



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

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## **Organizational Carcinogens**

### **Germes That Damage the Effectiveness of Fire Departments**

Several years ago there was a joke circulating concerning which portion of the human body was really in charge. In general, the joke said each part of the human body thought it was the most important to the overall functioning of the organism. The brain thought it was in charge because it was the center of the intellect. The back thought it was in charge because it provided support for the organism. The legs thought they were in charge because they provided momentum, and the arms thought they were in charge because they did the physical work.

Without discussing in detail the punch line of the joke, it turned out that another portion of the anatomy proved omnipotent when it ceased to function and slowed down the activities of the entire organism. Originally, the joke had a moral to it; namely, you didn't have to be a brain to be a boss. However, there is another moral from this story: No organism is capable of functioning effectively unless all of its parts are operating in concert with each other. It is not a question of what part is the most important to an organism; it is rather a question of what portion is being brought into play to handle any given problem at any given time.

There are several analogies between that joke and the way a modern fire department operates. The comparisons start with the fact that organisms and organizations share the same root word: organ. An organization is much like a human body. It has a portion that functions like a brain, an element that is like a spine, and working parts that serve as its arms and legs. Like an organism, an organization is only effective if those parts are able to work in concert with one another.

Similarly, organizations are like human beings because they go through various growth periods. For example, many of us can recall what it was like in the "old days." Many fire departments, during their days of infancy, went through a period when their responsibilities were few, and there was an emphasis on personal involvement, even enjoyment. The accountability of the department at that stage was negligible. All departments were in this infant stage at one time or another. This includes even the older; more established and institutionalized departments from communities with their origins in colonial times.

As a young child grows, so have the fire departments. There has been a period of growth in departments that is not unlike the teenage years. During this stage, many of the departments rebelled amongst themselves and against authority. During that growth period, the departments experienced the marvel of experimentation and the trauma of failure.



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Growing older, fire departments have reached a stage of maturation in which responsibility is more than a multi-syllable word. This stage has seen the enactment of fire prevention and training programs, and other forms of fire protection activities that blunted the unbridled enthusiasm of the teenage growth period. During this maturation process, fire departments have tended to establish both roots and lines of tradition. During this stage of growth, the institutionalization of behavior, attitudes and the organizational environment has developed.

Unfortunately, fire departments also can go through the middle-age process of losing identity and having apprehensions about their basic purpose and mission in life. The ultimate comparison to the human body exists when an organization has reached the stage of senility, the stage in which it does not have the ability or sensitivity to the world around it to cope with pressure and change. It begins to regress to an earlier age and attempts mentally to achieve a resurrection of its "good old days."

The one advantage an organization has over a human being, however, is that it can arrest the growth process if it wants. Organizations do not have to age, as does a human body, in exact ratio of calendar years to physical and mental deterioration. It is conceivable that, with the proper understanding of what is happening in an organization, a department can live as if it were an organism arrested at a particular stage of its growth. Conversely, organizations can become diseased and not only fail to grow, but, in fact, die.

The managers and leaders of the fire service are responsible for the aging process of their organizations. It is their mission in life not only to diagnose the diseases, but also provide remedies that keep an organization healthy, wealthy and alive.

If you think these analogies are stretching the point a little too far, take a look around you at both your department and those within your sphere of influence. Ask yourself a couple of basic questions. What is the mental frame of reference of the organization? Is the organization growing, not just in the physical sense, but also in a mental sense, or is it remaining status quo? Is the organization losing ground? Is it suffering the consequences of eroded manpower and confrontation with city management over such issues as public safety and consolidation?

It is not difficult to compare our organizations with the processes that happen to us personally. It does not take long to see that the motivation of a person is reflected in the motivation of an organization. One does not require a scientific or complicated analysis to measure whether a fire department is dynamic and on the move, static or regressing.

Years ago, a scientist won international fame by discovering the simple fact that germs cause disease. That basic discovery led to the development of a medical technology that has increased the life span of the human being. Perhaps it is time the leaders and managers of the fire service determined the causes,



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the “germs,” that are affecting the health of their organizations. No one is quite sure, for example, what causes cancer. Yet it is known that, in many cases, cancer is fatal.

Perhaps some of the problems being faced in the fire service today are based on a type of “germ” or idea that creates cancer in fire departments. Let’s call these ideas “organizational carcinogens.” Like the things that cause physical cancer in a human body, many of them are very subtle and almost defy definition. Yet they are there. They are affecting the growth and effectiveness of our organizations.

