The Ides of March

"Beware of the Ides of March". That was a warning spoken by a slave, who was giving advice to Julius Caesar over 2,000 years ago. Unfortunately, Caesar didn't pay much attention to that advice. He suffered the consequences in a very short period of time later. He was assassinated by his one time friends and supporters. One has to ask the question of: Who can you trust anymore when accepting advice? Who are your true friends and what can you expect from an adversary?

The reason for this revelation on my part is based upon a recent observation involving fire service individuals who have been betrayed because their staff turned on them at a critical time in the decision making process. In some case they warned and in others they weren't. But that is not the point. It happens. And it could happen to anyone.

We don't celebrate the Ides of March anymore, but I suggest that many of you who are chief officers should you better beware of conflict laden events. This is because you may not have the people behind you that you think you have.

What I am talking about is the concept of loyalty and trust. Some people believe that blind loyalty can is absolutely essential. I have seen that turn problematic at times. I have also seen situations where expecting or even assuming loyalty and not receiving it has turned into a lot of difficulty. Doing something merely because it is an act of loyalty can cause you to act in a manner inconsistent with human expectations. I would submit for example that bad things will occur in leaderships scenarios when there is a "Caesar or Saddam Hussein" like leadership style in place. Loyalty is so highly prized by dictators that people can get killed if they did not exhibit that level of loyalty. Worse yet, blind loyalty can lead to inappropriate actions on the part of subordinates at time. Look at what the Nazi's did with loyalty.

On the other hand, trust is another form of loyalty. By staying committed to someone that you share values with you can often make the organization better and better over time. As a chief officer, you have to be careful to balance these elements out.

If you don't command your staff's loyalty and you lose their trust bad things can happen. As a command level officer we often find ourselves in scenarios in which we have to be able to turn to our second, third and even lower level officer in the command structure to have people act in a manner that is consistent with our principles and beliefs. We have to trust them to do the right thing.

From a behavioral point of view, any individual who is in leadership position usually obtains loyalty and trust by exhibiting these same behaviors towards their subordinates. What is given is returned. These

two traits   generate a strong sense of camaraderie. For purposes of this discussion, let's consider them to be two rails on a railroad that is going to take you somewhere.

On the other hand, can a person exhibit outward examples of loyalty, and simultaneously be untrustworthy? At the same time? We actually have a word for that in our society. The word is traitor. Very few traitors reveal their malevolent behavior until after something has happened in which they reveal their lack of support. Sometimes they have been given access because they were considered part of the inner circle, but did not share the principles or values of t the leader.

Conversely, can a person appear to be disloyal and yet simultaneously be trusted? In actuality a person may not be allowed in the inner circle and are not required to demonstrate a high level of loyalty, but they can be trusted to act in accordance with their particular skills. I will use my example of this in a recent novel about Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet. I would suggest the Title" Team of Rivals provides a good setting for this discussion.[1] If you try to read the book, I will warn you. It is a tough read.

Nonetheless, Lincoln was able to take a group of people with divided loyalties and questionable motives, and turn them into an incredibly effective organization and while he never doubted that they would disagree with him on various points, he trusted them to do what he expected them to do.
As a person in an executive level position in the fire service, you need to be examining both of these concepts on an almost continual basis. There is such a thing as status quo with either of these factors. Loyalties shift. Trust is eroded. There are certain behaviors that you can engage in in which you speed up that process or you can reverse it.

Let me give you an example. An open channel of communication is probably more important than you can measure when it comes to being able to take the temperature of loyalty and trust in an organization. Anytime people are scared to death to tell you the truth you have a potential possibility of failure. When people deny giving you information because they are afraid you will use it back against them, then you have a scenario that can lead to disaster. The significant difference in the effectiveness of different leaders is often based upon how well they handle negative feedback. You have probably heard the old adage "don't shoot the messenger". I can't tell you the number of times that I have seen messengers mowed down as they approach a high level person to share information with them. Many times to the detriment of the leader.

In actuality, both of these concepts can be avoided by simply having an open exchange of dialogue among those with power and influence in or organization about honesty. If no one feels threatened by either disloyalty and/or distrust difficult questions can be handled. But more importantly what you

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[1] Goodwin, Doris Kearns, <u>Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln</u> [Deckle Edge]

want to avoid is the phenomenon that affected Caesar. As you will recall one of the most famous quotes in an event like this was his expression "Keep your friends close, but keep you enemies closer". In other words, the people who can do the most harm may sometimes be the people who are closest to you. You should pay attention to their feedback to you.

As you examine your relationship with those you interact with, the more honest and sincere that relationship is, the less likely that someone will pull out their stiletto and insert it in your back when you are in conflict.