



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## The Insanity of Profanity

At the tender age of 17 I joined the United States Marine Corps. As a young man in the State of Oklahoma I learned my fair share of four letter words. After all, I had been partially raised on a farm and been around a lot of my Dad's friends who were truck drivers, bus drivers and rodeo performers. I don't think there was a single, solitary cuss word that I hadn't heard. But I was wrong!

When I went to boot camp I was introduced to a two Sergeants and Corporal that had raised the art of speaking with profane language almost to the status of a third language. It is not that they had invented any new cuss words but they were certainly experts at utilizing words in a wide variety of applications. As you probably know, most profane words can serve as a noun or a verb and many can be converted into adjectives and adverbs with the use of suffixes and prefixes. These non-commissioned officers, I honestly believe, could make up an entire sentence using only profane words and it would somehow make sense. But they were novices compared to the real expert that I had met soon after.

My platoon sergeant in my outfit after boot camp was a Gunnery Sergeant. Reportedly he had been the first Marine to go over the wall at Pusan Harbor in the Korean War and was a bona-fide hero. He had a chest full of medals. We both loved and feared him intensely. His use of profanity was legendary.

One evening after my platoon had performed miserably during an exercise he entered our barracks and commanded our attention. Over a period of approximately fifteen minutes he delivered a speech to us about performance, pride and responsibility that were literally laced with profanity. He was outright elegant. When he was done and he spun on his heel to exit our barracks I can actually remember thinking to myself, "I wished I could speak so powerfully". He had both humiliated and motivated us at the same time. But his choice of language would no doubt have badly insulted his brother who was reportedly a Monsignor in the Catholic Church.

What has that got to do with the firehouse? The answer that was given to me occurred roughly five minutes after I sat down at my first dining room table in a fire station. The language was as purple as I had ever heard in my platoon in the Marine Corps. It wasn't quite as eloquent. In fact most of it seemed to be based upon feeble attempts at humor and often it was used to express angst over something going on within the organization. But profane it was. It was an acceptable form of language. The choice of words around that table did not raise a single eyebrow.

The problem is this: is it possible that an individual or an organization can get into trouble as a result of using profanity today? Is it possible that profanity exists within the context of language in most firehouses in this country? Is it possible that specific people will be offended by the use of profanity? Is it possible that there is personal or professional liability in the use of profanity? Are there warning signs



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that the use of profanity can result in damage in a personal relationship? Is it possible that individuals will take the use of certain words to be directed at them individually?

Let me make the answer to all of these questions pretty simple; yes. The answer to all of the previous questions is likely to be yes in our contemporary society.

Now let me give you the other part of the examination. Are firefighters going to completely discontinue the use of profane language? Are there going to be times in which anger or frustration results in the use of profanity? Is it possible that you can be cursed at in another language and not understand it? Is it possible that a word that you take for granted as part of your vocabulary could be interpreted differently by another individual? Can a fire department effectively rule out the use of profane language in the context of a firehouse? Can the use of profanity in one context be appropriate and in a similar context be totally inappropriate?

That is a tougher exam to take. Frankly I am not going to tell you what the answer to those questions are, because a lot of it centers around the organization, the individuals within it, the interpersonal relationships that are going on within that organization and the antecedent conditions that created the culture of your organization. In other words, some of you would have answered those questions one-way and some of you would answer those questions another.

One thing that is in play is the concept of “community standard”. Imagine for just a moment if we were to utilize the normal language around the dining room table with a dinner guest of the local priest, the head of the American Civil Liberties Union, the President of the Junior Women’s Club, and George Carlin. Now I couldn’t possibly imagine that we would be able to get all those people around the table in the firehouse but imagine if you could who’s standard would apply to creating the conversation and discourse of the evening?

Today we live in an environment in which our young children can hear and see things on television that I was denied access to until I had left home and joined the service. I have actually heard language come out of a six-year-old child that can almost match my two drill instructors in boot camp. You can see things on television today that were declared to be pornography not too many years ago. So, where do we go in terms of determining whether or not the use of rude, obnoxious and risqué language fit into the scheme of operating a fire department or fire company today?

