. While this may seem like a very simplified step it is somewhat of a problem for many individuals. Mandatory duties to warn and perform are not usually linked to fire suppression operations. They are more focused on such things as educational institutions, correctional facilities and high life safety risk. Therefore, you should request a briefing on the scope and depth of those mandatory duties that the bureau is required to execute.

The third step along this process is to take a very long and hard look at what are your "inspectable" occupancies. The concept of an inspectable occupancy is different than the problem of risk in the community. If you have experienced your career as a combat firefighter, you have gone to fires in many, many different types of buildings including residences all the way up to major businesses. Some



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

of those buildings your department has a right to enter and there are others that they have no rights to enter. Or at least their rights are restricted by a variety of either state or federal laws. The concept of identifying an inspectable occupancy is to sit down and do an inventory of those occupancies that are regulated by the codes and mandates that you have looked at in Step 1 and 2. You may find for example that you have large numbers of buildings many of which result in specific fire scenarios but that you have limited authority to go in and inspect those buildings. Primarily they are those that the jurisdiction has preserved for other entities, such as county government or state government. A classic example of this would be that if a community had a court house, a jail, an educational institution and a correctional facility, it may be that all those occupancies are relying on you to go through them as combat firefighters you have no authority to enter those buildings and require them to comply with any provisions of the code.

Then on the other hand, you may have authority. Many states have generated delegation of authority through a variety of laws and regulations that allows the local fire marshal to serve as a deputy fire marshal for the individual authority at the state level.

Developing the level of understanding of inspectable occupancies doesn't mean you need to go out and count every single one of them. What we are trying to focus on in this step is for you to clearly understand that it could be the context of the vast majority of your work. Those inspectable occupancies either will be inspected or they will be generating problems that you will have to respond to as a fire marshal.

Step 4 along the way is to engage in a dialogue with the members of the bureau to identify the following things:

- A. The 100 most complicated occupancies in your state
- B. The 100 occupancies that generate the largest amount of employment in your community
- C. The occupancies that create the greatest amount of danger to firefighters, i.e., abandoned buildings and buildings that are in a serious state of disrepair.
- D. Those occupancies that generate a large amount of sales tax revenue into the community

The purpose of this step is for you to get a grasp of the economic aspects of your role as a fire marshal. Those buildings that were just identified are obviously members of the inspectable occupancies we reviewed in step 3. However, there is a serious economic and ethical consideration that goes to the focus on what these occupancies consist of. These in old days used to be called target hazards. Today they are likely to be more of a part of economic development and may be taking the city in the direction of either improving overtime or deteriorating overtime. That is often a problem that lands right in the fire marshals lap. Our next step consists of making sure that you have an adequate library sitting on your bookshelf. It is really unlikely that if you came over from the suppression site that you ever cracked the fire code more than was required to perhaps pass an officers examination. However, when you



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

become a fire marshal you need to have a specific set of desk references that are there readily at your fingertips so that you can rely on them rather than relying on a spontaneous answer to a complicated question.

These documents could include but could also be shared with members of the bureau. They are:

- A. A complete set of the NFPA fire codes
- B. A complete set of the State Building Codes and the State Fire Code (if adopted)
- C. Local codes
- D. Any policy and procedures that are documented involving the prevention and/or plan checking process i.e., SOG's and SOP's
- E. A membership directory of the local, regional or statewide fire prevention organization

The primary purpose of building a desk library is to give you as the fire marshal the opportunity to do your homework before you are given a test with a very difficult question. Inasmuch as you will be lacking some of the experience of some of the members of your own bureau, it is absolutely essential that you be able to find your way through some of these documents on your own. While you may listen to input from subordinates in terms what you think you know, you need to make sure that you validate that information yourself.

Franklin's admonition that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is truly manifested in concept of plan checking. Where you may have a lot of experience going in and out of buildings throughout your career, the plan checking process is a fundamental part of creating the future fire environment. It is important that you receive a briefing on exactly how the plan checking process is adopted, executed and monitored within the context of your fire prevention bureau. There is often a division of labor between the building department and the fire department that results in conflict. It is also true that this has resulted in many building and fire departments forming joint task forces to smooth this process out. What is important for you as a new fire marshal is to clearly understand how plan checking has evolved and to put it into context of how it is being done today.

