CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Organizational Hypocrisy

How many rules and regulations does it take to run a modern fire department? Many of our firefighting agencies today have standard operating procedures or guidelines that take up volumes. At one level, the primary purpose for having to write all of this stuff down is to make sure that everybody does the right thing the right way. Why do we need so many rules and regulations when the good Lord has seen fit to provide guidance to modern society by suggesting that there are only Ten Commandments to provide guidance for human behavior?

One of the primary reasons that we write these extensive, complex and often times redundant policies and procedures is that somebody has either not done it the way we want it to be done in the past, or we are so concerned about the consequences of improper reaction that we want to make sure that it is done right the first time in the future.

But, just take a look at your fire department from a standpoint of whether it follows a set of two simple statements. These are: Do say what you mean and do you mean what you say? The significance of this is found in the fact that much of the conflict that goes on in organizations is based on the phenomena that rules and procedures are not being followed and/or inappropriate behaviors are exhibited that cause conflict and no one will act upon them.

In modern practice it is has been suggested that in order to make sure that a fire department operates in a contemporary mode, it has to have a set of guiding statements. This idea is being taught in schools all across the land. Thousands of pages of textbooks have been devoted to the concept of having a mission statement, having a vision statement, operating on a basic set of principles, having written and SMART goals, setting objectives and last, but certainly not least, having an action plan to guide your behavior.

The real question is, is it all rhetoric or does it really mean anything?

There is a relatively simple test that you might want to apply as to whether or not these concepts are real or whether they are just eye wash. For example, when you close your eyes right now can quote the mission statement of your organization? Can you, without looking at a plaque on the wall, state the vision of your organization? Can you without referencing the annual budget document clearly articulate the department's goals and/or its performance measurements?

If you can, then you might be walking your talk. But if you can't, then maybe you are on the verge of organizational hypocrisy.

When we use the term hypocrite, most likely, it is in the context of human behavior. In fact, many of the times it is implied to have a religious connotation. But the context of hypocrite is pretty straight forward. A hypocrite is a person who acts in contradiction to his or her stated beliefs or feelings. A hypocrite is a person who says one thing but does another. The degree to which this contrast is visible to other parties determines just exactly how intense the hypocrisy is. It is probably no mistake that the word evolved from a Greek word hypocrites, that was used to describe an actor, because most hypocritical behavior is a false appearance.

There is only one way that you can overcome organizational hypocrisy. You have to take your personal behaviors and place them under a microscope to determine whether or not you are actually living and breathing the same verbiage that you have espoused during those master and strategic planning sessions. One formula that describes hypocrisy is stated as Hypocrisy = Beliefs – Actions. The degree to which a person or an organization is hypocritical then is the difference between the two. If your actions are consistent with your beliefs hypocrisy is low. And visa versa. If you would want to learn a bit more about this concept type in the words, the psychology of Hypocrisy in a web browser. You will likely find an entry by Lonnie Lee that helps to provide a broader background of this phenomenon.

Having gone through numerous exercises in working with or assisting departments developing master plans and strategic plans, I have often marveled at the fact that people will through words up to put in the exercise that are not even being reflected in the room itself. In another column many years ago I talked about the fact that there are certain things that you must yield in order to get back. For example, the word, respect. I see that up here a lot in value statements. But respect is a two way street. You cannot give it without getting it and you cannot get it without giving it. The same with the word trust. The same with the word, confidence. It is very important that when people begin to articulate these concepts as part of strategic and master planning that they do so from the inside, not from the standpoint of an external exercise.

If these concepts are alive and well in your organization they often go a long way in reducing the amount of bureaucracy that has to produce to get the organization to function properly. It was once characterized that many of our written policies and procedures, and especially certain rules and regulations almost always had the name of a person attached to the problem that created the rule or regulation. In a self correcting organization you don't need to continually write rules to prohibit things. Instead, you find ways of solving problems at the lowest possible level and the number of rules and regulations that are required become relatively straight forward. Rules that empower have a different impact than those that restrain.

The one thing that will continue to grow in an organization when it becomes hypocritical is conflict. Another term for this is organizational dissonance. It is when the eye and the mind see two different phenomena that are mutually exclusive. Conflict has its consequences within an organization. For

example, if you go back and examine the mission statement, the goals for the organization and the value statements, it is not uncommon for them to sound quite altruistic if not almost self-righteous.   But, when individual behaviors are exhibited or encountered to those value systems on the part of some of the individuals, it creates dissonance with those who truly believe in them.

Probably the best example I can think of is whenever there is a disagreement in an organization they can either turn into dissention or dialogue. Those organizations that have focused on really living their value systems can often take some of the most difficult times and make them into meaningful experiences. In organizations where there is organizational hypocrisy even the smallest of infraction often gets turned into a major contention.

So the last remaining question is who is the hypocrite? As you are reading this column I would challenge you to ask yourself this tough question; am I ever a hypocrite? If you are being truthful to yourself, you might find circumstances in which you have not lived up to your own organizations expectations in terms of your reaction or behavior under a given set of circumstances. Then you might ask yourself if there are other people in the organization who are being hypocritical? If you know and understand what makes most of your subordinates tick, you might be able to identify individuals that are practicing it on you. The real question that remains then is what are you going to do about it in either case?

From a perspective of being a hypocrite yourself, one of the best strategies is merely to hold up a mirror to yourself everyday and ask yourself whether you are living your dream or making somebody else's life a nightmare. The only way to reduce hypocrisy internally is to face it. Ask yourself, am I doing what I think I should be doing in concert with what I have agreed to as an organizational leader.

It is much more difficult to talk about than your being able to criticize the behavior of your subordinates. One of the courses of action that is pretty straight forward for you to adopt is called accountability. When your people do not behave consistent with the value system that you have established then it is time to have a face to face discussion. In some organizations that might find its way into performance evaluation. In others, it might find its way into mentoring or role modeling relationships. In any case, you owe it to the people that you want to support you to let them know whether or not their behavior is consistent with what you expect.

In either case, you or your subordinates, and more importantly all of you collectively create a culture of competency in the organization. Those organizations that have a strong sense of acceptance of their guidance documents do not need an awful lot of strong guidance in the remainder of their activity.

It is sort of like the old Superman credo; truth, justice and the American way. How can anyone hear that explanation and see the behavior of Superman and not believe that his performance was predictable.

So, the next time you walk down the hall and glance at your mission statement, close your eyes and read it back in the recall of your mind. The next time you look at the value statements in your organization, ask yourself what kind of price you place on those values and how much are you trying to act as if you truly believe in them. Those organizations that can accomplish that have an inner strength that cannot be denied. Those organizations that say one thing and do another are weakened by each inconsistency when it occurs. Where would you prefer to work?