Sorry! I am not going to tell you. No, instead what I am attempting to do with this column is to raise the bar on the issue of discussing appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in the context of the current legal and moral environment. If you hadn’t thought about this right this very moment you are already behind the learning curve. You see, ignoring this will not make it go away. To the contrary, acting as if this



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problem does not exist creates a greater potential that it will come into existence whenever a set of circumstances are correct.

And it goes without saying that we cannot legislate morality in the firehouse. But we certainly can consider the consequence if specific behaviors result in anger, anxiety or hostility in the firehouse. The short cut version of what I am talking about is that we need to deal with the issue of inappropriate behaviors overall.

One thing we need to keep in mind is that it is now considered a liability to an organization if it creates a hostile work place. And what determines whether a fire station is a hostile work place or not? One of the things is when people feel uncomfortable, unsettled, a feeling of being singled out. Any behavior that focuses on an individual's sense of loss as a member of a team or an organization is often interpreted being hostile.

Where is the best place to begin on this topic? In my opinion it begins around the dining room table at a fire company level and eventually lands on the fire chief's desk at some point. I will not be foolish enough to recommend in a column of this nature that you can bring people together and order them not to speak in a certain fashion or utilize specific words as expressions of their feelings. But, I think it is entirely reasonable to engage a fire company in the dialogue of what makes people feel a member of an operating team. Going back to the early days of my fire service career I remember sitting at the dining room table with one of my captains. He very carefully and very effectively laid out his expectations to us as crewmembers. I can distinctly remember one of his admonitions. He emphasized the fact that we must learn to respect each other. He reinforced that statement to the affect that we were to be hard on our problems but soft on our people. He made it real clear that disrespectful and/or malicious interchange would not be tolerated in his presence. I don't recall ever saying anything about the use of profanity but his message was pretty clear.

After that event I am quite sure that I along with others may have said things in humor that violated that sense of constraint yet, we never ended up with negative interpersonal relationships in that fire company. Moreover, belonging to that particular captain's company help shape my perspective on how to refer to other peers as my career developed further.

As I have had the opportunity to interact with personnel issues and to witness the change in the fire service over four decades there has clearly been a change in expectations around the dining room table. Diversity, while it is still not considered as being complete has arrived at the firehouse. Whether anyone wants to agree with it or not the domain of the fire service has been modified by the introduction of new values and expectations by the diverse members of the workforce. And, a lot of people do not wish to admit this but it doesn't necessarily mean that these values have a higher moral ground to stand on.



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To the contrary, I was in a conversation once in a conversation with a member of one of the newer representatives of diversity in the fire service who bragged about the fact that “they could out raunch the raunchiest”. This particular individual proved the point by telling the story that even made my face turn a little red.

The one thing we have to remember is that the firehouse is a public facility that should be based upon a community standard and not upon our own point of value system. When we are in that firehouse we do have an obligation to those citizens that are paying the bill for us to serve. It is my personal belief that individuals will probably choose to do exactly what they think they can get away with. Under some circumstances a person’s behavior will never be held accountable and right down the road another individual will end up in a lawsuit over doing or saying the same thing. The choice is yours.

Every time you or a member of your staff chooses to utilize words that are found to be unacceptable by some component of society you are vulnerable. If those words are charged with emotion and directed at another human being the vulnerability increases significantly. If intervening supervisors do not see the warning signs that animosity is being generated and deal with it effectively, the vulnerability increases again by an order of magnitude. If an aggrieved person objects to the manner in which they are being communicated with and individuals do not react by dealing with the issue immediately the order of magnitude increases again significantly.

And yes, there is a price to be paid for all of this. Gutter language can get you into court. There are numerous lawsuits that demonstrate this. I can almost guarantee you that the cost of defending these suits places a high premium on prevention as opposed to responding to these types of events.

I, for one, do not regret my experience of hearing the subtle nuances of profanity that verged on the poetic. Yet, I am to this very day extremely careful of how I communicate with other individuals. We need to be more aware of the sensitivities that exist in our modern fire service.