



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

---

## **Giving Them a "Peace of your Mind"**

Almost all fire chiefs work for an authority. That authority is often managed by a chief executive officer, commonly called a city manager, or the chief in the case of districts reports directly to an elected policy board. This is a fairly straightforward formula for local government. It is also a formula for frustration and the recipe for conflict.

The reason? It's really rather simple. Often the fire chief finds that they are in conflict with the city manager and/or in a political turmoil with their elected board. There are many reasons why this can occur. However, the one consequence that this column wishes to address is what happens when the situation begins to affect the day-to-day operations of the organization?

This is not a simple topic to approach. For, there are almost as many reasons that people have conflict as there are types of personalities. And, there are individuals who move through years and years of experience without once ever having difficulty with a superior officer. Yet, in conference after conference I am hearing that chief officers are experiencing difficulty in their relationship with their superior officers and they are looking for potential solutions.

To further frame this discussion; perhaps we should start with what would be a good scenario. Our form of government is highly dependent upon the voice of the people being heard through their elected bodies. Therefore, in the best scenario the people who are elected to fulfill political positions are well qualified, competent and informed individuals. We live in a very complicated society so most political figures do not have adequate amount of time to devote to the day-to-day operations of broad-based local government and therefore they choose a professional to serve as the chief executive officer. In our best case scenario the individual who's selected for this job is well grounded in principles and practices that make for efficiently effective local government and does not have a bias towards any specific function. The individual who is given this assignment is someone who looks out for the interests of the public, as a surrogate for the activities of the politicians. Lastly, in our perfect world the fire chief is someone who has been selected to lead and manage the organization because they are well qualified, technically proficient, and are well grounded in the principles of local government.

What do you think the chances are of all three of those scenarios occurring at the same time? The fact is that we often have extremely qualified fire chiefs working for virtually inept city managers, working for political bodies that are fairly representative of the community. Then, on the opposite end of the spectrum, there are idealistic city councils with lofty goals that are being forced upon a chief executive officer who simply doesn't have the resources to accomplish those objectives, who often takes it out on the individual department heads by trying to "rob Peter to pay Paul."



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

*Ronny J. Coleman*

---

So, the first thing we need to recognize is that there are very few best case scenarios. Almost all of us must operate in a system where we must maximize whatever it is that we are faced with and minimize the number of conflicts. It is also important that we recognize that the only person that we control in this troika of working relationships is ourselves, and the degree to which an individual is willing to examine themselves before they begin to criticize the other two is an important departure point for this discussion.

Self-assessment is not easy. If it were, we would find a lot more people going through life with a much better sense of reality. Unfortunately, we find it difficult to take a look at our own behavior because it often results in us finding flaws that we would just as soon deny. Yet, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how to improve relationships with superiors, one of the first things that we must examine is our knowledge, skills, and abilities. I'm talking about a realistic appraisal.

Remember our best case scenario? Whenever we start talking about criticizing the inability of our superiors to understand our motives, goals, objectives, and priorities, we must examine whether or not we have them firmly in our own minds. In the best case scenario, the individual who represents the fire service must be more than just the best firefighter of the organization. They have to possess an array of talents that will allow them to interact with those who have a different perspective. But I'm not going to take the time to go into an in-depth analysis of self-assessment here. Instead, the emphasis is on the need to conduct such an assessment. Sort of like standing up in front of the mirror when you begin to shave your face or comb your hair, you have to make sure that the person that you see in the mirror is the person that you believe is capable of being the best case scenario to lead your organization.

Now on to our superiors. There are a couple of ground rules that we must recognize in dealing with people who are not members of the fire service profession. These ground rules are:

1. They almost all have perceptions of the fire service based on myth, rumor, or stereotypes.
2. They do not understand our jargon, our slang, buzz words, or catch phrases.
3. They almost all view the fire service from the point of "what's in it for me?" instead of what's in the best interest of the community?
4. They do not have to prove one thing to you; you have to prove everything to them.
5. All of the previous four will remain in place unless you take action to eliminate them.

If you think #1 is limited to very local conditions, let me dispel that myth right away. At one time there was a very high level meeting held with the American Fire Service and a presidential candidate whose



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

---

staff introduced all of the fire chiefs as "Smokey the Bears." Now, anyone who knows anything about the fire service knows there is no "the" in Smokey and that Smokey Bear is representative of the wildland firefighting operation, not so much the structural fire situation. Here was an individual who was attempting to solicit the rapport with the American Fire Service, who, at the very outset, had insulted the group by trivializing their profession.