The next step along the line is to build yourself an operational network. The less experience you have in a fire prevention bureau and the more you have relied on your background as a combat firefighter, the more you are going to need to build a network of allies. This could involve as simply a process as just joining the local fire prevention officer's organization. However, it may be as complicated as you going out of your way to seek an opportunity to attend workshops, seminars, and so forth to become far knowledgeable in the information that is being made available. Among the most dangerous assumptions any chief officer can note in assuming the role of fire marshal is that their knowledge base of the fire service in general is adequate to warn them about anything that could emerge in the field of fire prevention. Nothing could be further from the truth.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Our next step is somewhat sedentary but still an essential. You need to start developing yourself a list of websites that you can tap into to obtain information. There is an exercise associated with this section in the book that talks about a series of websites that you may wish to access immediately. By listing these as "favorites" in your computer it allows you to be able to utilize these websites to broaden your experience and knowledge base.

Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition
United States Fire Administration
National Fire Sprinkler Association
Residential Fire Safety Institute
American Fire Sprinkler Association
The Center for Campus Fire Safety
Fire Team USA
Fire Team Tennessee
Home Safety Council

<http://www.homefiresprinkler.org/hpsc.html>
<http://www.usfa.fema.gov/safety/sprinklers/>
<http://www.nfsa.org/>
<http://www.firesafefire.org/indexFlash.html>
<http://www.firesprinkler.org/>
<http://www.campusfire.org/>
<http://www.fireteamusa.com>
<http://www.fireteamtennessee.com>
<http://www.homesafetycouncil.org>

News Articles

The Logical Choice For Saving Lives And Property

URL

<http://www.nbc4.tv/houseandhome/3893793/detail.html?araconte>

Vancouver Fire Department's Sprinkler Success

Scottsdale Quick Facts

http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/fire/fire_prev/sprinkler.html
<http://www.homefiresprinkler.org/ResourcesScottsdale.htm>

The last initial step of assuming command is to sit down with all of the members of your bureau (even if it is only 1 other person) and have a dialogue about the decision making process in the organization. It cannot be underestimated the value of having a good teamwork environment in a fire prevention bureau. If you have got your battlefield commission over other people who have a lot more background and experience in fire codes than you do, you can almost expect there to be a certain degree of resentment. However, that should not be assumed nor should be taken for granted. Sitting down with member of the staff and discussing the pertinent issues that relate to all of the previous steps will be a useful starting point.

Speaking from personal experience, I actually went from the operations division into the fire prevention bureau in 24 hours. Our fire marshal was unfortunately killed in an automobile accident and I received that sort of "battlefield commission" by being the person on the phone who was talking to the chief notifying him that the fire marshal suffered mortality in a car wreck. At the time I was not a chief officer but I recall the mad scramble for a period of about thirty days allowing me to get a grasp on what I was supposed to be doing and how I was supposed to be doing it.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Years later, when I was given the opportunity to become the State Fire Marshal in California, I went through a similar process. I could not assume that by virtue of being the chief of a fire department that I knew what there was involved in being a State Fire Marshal. In another column I once wrote a column called "The Hundred Day War". In that I described the fact that there is about a hundred day period of time in which you are more or less given some slack because you are the new kid on the block. Unfortunately that 100 day war results in the 101 day initiation into the real world.

If you follow the previous steps and document what you have learned along the way, I am reasonable assured that you will be able to maintain your credibility through the decision making process. If I would give you any single piece of advice is that to remember that fire prevention and fire suppression are totally different with respect to the decision making process. Instantaneous decisions made with the speed of summer lightning at the scene of a fire do not always play themselves out well in the environment of judging what needs to be done in the management of a fire prevention bureau. You must remain decisive but you also must be accurate.

In summary, the day that you are told that you are going to become the new fire marshal could be a watershed event. It is going to put you into an entirely different world, but you need to remember that you will be saving lives and property like never before. The fire marshal may never be as visible in the world of recognition as the combat firefighter but reality is that this job truly makes a difference in whether the community is safe or not.