CHIEF'S FILE CABINET
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Give Away to Get Back

This column is going to start with a riddle. Exactly what is it that you have to give away to get back? What we're talking about here are those things that you actually have to give up having for yourself.

I'm sure some of you, in a matter of a few seconds, were able to come up with a thought or two on the riddle. When I first heard it, the first thought that came to mind was friendship. It's very difficult to get friends unless you're willing to be one. Now let's add a new dimension to the riddle. What do fire chiefs have to be willing to give up if they want to acquire something for themselves?

This one's a little tricky because the answers run counter to all the activities we engage in to achieve the rank of fire chief. Let's face it. Being promoted to chief often involves an intense amount of competition. One individual answered that question by saying "stress." That person felt that to get stress, he had to give a little bit of it away.

What I'm referring to, however, are four dimensions of the chief's job that are becoming important in the human relations aspect of managing and leading fire protection resources. The four things I believe you have to give up to get are power, respect, trust, and loyalty. The premise I'm basing this on is that these four dimensions are not absolutes. That is, there is no such thing as absolute power in the hands of one individual. There is no limitation on the amount of trust, respect, and loyalty individuals can display toward one another. This premise supposes that there is a synergy of these four dimensions in all organizations.

Let's focus first on power. The symbol of power in the fire service has historically been the badge or the position. But that's not what power is all about. Literally, power is the ability to get things done and influence the outcome of specific events. There are many individuals with quite a bit of authority but limited power. And there are a lot of individuals with a lot of power and absolutely no credentials or authority given them by the institutions they influence.

In a modern setting, the fire chief is seen as a person with a lot of responsibilities. These responsibilities embrace such a wide variety of topics no fire chief can maintain expertise in them forever. For example, I'm responsible for code enforcement and fire prevention in my community. But the real power, with regard to fire prevention, is not in my office; it's in the hands of the fire prevention bureau member who makes day-to-day policy decisions.

What gives my office the power to resolve fire prevention problems is not the symbol of the fire chief's badge. Instead, it is the influence of the plan checking organization that is working with our building department. Elevating the level of power of the individuals who are below us in making decisions does not detract from our position. It enhances it. Empowering subordinates to take independent action

based on the mission, goals and objectives of the organization does not siphon power away from the base of the organization. To the contrary, it broadens the influence base so that the ultimate authority, who has to resolve issues, does so from a significantly improved position.

While I'm using fire prevention as an example in this particular case, the same thing applies to training and education, emergency operations, labor relations and a host of other activities. The best way to improve the fire chief's position of power is to improve the positions of power of the subordinate officers who have adequate training and comprehension of the system. Their exercise of power in getting things done on a daily basis results in another empowerment – the individual company officers in an organization.

One of the classic examples of the use of power can be found in the body of knowledge regarding negotiations. I once attended a workshop where one of the speakers made this statement: "Never deal with a person who doesn't have the power to say yes." In other words, the lower in an organization that a person has the ability to take action, the more often problems are solved at a lower level. If the individual can say no, but does not have the ability to say yes, then problems will almost always be elevated in the organization until they reach the level where the power has been stabilized.

This doesn't mean that we're looking for yes-men in the organization. If a person who has the ability to say yes still says no, then it means no. If an individual is not concerned about someone overturning their decision, they're more likely to make a decision that will be supported, reinforced and sustained by those higher up in the organization.

Now to the subject of trust. We have a lot of trust symbols in our organizations. For example, the quaint habit of shaking hands. This started as a gesture between warriors. Individuals would approach their enemies and extend their hand to clasp as a display of the fact they did not have a weapon. Nowadays, people often equate a strong handshake with a strong person, weak handshake with a weak person and all sorts of connotations of that symbolic gesture.

But how do we measure trust? The only way a fire chief can expect subordinates to trust that position is to be willing to trust subordinate positions. And, when we use the word trust, we literally mean that parties anticipate the other party doing the right thing under any circumstances.

