



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## **Double Jeopardy**

Many television game shows are real no brainers. They consist a great deal of dumb luck, dumb questions, and dumb consequences. One of the exceptions of that rule is the television show called, 'JEOPARDY.' Alex Trebeck, the host of the show, is an intelligent articulate individual, the question that they ask require a comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of a wide variety of subjects. It's also one of the most popular game shows on television.

If you watch the show you'll sometimes observe the following fact. The person, who does the best in the first half of the show, i.e., in Jeopardy, is not always the person who wins the second half of the show "Double Jeopardy." The simple reason is that the first set of questions on the board is simpler than the second set. The person who does well on the first set may or may not have the knowledge for winning. Then the ultimate is there is a part of the show, "Final Jeopardy." Final Jeopardy consists of one single question. You gamble it all right there. You could be running in third place and still be the winner in Final Jeopardy.

What does this have to do with the fire service? As Chief Officers, we are often confronted with an increasingly complicated set of problems that we are facing and solving some of the simpler ones does not always provide us with the answer when we get to a critical question that puts it all on the line.

Before we put some time frames around this issue, I would say that our day-to-day decision-making often takes on the aura of being somewhat boring and after a while we even take it for granted. Periodically, there are more complicated questions that we must address, these come attired as crisis problems and we often have to rise to the occasion to cope with them. Then there is the phenomenon of the critical decision point in which there is only one issue in front of us. This could be in the form of a budget, or a decision to move forward on a major program, or it could be the juncture of other decisions that are forcing the fire service to make major change.

Nothing like the game of Jeopardy, we sometimes take a lot of pride in our ability to win on the simple level, but are terrified of losing when we reach Final Jeopardy. How do we become better prepared to cope with this issue?

What got me contemplating this particular topic was a series of events in which fire departments faced a confrontation over major decisions and unfortunately came out the loser. These were fire agencies that did fairly well on the day-to-day type of things, but when they were put to an ultimate test of convincing a political body to take a particular course of action, there recommendations went unheeded. My observation started a couple of years ago, over issues such as the passing of local ordinances. However, it is now evolved into issues where fire chiefs have been impacted in every area ranging from their own jobs being dissolved and going into public safety, the dissolution of fire departments, downsizing



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activities that are inconsistent with good fire protection principles and confrontation with tax payers groups which the fire department became a target.

When reviewing my notes on this phenomenon, I could not help but notice that this trend is consistent with the parallel problem of lack of adequate financial resources to continue to provide government service levels that are consistent with past practices. The jargon of buzzwords now includes such things as downsizing, rightsizing, and in the case of the fire service perhaps this is now capsizing.

I have three basic questions I would like to pose. They are: 1) who is truly the expert on fire protection in your community? 2) Whose responsibility is it to set the level of service provided in your community? and 3) Who is responsible for paying for the service levels that have been established?

At the outset, those questions look pretty simple. For example, many of us believe that the fire chief is the expert on fire protection in the community. One could not tell that by reading some of the clipping files that I have accumulated on this particular topic. To the contrary, it appears that expertise on what is good fire protection ranges all the way from retired members of fire departments from neighboring communities all the way through to business men and industrialists who have some strongly worded concepts about what is adequate fire protection. Can we assume that because we have expertise in firefighting that this translates into the community accepting us as being on the experts on fire protection? In my opinion, it is very dangerous for us to assume that we have this credibility in the community.

I'm not suggesting that we don't have it. What I am suggesting is that some people do not believe it. And, one of the reasons they do not believe it is that the fire service in spite of its recognition of the endeavor as a fire science, seems to be deathly afraid of quantifying and qualifying what we do. We are basically a process-oriented industry.

What this means is that we will point to a standard operating procedure and say, that's the way we have to do something. We are unwilling to do the homework that provides us with the background as to why that SOP is the most valuable, why it is the most beneficial, and why it is the most appropriate for our respective communities. By relying on process instead of background information, it becomes contentious. One of the best examples I can give of this in my clipping file is one fire chief who lost severely because a retired fire officer from another community would stand up and argue with him point for point when it came to procedural activities of the agency.

If you go back and compare this to the game of Jeopardy, the first set of inquiries a fire chief faces are the simple questions. Anybody can answer them. They become critical when individuals begin to question the validity of our background and if we are unable to produce the facts, it puts us into the Final Jeopardy. That is: Why do we have to do it this way?



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In response to question number two, we asked who is responsible to set the recommendations for the level of service. Once again, I would anticipate most fire chiefs think that is their job. However, reality is that most of the time that actual recommendations that are placed on the agenda for a Board of Supervisors or a City Council have been carefully screened by an intermediary such as a city manager or chief executive officer. In essence, the recommendations we get to make are the ones we are allowed to make in many cases.