That same type of an event goes on at city council meetings, state government legislative events, county boards of supervisors, and a whole host of other political events. City managers have often referred to fire chiefs as "Smokey Stovers." The fact is that outside of our own profession very few people really have a concept of what constitutes the fire profession as we know it. In spite of years of television series which attempted to take individuals into the firehouse, there is still a pervasive concept in society that the fire service is macho, rife with bravado, and cartoonlike. That is, unless their house is on fire. Then they fall victim to practically everything else that has to do with the language of our business.

An untrained observer who is watching a structural firefighting operation may form totally different perceptions of what we are doing than the skilled observer. In one case I responded in civilian clothes and in a private vehicle to the scene of a structure fire being fought by my own firefighters. There was an individual standing on the curb opposite of the structure giving a "blow by blow" account of everything that was happening and 90% of what he was saying was wrong. After he had gone on for about 10 minutes elucidating as to why the firemen were systematically destroying the house in order to save it, I interjected. I made sure that the remainder of the crowd was listening to the discussion by demanding in a very loud voice "Excuse me, but just how long have you been a professional firefighter?" His retort to me was somewhat cynical and frivolous. I then responded by stating, "Oh, now I understand why you're so misinformed. I am the fire chief and I can tell you that the crews that are operating on that fire are doing so in compliance with our operational procedures and policies. If you would like an explanation of why we're ventilating the roof before we enter the house, I'd be glad to give it to you." The individual shrank into the crowd and the issue vanished. Yet, I cannot help but wonder how many times individuals are providing sidewalk critiques of our operations based upon the fact that they simply don't understand what we're doing.

The commands that we give, the policies and procedures that we put into place, in fact the very calmness with which we approach our job is often misunderstood by the uninitiated.

Which gets us back to the point of what's in it for them. About 99% of the time people outside of the fire service have little or no respect for the standby function of the fire service. Yet, when they rapidly punch the three digits on their telephone that they have been trained to use to call for emergency services, a clock begins to wind up real fast in their mind. The only thing that drives most people is self-interest. If everyone's house caught fire every week, I can assure you that the fire service would have a very high level of priority in most people's thinking. Yet, if you look at the statistics in most communities, the laws



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

---

of probability of fire striking any single residence is down into the decimal points.

Lastly, people who are considered to be superior to the fire service in terms of the governmental hierarchy feel that they have a mandate to be where they are. They don't have to prove anything to anybody who is subordinate to them. To the contrary, they feel as if they are the ones who see the expectations for the community and it is up to us to live up to them.

So, that's where we are as fire chiefs! We live in an atmosphere where the profession that we embrace so closely is misunderstood, misrepresented, mismanaged, and in some cases treated as a necessary evil. Our last mandate (Rule #5) is that all of that will remain exactly that way unless we do something about it.

The strategy for involving our superiors in our profession is not a short-term strategy. To the contrary it's a lifetime of commitment by almost anyone who wears a gold badge. In order to put these strategies into context, I've chosen to list them all as beginning with the letter "i." They are image, information, interest, and insight.

Image is very important. Anything we do to perpetuate the clichés and stereotypes of the fire service are going to come back to haunt us. On the other hand, all of the positive images of the fire service that we get a chance to utilize to our advantage can help us. What this means is that we have to be very careful to balance the positive images of the fire service off of the atypical ones. This is very difficult for me to describe in this column. Probably the best example I can give is the "checkers playing syndrome."

In my 34 years in the fire service I have never actually sat down in front of a fire station and played checkers. Yet, I have had that expression stated to me numerous times about activities in the firehouse. The same thing might apply to the playing of pinochle or for that matter any kind of a game that is used to provide diversion for firefighters when they are in a standby mode. Frankly it's nobody's business what we do to keep ourselves entertained in the firehouse. Yet, it has been used as a negative image and every time we do so in the public's eye we tend to reinforce it.

The concept of keeping fire apparatus meticulously clean and properly maintained, on the other hand, has a positive connotation. And, when we see a piece of fire apparatus that's dirty and filthy, scratched and improperly maintained, it carries a negative connotation. Probably one of the best things that we can do as a mental exercise is sit down and prepare a list of both the positive and negative stereotypes in the fire service. This might even be a good exercise for a task group to participate in. Then, once the list has been prepared you can then go through the conscious process of trying to minimize the bad ones and maximize the good ones.

Professionalism is what we are attempting to achieve in the area of imagery. It's not uncommon for the



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

---

fire service to engage in social behaviors that border on being very unprofessional. To be honest I don't think that that's entirely bad as long as everybody is really clear what we mean. An example of this could be the type of event where firefighters engage in competition using old-fashioned fire apparatus. That no more represents the contemporary fire department than "wild west days" represent law enforcement. Drudging up old stereotypes and using them as a reflection of archaic practices may actually help bring focus on the status of contemporary fire protection practices.

