



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Is He Talking About You?

One of the sure-fire ways of being an unsuccessful human being is to try to please all the people, all the time. This is especially true for leaders. Anybody who tries to please everybody runs the risk of vacillation, inconsistency and indecisiveness that often causes an organization to lose its bearings. However it is also true that if nobody likes you there is a good possibility nobody is following you. You have to please some people some of the time or you don't have any friends or followers.

Recently Fire Chief Magazine received an anonymous letter by a member of a department about a person's perception of that phenomenon. The letter was forwarded to me for my observations about what this letter could mean in terms of leadership in the fire service. I am going to provide you with in the next couple of paragraphs the actual unexpurgated version of the letter. You will note that there is no name or location given. It is an anonymous letter. Because I do not know who wrote this letter nor do I know what location it came from, I am using this letter only as an example of an internal issue that almost all leaders have to be concerned about: what is your impact on the people who are working for you?

The letter reads as follows:

' I am writing to you/your magazine because I know it gets out to a lot of chiefs and departments. I have a short story and but one simple question. The short story goes like this. A department in a small politically corrupt town. Several volunteer companies, small number of union career personnel. A chief that became a "paid full time chief". A town where the citizens are clueless of what goes on inside. I am a life member of one of the companies and over the past years I have been a member, recently a significant amount of good firefighters quit because of this person that has become an untouchable. What I mean by this is he changes rules and regulations and run procedures daily. He basically bullies around the volunteer members and just about everyone in the department both career and volunteer have had enough of this guy. The problem is, he is untouchable. Town council will not listen, public safety director will not listen and the town manager will not listen either. They think he is the best thing since sliced bread because he made all members become state certified so he could get a variety of grants. This town is broke beyond explanation. One thing is for sure though; they could have hired two police officers and /or fixed a million potholes that cover most of the streets with the salary they are paying him. In addition to this, he has a town owned vehicle that he uses for personal use which is not allowed. The good ole boys theory is in full effect in this town. Now how do you get rid of a guy like this? This guy is doing more harm than good and ruining a once great department. His attitude is he don't have to explain anything to anyone. He is the chief. if anyone don't like it, then



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quit. What does your Professionals think? I am asking in confidential letter because we are about to attempt to bring this issue to council and I hope you may have some tips that could help us out.'

Is this person talking about you? Or, is there somebody out there in your fire department that feels this way about you? I would almost bet that the vast majority of the people that are reading this article right now are thinking to themselves “that can’t be directed to me because I am a good leader – good manager – a good person – a good whatever”.

Yet, this letter and/or ones like it do surface in organizations from time to time. They are blatant criticisms of the leadership style of the individual running the department. To be very blunt about it, if that chief wants to create that kind of environment and is doing it on purpose then it is likely that the chief has a reason for creating that kind of world to live in. I haven’t got a clue why they would want to do that. But I will tell you that there are people who are very much aware of how their own people feel about them and choose to exhibit personal behaviors that are not dissimilar to what you are reading that this person is criticizing.

What’s a chief to do? Remember what I said earlier, if you try to please everybody you are not going to please anyone. And, to pick up on the theory behind it, if you please just a few people and have the vast majority allied against you then you are not going to be very effective as a leader. I asked earlier in this column a rhetorical question is could this be somebody in your organization talking about you?

This opens up the specter of internal credibility and relationship between the rank and file in the fire service and the leadership component of a fire department. I have heard many comments about these kinds of problems as being driven by the lack of inner personal skills of individuals who have emerged as chiefs of departments. However, in my own personal experience I have also seen comments of this nature generated by people who are cynical, dissatisfied and disgruntled with the organization from the core. It raises the question as to whether or not a letter of this nature is really justified or whether it is a reflection of something deeper.

As I started reading this letter myself, one of the first things that came to my mind was a sense of the loss of respect within our industry. While many fire departments enjoy good moral, and a high level of mutual respect, there are also many fire departments that suffer from morale problems from inner personal behavior that starts with the deterioration of respect. It almost reminds me of almost childlike behavior where one child accuses the other one of a wrong doing and they engage in a dialogue that goes something like – “did – did not – did – did not”. If you have got any small children around your household either as your current crop of children or your recycled crop of grandchildren, you may have seen that tit for tat approach in which there is deterioration in people’s opinion about the other person.



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In fire departments in which the fire chief demonstrates that they have no respect for the members of their department it is not uncommon for the members of the department to lose their respect for the chief. You notice I said lose respect. I didn't say that they still don't fear them; I didn't say that they still don't obey them. I didn't say that they would run away from them in an organizational sense. But, the loss of respect usually starts when one party demonstrating that they have lost their respect for the opposite party, which is instantaneously responded to by the opposite party doing likewise.

