



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## My Little Corner of the World

Who is the happiest fire chief in the whole United States? How about in North America? How about Internationally? Who is the one person out there that is so pleased with who they are, and what they are doing and what they are accomplishing that they can't wait to get up in the morning and go to work that they would never even think of giving up?

Hey! If you think that it's you, more power to you. But, if you are not that confident in how satisfied you are with your job, my second question then is; why not? You are in your own little corner of the world and you should be happy that you are there, or know the reason why you are not happy and change whatever needs to be changed to make things better.

What prompted this column was a conversation with a fire chief about his feelings after he had experienced a personal set back. The set back involved an activity external to his department. When I talked to him about the situation I was absolutely amazed at his reaction to the disappointment. I was astonished to observe on how this set back not only did not have an adverse effect on his feelings of satisfaction of what he was doing right there within his department, but that he considered it to be just another thing to learn from. His response to my concern over his feelings after the loss, was a pleasant one of; "I am extremely happy in my little corner of the world".

I don't usually repeat the phraseology of my previous paragraphs, but I am today. Are you happy in your little corner of the world?

If the answer is yes, then keep on reading because it is my belief that your belief in that idea is a force multiplier. If your answer is no, keep on reading also, because it is my belief that there is room for improvement.

First, let's deal with that feeling of satisfaction that you might have. I call that belief a force multiplier because that feeling shared with others increases the collective sense of accomplishment and achievement in the organization. I'm not talking about a sense of giddiness that life is a bed of roses, but rather the idea that there is a value in having the sense that you are doing the right thing. There is a sense of purpose that prevails, even when something goes bad. There is a level of trust and confidence that overcomes adversity. The more I thought about it, the more I feel that this one characteristic of an organization is actually on a spectrum that is distributed across fire departments based on a series of behaviors by the fire chiefs that were reflected on the degree of satisfaction they get from their own little corner of the world.

If you have that sense, then your organization is blessed.



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Then there's the dilemma of someone else that doesn't feel that way. They are disappointed. And, they let it show. That is toxic to the idea of force multiplication. It can be the beginning of a slump in morale.

Since that conversation with the Fire Chief mentioned earlier, I have been at his department with his staff many time. As a result I have collected a few observations that he displays that I believe describe most people who are satisfied with what they have.

Those that answered no in the previous paragraph may want to start comparing the following notes with their own environment. These are not in any specific order. They are merely expressed as being part of the concept.

1. You take as much pride in the small achievements of your individual personnel as you do in the grandiose schemes of large groups of people.
2. You don't care who gets credit as long as the job gets done
3. Your number one priority is your people; your second priority is your organization; your third priority is your performance.
4. Strengths are never abused and weaknesses are never exploited
5. Challenges never go uncontested and opportunities never go dormant without a response.
6. Failure and competency are not seen as opposing forces; but are regarded as mutually reinforcing when viewed in the context of experimentation.
7. Stress is never a justification for rudeness and conflict is never a justification for divisiveness.
8. The group values are based on individual values and they are regarded as self correcting within the group
9. Success is shared equally; and failure is accepted as a teacher, not a judge
10. The reputation of the organization and the individuals within it are almost identical.

So, let's get back to your own little corner of the world again. Taking those ten attributes you might notice that you are doing well in some, not so well in others. How do you get from one stage to another? The answer is found within you, not the organization. You are the architect on your corner of the world by what you say and do almost every day you show up for work.

I know that someone out there reading this is going to say that they inherited a situation that is very difficult and that no matter what they do, it doesn't get any better. Uh-oh! I bet that comes through in that department too.



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I am reminded of an anecdotal someone wrote about Elvis Presley that spoke to his attitude. It was written that he wore a necklace that had only 4 letters on it. They were TCOB. The letters stood for Taking Care of Business, and the inference was that if you took care of business the business would take care of you.

In your world do you TCOB? Or, is that something everyone else does and reports back to you?

The last comment I am going to toss into the column is the idea that if you weren't satisfied at home, nothing that you can do outside of that corner is every going to make you happy. The term I use for this is "chiefing around".

In essence, this is a reflection of some people's desire to achieve happiness by getting this accolade for those outside of their own little corner of the world.

When I first heard that term it was used in a humorous expression regarding an individual who disliked his own work environment that he spent every possible moment seeking respect from outside entities and individuals. He was never home, and never engaged in the department. He was like a stranger to his own people. Later I heard it used in reference to the technique of attending meetings on the 15<sup>th</sup> hole of an area that was extremely well landscaped, as if it were to be used only for recreational purposes. The context I am putting this term in for this column is that if a person is seeking happiness external to your organization, it is likely to be evasive and in many cases significantly lacking.

What is it that makes you feel good about where you are right now? Can you enumerate the things that make you feel that you are making a difference? Why don't you sit down for a few moments and write up a list of the most positive things you can about your little corner of the world. Identify the small things you and your personnel have achieved. Describe the strengths of your organization; recall the incremental improvements you have overseen. Identify past and present relationships in your organization that feel good to you. Take the time to appreciate your little corner of the world. You may find out that you have more reasons to be happy then you think.

My reason for writing this column was originally based on my admiration for a specific fire chief who took on something that he believed in and lost. He had a sense of pride in what he was and where he came from that literally turned disappointment into a mere footnote in his life. As I contemplated that approach I started looking at the lives of other Chief Officers I am familiar with and began to notice that many seem to be so unhappy with the way things go for them. Those that have a sense of enjoyment do not seem to be basing that felling on how small or large their organizations are; Nor, does not seem to be based upon whether they are a leader outside of the organization, or whether they were home grown or imported into the culture. They know their own little corner of the world and are happy with it



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What I would hope you do after reading this column is spend some time with the list I asked you to develop and the 10 cultural aspects of your organization. After reviewing those for awhile, re-evaluate just how satisfied you are with where you are and what you are doing. You might just find that there is more to your world than you realize.

In the final analysis, no one is guaranteed that they will be happy with anything. Marriages dissolve. Families become dysfunctional. Organizations turn into cesspools. Or, not!

The one fact that seems to differentiate the happy from the unhappy in this scenario is the degree to which they feel personally accountable for how things turned out.

How are you doing Chief?