



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Go to a Neutral Corner

Rocky Balboa has been there. So were Jersey Joe Walcott, Jack Dempsey, Muhammad Ali and Evander Holyfield. Where? I'm talking about the neutral corner. It's the place where the referee tells you to go during a fight. You cannot talk to your trainer when you are in the neutral corner, but you can contemplate what you are going to do when the fight resumes.

Sometimes we, as enforcement authorities, can feel that we are in the middle of a virtual reality boxing ring. While we do not slug it out physically, we do have the opportunity to face our adversaries in a form of intellectual combat. When we take it on the chin it hurts. When we get the other person on the ropes we gain confidence. When we score a point it feels good.

But, there are referees in our virtual world. They sometimes remind us that a round is over and send us back to our corner. Sometimes, during the middle of a round, there is a need to have a break between combatants for some technical reasons. We can be sent to our proverbial neutral corner to reflect on things. The question is, where is the neutral corner?

I can tell you that there are two places it isn't. The first place you can't go back to is where your team is setting. And, believe me, you don't want to go over and sit on the stool in your adversary's corner. That gives you two other choices. You pick which one.

To provide you with a model of this concept, imagine that the ring has four corners. They can represent the four different aspects of our ability to do things in our life: The four corners of our metaphorical boxing ring are: Our team's location; our adversary's location, which are always opposites; our personal knowledge and experiences which are in two neutral corners. The ring, which for some reason or other is really a square, essentially creates the arena in which we deal with the world.

If we want to win a bout on points we have to take the fight to the adversary instead of it being brought to us. In the best of all combat situations the battle would be fought in the center of the ring, where you can bring all your strengths to bear without having your back against a post, or to use a boxing cliché, "being on the ropes."

When a round is over, you are allowed to go to the team's corner where you are the center of attention. Your team tells you what to do; they reinforce your tactics and strategy. Your adversary is getting the same thing over in the opposite corner, so there's very little advantage to the brief break between rounds. The corner you are in is safe and secure, but there is a limitation. When you get up and walk back onto the canvas, they stay there.



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The other two corners I referred to are knowledge and experience. No one can give you either. You have to acquire them for yourself. Granted, there are those that have contributed to our opportunities to acquire both, but no one really knows what we have in our own heads. When we are taking a break, away from the team, there are times when we need to become much more introspective about them.

That's the neutral corner. From time to time it is very healthy to review our own strengths and weaknesses without outside influence. It is legitimate to recognize that we have both assets and liabilities in this arena, even if others do not know it. Introspection involves telling us things to ourselves that we may not, or should not share with others. That's why it's called the neutral corner. What you should be doing in this exercise is being brutally honest about your capacity to continue the fight. When you come up wanting for either knowledge or experience you are not going to be able to get it before you walk off the canvas.

The ones that survive this process are the ones that tell themselves the truth, even if others won't. What happens in the neutral zone is that you develop a strategy to compensate for what you lack while still under stress. This is a simple thing to state, but difficult to describe. Yet, I know that it exists. I have witnessed it in myself. Other shave told me of their experiences. It's an instinctive thing that comes from a will to predominate over adversity. Sometimes our training and education simply does not provide us with an answer. Sometimes the adversary we face is the greatest challenge of our career and we lack experience in dealing with its scope or depth.

The neutral zone is when we realize that and yet will not accept defeat. Instead we go down into both of these areas and look for intuitive direction as to what is needed to prevail that we have never accessed before. I think of it as the point in which our knowledge confronts our abilities to produce a new characteristic in ourselves.

One of the best books I have read on this topic is *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose Between Right and Right* (Joseph L. Badarracco, Jr., Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass, 1997) It's a book about work choices and life choices and the critical points where they collide.

The book is only 131 pages. You can read it in a single setting. And then you will probably think about it for weeks. Badarracco provides some excellent examples of where careers have been altered by character or the lack thereof. He challenges a lot of what has been offered in the dance craze of management theory, for example the concept of ethics and the role of mission statements. This is not the kind of book you can read without asking yourself the question: How does this relate to me?

I will not go any further into the contents of the book other than to state that I have recommended it to many of my friends. I believe that it has a message for those of us who are given the responsibility for fire and life safety. He talks about having to choose between two right things, and if there is any



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profession that faces this daily it's us. We often choose between two lives to be saved. Triage is the EMS term, but that doesn't soften the impact of having to decide between one life and another. We often have to make decisions about one person losing their property so that others can have theirs survive. It's called tactics and strategy. We have been called upon to decided between jobs in the community and minimum standards for fire and life safety. That is called fire engineering. The choices we make are often not supported by either our previous schooling or our current experience. They are decisions that have to come from somewhere else.