The next "i" is information. You simply cannot expect anybody to know what you are thinking. The individuals who come to us as our superiors in the governmental structure seldom have a fire service background. Moreover, they are unlikely to acquire a considerable amount of knowledge or information in a very short time frame. It is up to us to continue to feed them information in as subtle a manner as possible without appearing to be lecturing to them.

In the most simplistic of terms, what this really means is that we can't ask for something just because we want it. We must be able to provide adequate background and justification for the logic to our decisions in the fire service. Some people call this just writing good staff reports. I call it subliminal suggestion, inasmuch as most people that are elected to government office or who have achieved the position of top level management are reasonably intelligent human beings. Its incumbent upon us to do everything we possibly can in the preparation of staff reports and in processing information, to be as credible as possible and as continuous as possible.

The latter is very important. One does not communicate upward in an organization just when a meeting is occurring or because the fire service wants something right now. The communications process of feeding information upward goes on almost daily.

One of the smartest moves that I ever personally witnessed was a president of a firefighters' association who bought memberships to the NFPA for members of his city council. Granted, the city councilmen probably didn't understand 95% of what was represented in the NFPA publication. There was sufficient amount of similarity with the problems in our community that it formed the basis for other conversations.

The mayor at the time happened to be a retired admiral from the Navy. In short order he began to interject information into conversations with my office that indicated to me that he was reading the NFPA publications and was developing a vocabulary that made it easier for me to discuss policy issues.

Our third "i" is interest. There's an old saying that goes something like "Do unto others as you would have done unto yourself." That's not true. The fact is that most people like to have done unto them the things that they like. Therefore, one of the things that we must constantly keep our minds on when we are attempting to articulate fire protection issues is what is in it for someone else. It's easy to wrap



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

---

everything in the fire service in the banner of fire and life safety. However, that's not the only interest. There are economic interests, there are political interests, and there are day-to-day practical interests. If we've done an accurate assessment of both the city manager (CEO) or the political body, we should know something about what their interests are. It follows if we have some concept of their interest that we should be able to repackage or rephrase what we are attempting to do in words that express compatibility with the wishes and interests of those individuals.

This doesn't mean, by the way, that we play to their sympathies. The focus here is on interest. In other words, what do they stand to get out of the situation? On the surface of it interest sounds very self-serving and to some people might look like we are placating people by playing to their interests. To the contrary. Interest is a focus of a line of thought. An analogy might be the fact that people all have the opportunity to listen to music. Yet, some people choose to listen to classical music and others to rock and roll. What makes us choose a form of musical entertainment is the value system that drives our acceptance or rejection. Once we've determined what people's interests are it does not take long to build a bridge between that interest and our own interest.

Insight is much more difficult to describe than it is to feel. In the context of this article, insight means to look inside of things as opposed to external influences. Insight means to constantly be observing what goes on in our superiors and attempt to understand where they're coming from. We are never going to change the attitudes of our superiors unless we fully understand what it is that drives them to have a particular perspective on fire service related issues.

Insight means that we must listen more than we talk. Gathering information regarding what people have to say about what we're doing is a lot more important than defending ourselves against those very words. Insight means examination. It means to take a real close look at the findings of the motives and the rationale behind a line of reasoning that is applied against the fire service or even against our own personal best interests and wishes.

Some people who think that rephrasing this concept as a life safety system is a euphemism. It's sort of like misrepresentation and advertising. To the contrary. I feel that by calling residential sprinkler systems by such a generic title that would raise the opportunity for people's minds to form different versions of what they can expect from the activation of the technology. In the early days of residential sprinklers there was a great deal of confusion about the difference between a lawn sprinkler and a fire sprinkler.

Life safety is what it's all about. Not unlike the fact that we faintly have air bags installed in vehicles and seat belts installed in vehicles as a safety mechanism in the event of a crash, the life safety system is there in the event of a fire. We are not saying that the number of fires will decrease any more than we have said that seat belts will prevent car crashes from occurring. The presence of automatic warning devices such as smoke detectors and such is not any different than air bag installation that requires



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

---

some form of trauma to occur before they're activated.

I never did find out if Chevrolet renamed their Nova as it was sold in Spanish-speaking countries. I do know that we owned one once and that it wasn't a bad automobile. But you had to purchase it in order to determine whether or not it met your own personal interest. That's the way it is with the use of residential life safety technology. It does no good being a product of a laboratory, nor does a residential life safety system fulfill its destiny merely by existing. In the case of life safety systems, they must be installed and they must be activated in the event of a fire occurring and that information must be packaged and repackaged until such time as a residential life safety system is almost as important to the new homeowner as indoor plumbing.