This is one of the manifestations of inner personal relationships in the fire service that often turns into an organizational free for all. Having visited hundreds of fire departments in my career, I have born witness to how some of these events start. Sometimes they are started with snide remark at a staff meeting. Sometimes it was something that was said in response to a news article. Sometimes it is a statement that is made at one or more of the various meetings that fire departments are involved with. But it almost always starts with a deprecation and disrespect for the opposite side.

Using my childlike metaphor of did – did not, it really doesn't make any difference who makes the original gesture. What it basically boils down to is whether or not the opposite side chooses to respond in kind. Because this magazine focuses on chief officers and the leadership and management of fire organizations I am going to choose to talk primarily about the role of a fire chief in creating a culture of respect. The worst thing that could possibly happen for your credibility as a fire chief is to be the one who initiates this kind of disrespectful behavior. The second worse thing is for you to be the recipient of disrespectful behavior and not handle it in an appropriate fashion.

If you follow the logic of that, what I am suggesting is that it is real important that a fire chief never allow themselves to personalize any process that results in the denigration of anybody in their organization. It is totally counter intuitive being the leader of an organization and simultaneously demonstrating that you think your people are incompetent, incapable or insincere.

I will bet you some of you right now are actually thinking of times in which that may have happened. Sometimes we say things we wish we had never said. Sometimes we say things to specific people that we wish we could go back and take back. But, being disrespectful is like ringing a bell. Once it has occurred you cannot un-ring the bell.

And, I suspect there are some of you that are reading this column are thinking about times when people have attacked you and hurt your feelings. It is only natural that you defend yourself and it is even more natural that you fight back if you come from the line of individuals that are normal in the fire service being combative is almost part of the job. But two wrongs absolutely will never result in a right.

This entire column is really about introspection and acceptance.



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I would like to talk about the introspection first. If you go back and reread that letter and ask yourself this question – is that person talking about me? It requires that you reach down inside and ask yourself how do you behave in your relationship with your organization. Do you create that culture of respect even when there are differences of opinion? Or, have you allowed yourself to reach a level of disrespect that makes it easy and in fact some cases almost enjoyable to attack the other side.

Nobody knows the answer to that question except you. It is your own evaluation of your character and your characterization of how you deal with people that determines whether or not your people feel that you are a credible, competent leader.

If, by chance, there is someone reading this column that is not the chief of the department but is a leader in some other capacity, I would ask you to do a little bit of soul searching to see if you have contributed to this process yourself. Have you made statements about other human beings that are in working relationships with you that demonstrate the fact that you do not respect them?

Before everybody runs off to a corner thinking we are trying to create a Polly Anna attitude and have everybody in the group hug business, that is not what this column is about. It is about rising to the level of professionalism that does not allow a culture that is dysfunctional.

Recently I had an opportunity to read a book about dysfunctional communication and it might be worthy to note in this column. This book which is relatively small contains some very good suggestions on how to break the cycle of being dysfunctional. It is entitled “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team”, by Patrick Lencioni, (Jossey Bass Publisher, 2002).

I could talk about the implications of culture in the fire service all day long. Many of you out there have heard the stories around the dining room table. You have been witness to events that have resulted in ruptured relationships yourself. So I would like to focus in on just one very, very insignificant and yet absolutely important element of the resolution of conflict. And that is, that one of the opposite sides that is in conflict must make a choice to resolve the conflict rather than continue it. That is what Lencioni’s book is all about.

In essence, what I am saying is that if the chief started it, it makes no difference. If the individual in another rank in the department started it, that makes no difference. The question is which one of those two parties will finally come to the realization that the organization is being damaged much more than their personal credibility.

I have seen this particular phenomenon go all the way to the level of forcing people to be dismissed from their jobs. Votes of no confidence have come out when the lack of relationships between leader and followers reach this level of personal dissatisfaction. Families, lives, careers and organizations have



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been impacted by unwillingness on the part to realize the level of dissatisfaction with each other's performance.

There is no simple solution to this discussion. There is no textbook about making everybody happy. But, Lencioni's book does talk about being able to operate effectively even if there is conflict. There is only the reality that those people who are very much aware of their relationship and are willing to extend themselves to better it, that result in organizations surviving conflict.

Going back to our anonymous letter writer, what I am reading in between the lines is a case of winners versus losers. Eventually people will ally themselves with one perspective or another in its organizational context and the organization will be shaken to its core by the struggles for supremacy. It is such a terrible waste of resources and capacity.

Any organization worth its salt should be able to process conflict without dissention. In fact I would go so far as to say that those organizations that have faced conflict and have been able to address it in an appropriate fashion have probably come out stronger in the long run. So, as you finish reading this column I would invite you to go back to read the letter from our anonymous firefighter and ask yourself is there anybody in my organization that feels this way about me? If the answer is yes, you have got some work ahead of you. Read Lencioni's book. If the answer is no, I would hope that you would do everything you could to sustain an organization that prevents it from happening in the first place.