



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Chiefing Up

One thing that is unique about occupational slang is that a very short expression stands for a lot more than the words express. For example, I have heard the acronym CHAOS used in the fire service. Reportedly it stands for Chief Has Arrived On Scene. The image that acronym conjures up in my mind says a lot about command and control techniques and/or the absence of same by the white hats.

I have also heard of the term called “chiefing around” or “chiefing off”. Those terms have often been applied to those fire chiefs who disappear from the office on a frequent basis. More often than not, this activity involves visiting other fire chiefs, spending time on golf courses and/or in cocktail lounges lamenting the problems associated with managing fire departments.

But one of the ones new expressions that I just heard recently gave me a little bit of concern. My reaction was to slow down and check it out. The event involved an individual who was having a tough time dealing with a decision making process in his community. One of his chief officers stated, while expressing frustration at the situation that he expected his superior to take action and soon. His comment was; “it is time to “chief up””. Obviously this is an extension of the phrase “man up” which literally speaking means stand up for what you believe. Or for the gender correct – woman up.

As I engaged in the discussion with the parties involved it became very clear that the fire chief’s stress was associated with the fact that no matter what decision he made, it was not likely to be popular within his organization. The staff chief was equally frustrated in that the lack of a decision was resulting in huge morale problems in the organization. That scenario is not exactly a new phenomenon. Decision dilemmas have been going on practically since the organization of the first organized fire departments.

Being the chief is not supposed to be a popularity contest. Granted, in many cases, especially in the early days of the volunteer fire service making unpopular decisions often resulted in a chief not being elected the next time. In a more modern and contemporary sense, the chief making an unpopular decision can often result in an extremely negative reaction by the labor force. Therefore, the discussion of what it means to “chief up” is a lot more important than the phrase might apply.

In another conversation, with another chief officer from a major fire department, we got into a discussion about the criticism being lodged against the fire chief for arguing against specific budget cuts that were on the horizon. In that particular case, the city manager had openly stated “that there is no leadership in the fire service”, meaning that the fire chief was resisting the change and was perceived as a weak department head. The chief felt vulnerable



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It may also be true that trying to be popular with our bosses is not where it is at either. This opens up a real dilemma with a lot of chief officers. In the context of contemporary discussions of what constitutes leadership conflict like this creates an ambiguous an almost hysterically illogical set of expectations to a person being a fire chief when faced with tough decisions. In easy going economic times, it is not hard to be the chief and stay popular, but when the going gets rough the demands upon the chief becomes a proverbial double edged sword. Anyone can sail in calm waters. Takes a sailor to handle rough seas

In all of the schools, in all of the classrooms, and in all of the training environments of the fire service where does anybody talk about this phenomenon? It gets talked about in an informal fashion a lot. But seldom does the topic of personal integrity and inner strength enter into the formula of carrying out your duties as a fire chief.

But, that is literally what is meant by chiefting up.

Decision making during tough times is not always about popularity. It is about principle. And, the fire chief must be prepared to stand on those principles regardless of what the consequences are from above or below. I am not suggesting that by this remark that you go out to antagonize groups, but a reality is that any given decision is liable to result in criticism from either your superior or your subordinate. Recognize it. Accept it. And then move on.

If you have lived through your entire career without having a real serious conflict in making this kind of decision, then you are a fortunate person indeed. If you are looking down the path and seeing decisions of this nature facing you in the near future you might be well advised to examine the choices you are going to have to make from the perspective of your value system and not your popularity.

Among those choices you might have make is to assure that your leadership strategy going into the decision process is not based on your personality or charisma but rather on a set of ground rules that are well defined. It is my personal belief that the most stressful sets of circumstances that anyone can face in making a tough decision in tough economic times is when it is coming from the heart instead of from the head. In advance of such events there should be some introspective thinking on your part as to what you believe in, what you stand for and what you are willing to tolerate. Lacking definition of those three you are very likely to react to negative sets of circumstances in an emotional fashion.

I am not suggesting that by conducting that kind of internal assessment is going to be any easier but I am suggesting that if you don't do it is going to be a whole heck of a lot harder.

In the final analysis, some of the phrases I used before are likely to be part of your world. You can't chief off, you can't chief around. Both of those are a conflict of strategies. But chiefting up means, confronting the dilemma. That is what those trumpets are all about!