Trust often manifests itself in problem-solving situations. For example, if something occurs in an organization, and the first questions posed are interrogatories of who was to blame, there is little trust. On the other hand, if initial problem-solving is based on a premise of identifying all the facts and finding out what happened before you begin to focus on who caused it, then the trust level is usually relatively high.

There are a lot of synonyms for trust – faith, integrity, and honesty. There are antonyms to trust – distrust, antagonism, secrecy and manipulation.

To achieve a trusting relationship in any organization, superior/subordinate relationships have to be based on common values. That is why in many organizations they have adopted a "value statement" that reflects the individuals' values in the organizations. When values are drastically different, then the communications process must be really intensified to establish trusting relationships.

The next dimension we will look at is loyalty. I'm always intrigued by individuals who expect their troops to be loyal to them, but do not support their subordinates when criticism on issues is leveled against the organization. Loyalty means standing by your principles and your allegiance to an individual and an organization. Loyalty is a two-way street. If one expects loyalty from subordinates, then one must be willing to be loyal to the organization and the interests of those subordinates.

Now, before anyone misinterprets this to mean the fire chief should become the chief negotiator for labor relations, this is not what we're discussing. Instead, we are looking at the dimensions of organizational interrelationship based on an oath or affirmation that binds an organization into a cohesive unit.

In the military there's a big difference between brigadier generals and buck privates. Their tasks are different, and in some cases, the general has to order the private to do something that could result in that private's death. However, in the context of life-threatening situations, the loyalty expressed by both levels in an organization is toward a common bond.

Loyalty does not mean blind allegiance and conformance to the every wish of superiors and subordinates in working relationships. The operative word in blind loyalty is "blind." Individuals following others out of strictly charismatic confidence can often result in an organization going off on a self-destructive direction.

Lastly we come to respect. A few years ago, it was popular to show disrespect for a number of society's icons, including the flag, symbols of authority and politicians. But by displaying disrespect for another, one does not gain self-respect. Instead, there tends to be a spiraling downward of the self-esteem and conflict resolution capability.

One can have respect for an adversary and still be able to compete. Therefore, respect should be identified for what it is – a mutual and reciprocal relationship between individuals based on recognition of each other's needs and position.

For example, at the beginning of some of the oriental martial arts, there is always a bowing and exchange of pleasantries based on the premise that the victor respects his or her adversary. One cannot display disrespect toward another element of an organization, such as a labor union or firemen's association, builders and developers, or any of the other adversarial relationships that fire chiefs frequently find themselves involved in, and expect those same individuals to display respect back to the position of fire chief.

When conflict is highly personalized and people display personal disrespect for each other's positions, it does not strengthen either party. Reducing the respect given to an adversary does not necessarily reduce his self-esteem. It has been proven in the field of combat that guerrilla warfare can often bring down the most powerful figures.

So what we've explored in this month's adventure through the minds of fire chiefs is a simple, four-element approach to enhancing the position of fire chief. If you wish to have more power, you must learn how to give it away to people in the organization that you trust. If you wish to have an intensely loyal organization, you must give loyalty to people that you have respect for. These four dimensions are definitely interrelated. The higher the level of empowerment, the greater the trust. The lower the level of respect, the lower the level of loyalty.

Working on these four dimensions does not mean a chief officer is "totally in control," and engaged in some sort of Machiavellian manipulation of the organization. To the contrary, this often results in a highly dynamic, sometimes difficult-to-steer organization. Generally speaking, high-performance organizations have all these dimensions in play at any given time. But, high-performance teams can be difficult to manage.

Of course, in almost every organization, all of these elements are at play. There are varying degrees of these factors in your own organization. As I was preparing this column, I was reminded of watching sound as it is recorded on some of the new stereo equipment. You know the sight I'm talking about; the little red bars that move up and down the scales depending on the intensity or type of sound. I sometimes think that in our organizations, these four elements are much like that. They move up and down according to various influences affecting the organization.

The more the fire chief and the individuals in the organization are aware of these dynamics, the more likely they will work toward coalescence and unity. The more discordant the organization is, and the more there is antithetical behavior going on, the more likely there will be conflict and unresolved problems.