



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

It would appear that everyone who is trying to find a fire chief through the testing process is looking for perfection. All you have to do is read the job description and note that they are looking for someone who is progressive, innovative, creative, and charismatic. As one reads some of these job fliers, you almost feel compelled to add, "can leap tall buildings in a single bound and stop a speeding locomotive." It would appear that when personnel officers prepare job fliers they are really looking for the perfect candidate.

Then, of course, when we read those job fliers we begin to subscribe those characteristics to ourselves. After all, aren't we all progressive, creative, innovative, and charismatic? Generally speaking, candidates will skim over the rhetoric of these items and look for some more substantial indications of the job. By that I am referring to the pay range, size of the department, and the perks.

Then there is the testing phase. Candidates are pitted against one another to determine who is the best person for the job. A group of assessors or evaluators come in, furrow their brows, place pencil or pen on paper and try to describe who the best person is for that job. Nothing is more satisfying than coming out on the top of one of these types of lists. One cannot help but feel that if they are selected to be the top of that list, they must possess all these characteristics.

Then there is the honeymoon. That is the point in time in which everyone gives you the benefit of the doubt and no matter what your personal characteristics are you can usually get away with making some changes that may or may not have any long range implications. During the honeymoon period, everyone is getting to know one another but all honeymoons must come to an end.

That leads us to the next phase - the shock of reality. More individuals are beginning to express dissatisfaction with the fact that they have tested for a position that ceases to exist once the honeymoon period is over. Often, in spite of the rhetoric of the job flier, the rug is pulled right out from underneath innovative, creative, progressive, and problem oriented chiefs. In short, many of them are told that let's not be quite so progressive, quite so innovative, or quite so creative. The very dimensions that allow them to seek the job and to achieve the position are often a source of great dissatisfaction once the individual is expected to address problems in the fire service.

The consequences of this conflict are multiple. On the one level the fire chief becomes increasingly dissatisfied that all those great things they wanted to do are put on the back burner. Secondly, there is often conflict between the chief and the appointing authority which results in strained relationships. Lastly, there is the loss of energy in the organization because the status quo seldom requires much energy to sustain.



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I recently held a conversation with a group of chief officers who expressed a sense of betrayal because of this concept. During the recruitment and selection process, they were encouraged to express their ideas upon how to improve the fire service. Yet, after appointment, they were told in many cases to temper their enthusiasm, slow down, don't make waves, etc. Several individuals indicated that this is probably more of a problem for stress in their jobs than almost any other single factor.

So, what is a candidate to do? Are there any techniques to make sure that a chief officer is not romanced into a position that subsequently results in a divorce. There appear to be at least three common factors that are shared by those people that have had positive experiences of going in and making changes in their organizations. They are: A sort of prenuptial agreement between the chief and appointing authority, and a recognition that openness and honesty in their relationship with their appointing authority is by far the best policy.

The concept of a prenuptial agreement has two connotations. The first of these is the establishment of a contract between the fire chief and the appointing authority. In the writing of a contract, a candidate has the opportunity to articulate their expectations. This can encompass anything from their salary and benefits, all the way through to a statement regarding their fire protection philosophy and their agreed upon performance standards.

Top level athletes have been using contracts for years to establish the ground rules for performance. There is nothing wrong with fire chiefs having the same working relationship. A contract is the legal document that provides protection both ways. It can be used by the appointing authority to indicate to an individual that they are not meeting expectations. On the other hand, it can be used by an incumbent to delineate what they expect to achieve within the contract period and if the appointing authority reneges on that agreement, they are justified in seeking redress.

One step down from the contract is the concept of a Memorandum of Understanding. This is nothing more than a statement exchanged between two parties to clarify specific points prior to entering into a working relationship. Some individuals have been successful in getting their appointing authority to put their expectations in writing. This goes further than what was contained within the job flier. It specifically addresses what the appointing authority wishes the chief to accomplish within the context of the organization.

Memorandums of Understanding are not nearly as binding as contracts. In the sense of the word, they are nothing more than statements of intent. However, they have one distinct advantage over the contract. They can be modified as time goes on by dialogue between the chief and appointing authority. They are not nearly as restrictive and the consequences of failure on the part of either party is not quite so visible or controversial.



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The main point of both these techniques is that they must be established prior to appointment. One cannot negotiate an agreement after they have accepted a position. It is a position of weakness. It is also a process that many candidates are fearful of entering primarily because they are afraid they will offend the appointing authority.

Well, that may be true. On the other hand, failure to raise this issue with an appointing authority and the degree to which they react to it may well portend of how things are going to go after you have been appointed. If the appointing authority is unwilling to talk about actual job expectations, beware.

A lot depends on the chemistry between you and the person who is asking you to accept the appointment. There is absolutely nothing inherently wrong with asking for a clarification of these major issues. A simple question during the selection process is, "Does this agency have any difficulty in entering into contract for this position?" City managers, for example, often have contracts for their services, so why can't fire chiefs?

There is another reason for trying to get this clearly articulated before you accept the position. It is not uncommon for appointing authorities to bring someone on board and then they themselves depart. More and more, with the stresses and strains of government today, appointing authorities will bring people into the team environment without adequately exposing them to other conflicts that are going on between themselves and the political bodies. You might be surprised when you ask for clarification of job expectation, when the person responsible for making the appointment starts to divulge information about political stability - or the lack of it.

The worst case scenario that I have ever personally observed in this matter was a department head who had resigned his old job and was awaiting to come to his first day at the office in his new capacity. He was asked if he wouldn't mind coming to a Council hearing and listen to some budget deliberations. There, during the budget deliberation, one of the council members made a motion to delete the position that the candidate had just accepted. The individual almost had heart failure.

In conversation later, the city manager indicated he knew the council member was going to make that motion but he knew there were three votes in his favor. This situation might have been humorously stressful but it could possibly have been avoided by some dialogue about expectations and the environment in the organization prior to accepting the position.

Nothing in this column is going to prevent an individual from seeking a job that can ultimately result in frustration. Just remember that if they are asking for a person who has super dimensions and you possess those dimensions, you had better make sure that when you actually accept the job, you will be able to apply yourself. Failing to do otherwise is only setting you up for a great deal of personal grief.