



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

A CHIEF'S FIVE TRUMPETS AS SYMBOLS OF PROFESSIONALISM

These days you hear an awful lot about **professionalism**. There is a fair amount of time spent discussing what professionalism is and how it can be achieved by the fire service. No one seems to have come up with a definition of what the term really means that is acceptable to everyone.

Of course, there are a lot of things touted as examples of professionalism, such as more and better education, getting paid to do the service and some subtle changes in imagery. For example, one current trend is to get the chief out of uniform and into “civvies.” I can understand that desire myself, because one gets awfully tired of a two-toned ensemble day after day, but we may be throwing the baby out with the proverbial bathwater.

If we lose sight of what we are, perhaps we will also lose sight of what we are supposed to stand for. Now, before anyone gets up in arms and suggests that I am advocating that all fire chiefs wear their uniforms every day, be apprised that I don't intend to. However, I'm raising the issue of whether we are truly professionals. Perhaps it is time for us to examine the symbolism and ethics associated with fulfilling the role of fire chief, before we decide about our level of professionalism. Let's start with the symbol of our rank — the fire trumpet.

When you became a fire officer someone gave you a badge and a set of collar ornaments that probably had one or more trumpets inscribed on the metal. The symbolism of this comes from the days when the emblem of command was a speaking trumpet.

After working so hard to earn five trumpets, why should we be so anxious to remove them from sight and bury the symbols of our rank? Is it really “unprofessional” to wear the uniform of our position?

The speaking trumpet is to the fire service what the caduceus is to the medical profession. It is our symbol of professionalism and it should be displayed frequently as a reminder of the five roles a modern fire chief must assume: leader, manager, role model, mentor and change agent. One cannot emphasize one role to the exclusion of the others without harming the organization.

A leader must get out in front, take risks and be visible. In the old days, the fire chief was a **leader** in the actual battle against fire. Today's pressures to battle budgets and resistance to change have altered the nature of the battlefield, but not the role. A chief is expected to exercise leadership, to take the offensive in the field of fire protection. Taking someone or a group of someone's somewhere is what leadership is all about.



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The role of **manager** is likewise difficult to achieve. Fire protection is costly and can be administered either effectively or ineffectively. The second gold trumpet stands for the role of fiscal responsibility, or, in other words, making sure the partnership between fire-protection technology and technique is combined with a keen sense of cost effectiveness and cost benefit.

Much of the credibility of a fire officer comes from his or her ability to predict what effects there will be from a certain expenditure of funds. Managing means manipulating resources to achieve predictable results. It means knowing both sides of the ledger — expenditures and revenues. A modern fire chief must know and utilize the local economy in the development of the fire-protection mix for his/her area of responsibility. Managing means being on top of things.

Someone once said that managing an organization meant that you always do things right. The same person stated that leading an organization meant that you always do the right thing. There is a subtle, but very important, distinction. Leaders take people to places they have never been, and managers make sure they get there on time. So what we have in the symbol of the two crossed trumpets on a battalion chief's badge is recognition of the fact that both leadership and management expertise are essential in achieving success at the first level of the chief officers' rank.

When officers get those next few bugles, they assume new, difficult-to-define and difficult-to-assess roles, those of role model and mentor. Being in a leadership role has its price. First off, a leader can no longer avoid responsibility for his/her actions. As chief officers climb the ranks they become more and more visible to two groups of people — those in their organization and those serving in similar organizations.

The third trumpet from the pentacluster represents the task of becoming a **role model** for others to follow. In short, one of the tasks of the chief officer is to set the example. If we ever hope to achieve excellence in this profession, we must strive for it ourselves. There is a lot of truth in the cliché, "seeing is believing." As chief officers, if we don't strive for goals ourselves, we cannot expect our subordinates to do the same. If we do not demand competency in our everyday acts, we cannot expect it of those looking to us for behavior to emulate.

But setting the example is not enough. Counseling others following in your footsteps is also required. That's called mentoring. To mentor is to guide. A **mentor** is someone that can help a person solve a problem, but will not solve it for them. Mentors are those whom others can listen to and learn from.

To be a mentor means to risk helping a person grow at a more rapid pace than you have been able to grow. To mentor is to risk creating a replacement that may have more to contribute than yourself. But to mentor also means achieving a form of immortality. You have an opportunity to become a little bit of the future, because you have invested in a person who will help shape that future.



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Don't mistake the role of mentor for friend. My first mentor was a man that made me stretch to the limit at times. I often felt less than grateful, but I knew I had grown in the process. This particular individual was a company officer I eventually bypassed in the promotional process, but I never lost the feeling that I could call upon him for advice.

To summarize the role-model-and-mentor relationship is simple. As we are growing into positions of power and authority, we need role models and mentors, and once we've achieved high-ranking positions, we need to become role models for others to follow.

The last trumpet symbolizes the role of **change agent**, a person who makes things happen. Someone once told me there were only three kinds of people in the world: those that watched things happen, those that made things happen and those that wondered what happened. If you have assumed the responsibilities implied by the other four trumpets, the only task left is to use that fifth trumpet to make things better than they were before you attained the rank.

The ultimate role of the fire chief is to leave a mark on the system, not just a memory. As a former combat officer once stated, "No guts, No glory." Change agents take a risk in pushing back the darkness of limited knowledge and prejudice against change, but if they don't do so, their role is unfulfilled.

We call change the "cutting edge," because it represents the potential for trauma and injury. But we also know that failure to change leads to obsolescence. That fifth trumpet is the heaviest, because it puts the burden on the chief officer to deal with the collective resistance of his organization to change. The chief, of all of the ranks in the fire service, must stand ready to challenge the status quo; the chief must be the one who is ready to question the validity of the programs and actions of the organization; the chief must make sure someone acts on needed changes.

In this ever-changing world of definitions, the terms we use for such things as "professional" are nearly meaningless. The real measure of a profession is not found in what it calls itself, but rather in how a member of the profession is expected to act and produce.

The medical profession has an oath that goes back thousands of years and a code of ethics to match. You have to "pass the bar" to practice law in almost every court in the world. Perhaps, in the future, we, the fire service, will have a "code of conduct" and ethical considerations that will rival the other "professions."

In the modern context, the speaking trumpet is an antique, but what it stands for supersedes the technology of the time. It is the symbol of a responsibility and authority that needs to be respected and carried out with dignity.



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If you are already a chief, the next time you put on the pentacluster of trumpets, think a little bit about the roles each symbolizes. If you aspire to become a fire chief, think a little bit about whether you want to carry out these roles.