Let me give you an example of a few organizational carcinogens. As a former training officer and fire science instructor, I have seen this problem reflected in conversations in numerous seminars and college classrooms. It has been fashionable for several years to discuss the desirability of upper level education. Many fire chiefs actively and sincerely have advocated that their personnel go to junior colleges for fire science classes, or attend colleges and universities to obtain degrees in fire and public administration.

Unfortunately, once these individuals acquire this broader base of knowledge, they return to the department and are expected to conform to the traditional, tried-and-true methods that defy the information the student has acquired. I have had student after student say: “I don’t know why I bother to go to school because, when I return to the fire department, I am not allowed to put into practice any of my new ideas.”

That is a cancer. If we do not want our people to get a better education, then we should tell them so. We should not advocate that they spend hundreds of their off-duty hours gaining knowledge that we never intend to let them apply, except when it conforms exactly to what we have predisposed to be the way “things are.” If we send individuals away to schools, seminars or workshops, we should expect, no demand, that, upon their return to the organization, they provide something new to the growth process. Some new muscle. Some new exercise that keeps the organization viable and moving forward.

The buzzword is another example of an organizational carcinogen. We all hear them - participative management, management by objective. We hear them at chiefs’ seminars and in the corridors of city hall. By repeating buzzwords, we are implying to our subordinates that we expect them to believe that these things are, in fact, part of our methods of operation. If we suggest that participative management is a process that we believe in, and yet fail to allow individuals to make contributions or demean the contributions they make, we, in effect, are creating a cancer. If we talk about management by objective, yet leap from crisis to crisis with no objectives in sight, we lend credence to the idea that crisis management is desirable.

Credibility is vital to the dialogue and communication between two human beings. If someone continually lied to you, it is unlikely you would develop a trusting relationship now or in the future. In effect, when we talk about and imply acceptance of concepts and methodologies, and then fail to use



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these concepts, we are lying to ourselves and to the other person. The net result is a credibility gap in the organization.

I have seen this reflected in departmental staff meetings where individuals get an earful of the latest “theme” that is being pushed, either in management or public administration. As soon as that staff meeting is over, the officers go back to their fire stations and continue to function in a work environment that basically has not changed significantly in the American fire service in the last one hundred years.

Participative management - what does that really mean? Zero-based budgeting - what does that really mean? In most cases, all these ideas are overshadowed by rules and regulations that have not changed in 25 years, or by operations manuals that allow absolutely no latitude in the decision making process.

The last example of an organizational carcinogen is probably the most subtle and damaging to the future of the fire service. Notwithstanding all the controversy over equal employment opportunity and the other areas that impinge on the selection process, I think it is safe to say that the average fire fighter candidate, who successfully completes the screening process, is among the finest of individuals. I mean this in terms of both physical strength and agility, and the capacity to learn and contribute to the department. The testing procedures are set up specifically to screen out those individuals who do not have, on the surface, the abilities to perform jobs that are extremely complex and are performed under both mental and physical stress.

The raw material we bring into a recruit class would make excellent raw material for an entry class at West Point. Historically, however, we have brought that individual into the department and placed him or her into an environment in which he is part of the lowest common denominator.

In essence, we have told that individual that once he has entered, he is not to think for himself, but rather is to learn how to perform mechanical skills in a rote manner. Emphasis is placed on discipline, not decisions. We practice physical skills, not mental skills. We decide for him that he does not know enough about the organization, therefore, he must be subservient instead of curious. We prize conformance, not competency.

The net result is an acceptance that borders on apathy. I am not saying that fire fighters are apathetic. Most of them are sincerely interested in becoming good fire fighters. However, they are not realizing the potential they have to contribute to the fire profession because their initiative has been stifled.

Probably the best evidence I can use to demonstrate this one problem is the significant number of career fire fighters who are more interested and concerned about their off-duty employment than they are in achieving or moving forward with new ideas and concepts in the fire service itself. We have stifled



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their mental growth in many cases during their formative years in the fire service. Many of them, frustrated with the lack of opportunity to use their mental capacity, begin to exercise that capability in a venture divorced from their chosen profession.

The old joke said: "You didn't have to be a brain to be a boss." That is true; you do not have to be a brain to be the boss. What you have to be is the spirit that makes an organization have a reason to want to be what it is. Where our organizations are in terms of growth and potential is a reflection of the image we shape for them. I would like to think that most fire departments have as their target a fire fighting organization that would be roughly analogous to a well trained, physically fit Rhodes Scholar who is capable of competing in all Olympic sports.

Hopefully, this image can be brought closer to realization by the fountain of youth called professionalism. It is the responsibility of the chief of the department to infuse his organization with the necessary "vitamins and minerals" to remain a healthy, viable organism. Anything less is to condemn the organization to an early death.