The types of scrutiny that apply to our written recommendations as they precede an approval process are not unlike those of our “community experts” who frequently disagree with how we need to do things. The difference is that it is a closed shop. The individuals who get to scrutinize our recommendations are often our fellow department heads and specifically the finance director, personnel officer and chief executive. This is our Double Jeopardy. The degree to which the recommendations are unmodified as they proceed through speaks volumes of the trust and credibility of the fire chiefs. When there is an attempt on the part of these individuals to modify these recommendations utilizing what usually ends up being essentially fiscal arguments, we often face difficulties in our Final Jeopardy phase. At this stage of the game, it is not so much that people want to disagree with us in setting our level of service it is that we are in competition with other services. To reiterate a point earlier, the more that we are able to qualify and quantify what we are doing, the better off we are. Simply pointing to our manual of operations and saying this is the way we have always done it is rapidly losing its credibility as an input to the decision making process.

In fact, I had the opportunity to participate in one discussion involving a policy issue of a fire agency in which the chief executive officer challenged the chief of fire officers to predict the consequences of failing to follow his recommendation. His response included a lot of ... edged words like maybe, could, might, etc. The chief executive of the community was relentless. He wouldn't let the chief off the hook until he would actually make a prediction that a certain event would transpire.

The only reason I was privileged to be part of this discussion was the fact that the city manager had been working on a fire related project with us and was trying to make his point back to our committee. Most city managers do not want to intimidate their fire chiefs, but they do want them to have solid answers that are defensible when it comes time to face public scrutiny. During this discussion, one of the individuals said, “I wish that you would understand.” The CEO's retort, “If wishes were horses - then all beggars would have a ride.”

This leads to our third level, which is public scrutiny of the recommendation that we do make. We do not actually set the service level in our community. That is established by the adoption of budgets and by public policies of the authorities that we serve. In a sense, this is our Final Jeopardy. What happens when we face public scrutiny, determines the level of service to be provided. In many cases, we are only



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one vote away from going either direction. In case of an entity that supports us, all we need is a three to two vote (or whatever majority is required). But, that is a double-edged sword because we can also lose by the same margin. The perception of a single individual regarding the level of service being provided really determines what the ultimate level of service will be.

There are probably many of us in the fire service that can recall the days when our budgets were basically made up of last year's expenditures with an inflation factor thrown in. We used to fight over who got the increase in inflation, but seldom did we worry much about the core-funding component.

Now, we are talking about what is called, "structural imbalance." What structural imbalance means is that the taxing system in many of our communities is inconsistent with the service level that has been provided in the past. It is virtually impossible for us to continue to grow without reprioritizing what governmental services are being provided. This reprioritization process is painful and at the same time, virtually impossible to avoid by any community that has a structural imbalance.

What all three of these areas provide us with is a snapshot of the future. I am anticipating there will be an increased number of individuals in our community that will compete with the fire chief as being the expert on what constitutes adequate fire protection. In addition, I am anticipating that more and more people will begin to weigh in on the recommendations that we make relative to our levels of fire protection service as different disciplines compete with us for the existing resources. And, finally, I am anticipating there will be more and more public scrutiny over the final adopted budgets of fire protection agencies with a continuing emphasis on the value for the dollar being spent.

What strategy should we as fire officers engage? There are probably a wide variety of potential tactics and strategies that can be used with the exception of one. The one that will probably not work is current practices. And, I mean that even for departments that are doing very well. The price we must pay for keeping fire protection a priority in our community is eternal vigilance. There is no such thing as a status quo. Any chief officer who practices this form of organizational myopia will be blindsided sooner or later. Some it will happen to quickly others might take a lot longer. But, the status quo is simply not a viable alternative.

You can go to almost any bookstore these days and find a million books on management and leadership. Everybody has theory. Therefore, in this column I'm not going to take the point of view that any one of those theories is any better than any of the rest. However, I will make one observation about the role of the fire chief in being responsible for the destiny of a fire protection agency.

It's simply stated, "If you don't have a plan, plan on losing the game." Budgets are not a one time a year Final Jeopardy question any longer. We must have the ability to work our way back through the system to dealing with our customers and our constituencies on the day-to-day events, which lead to the



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community fully accepting and supporting what a fire agency does. The game plan that a chief officer needs has a great deal of room for innovation and entrepreneurship. The one most essential component of it is the application of energy by the chief officer.

In the future, behavioral conditions of apathy, lethargy and mediocrity are going to result in organizations deteriorating drastically. The application of energy literally means paying attention all the time, every day, in every way about what's going on in the community so that you can be a part of the community's decision making process, not just the fire agencies.

This prediction on my part certainly doesn't make it look like the fire chief's job is getting any easier. It isn't! If you go back and reflect on the history of the fire service however, it will be easy for you to come to the same conclusion that I have - that it has never been that easy. The only thing that has changed from the past to the present is that the questions that we must be responsive to are getting harder and harder all the time.

On the game show Jeopardy, when Alex Trebeck calls for the final question, there is always the possibility that all three people will have the right answer. However, only one is allowed to win. And, the thing that determines who becomes the winner is how much they had in their bank before they went in to Final Jeopardy and how much they were willing to bet on the answer to the final question. Sometimes a person with a lesser amount will win because they know the answer and they bet everything. Other times another person will have the wrong answer, but have so much money in the bank and had bet so little of it that they still become the winner and so it is in our Final Jeopardies. The investment in our community and the amount of time we spend getting ready for that Final Jeopardy question is much more important than the single event itself.

The people who win at Final Jeopardy are not lucky - they were prepared.