



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Plays Well With Others

I guess I have to admit that I'm some sort of a pack rat. It seems like I've never thrown anything away. Anybody who has ever visited my home or my office, visited my barn in the backyard can attest to the fact that I seemingly find value in some of the most insignificant pieces of paper that have been provided to me throughout my life. Among those various items, however, I frequently find something that reminds me of why I kept it in the first place.

For example, I recently found my grade cards from grade school. I'm not about to reveal what these grades were, but I was reminded of a concept as I read through one of them. It was a comment made by a teacher, it goes: "Plays well with others."

That sounds like something that you might hear in a kindergarten class, perhaps even as late as the 5th and 6th grade. But, what resonated in my mind as being a phenomenon that maybe we need to think about in the adult world. Just exactly how well do we play with others?

What I'm referencing here is not playground, but rather interpersonal relationships. The degree, in which individuals have the ability to interact successfully with others, is often a determining factor in their success as a person. In the case of a fire chief, or for that matter anybody in our profession, that interaction can sometimes be either a huge advantage or a severe liability.

Let me be more specific. At the fire station level, getting along with each other is absolutely one of the premiere elements of fire station life. We spend a great deal of time in rookie academies trying to make sure that people understand the capability that getting along together is important. As a matter of fact, there are probably more firefighters that have been terminated during their probationary period for their unwillingness to be a team player than almost any other specific thing. I have actually seen individuals who have been coached, mentored, counseled, and tutored through their probationary period with skill deficiencies merely because they were regarded as being a very nice person to work with. To the contrary, I've also seen individuals with a high skill set who have been shown the way to the door because they couldn't get along well.

Traditionally, we prize compatibility in the firehouse because fire stations are literally the second home to a firefighter. Interestingly enough, as individuals begin to emerge from the cocoon that a fire station provides, sometimes their character attributes begin to change and they become less and less concerned about whether they get along with others. The reason I can say this is having borne witness to such things as shift wars between battalion chiefs, divisional wars between fire prevention training and operations, and the unseen warfare that often goes on between fire departments. While we might



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prize compatibility at the fire station level, we seem to lose emphasis on it as individuals gain more and more power in the fire service.

Now that might be a good thing. Or, it could be a bad thing. What do I mean by that? Well, in the first place, as you begin to develop leadership skills in the fire service, you are probably going to aggravate somebody and if you are an active person, you're probably going to aggravate a whole bunch of people. That means that an individual who is exercising a higher level of individuality as they proceed upward in the chain of events in the fire service, they are liable to develop enemies. Moreover, we have individuals who try to please everybody to the point where they absolutely please nobody. I'm sure some of you have observed the fact that a person trying to go along to get along often suffers almost the same lack of credibility that someone who overexerts themselves.

So what's a person to do? Are you going to be one of the white hats or are you going to wear a black hat some of the time? I've asked and answered this particular question a couple of times in my writing history. But how it was brought to my attention most graphically lately was in the effect that differences of opinion and conflicts can often result in the inability of entire organizations to achieve their overall objectives. I don't want to get too specific about this observation because it might strike something on specific toes. But, I can be specific enough about it to state that I can almost know whenever this phenomena is occurring that I hear a statement "we get along great at the field level, but the problems between our two chiefs are overwhelming."

As I visit firehouses, I often overhear random conversations about the level of cooperation between organizations and I'm always startled when I find a set of circumstances in which the environment is openly hostile. After all, if we all started out in the same firehouses, what is it about our new life as head of a department that forces us into becoming someone who does not play well with others?

Sometimes when I start examining the nature of these disagreements, I'm surprised to find that neither of the chief officers has a superior position on a particular issue, but they have drawn lines in the sand that force the other one to remain hostile. There are situations in which I found one person that was basically coming from the right place and the other person was deliberately choosing not to accept a set of circumstances thereby keeping the conflict open like a seeping wound or an emotional scab that could heal because it was being picked at constantly. Whenever two individuals that possess strong opinions have the ability to articulate those differences without dissension, I often find that there can be dislike and even disagreement if not dysfunction.

This got me to thinking about the whole idea of character attributes as it relates to fire chiefing. Who is right? Who is wrong? Is the person who does "play well" with everybody really that good a person or are they merely seeking the middle road of compromise to avoid conflict? Does the person who is



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openly confrontational really have a point about that confrontation, or are they merely continuing the argument for argument sake?

Entire novels have been written on the basis of the resolution of such conflict. Far be it for me to be able to say exactly what fits under every set of circumstances. However, I have observed the fact that very effective leaders have an ability to deal with conflict without rank. What character attribute does a person have to have to be able to remain as strong an individual as they desire and simultaneously be considered by other people as a team player?

Then I recalled a rule of threes that was given to me as a young fire officer. I was advised to be firm, fair, and friendly. Nobody gave me any definitions of what those three words stood for, but the indication was that you could be a person that was approachable without being a pushover. I discovered that you could be firm in your convictions, but you had to keep an even balance between factors as you pursued that sense of fairness.

As I started writing down some of my observations about conflict, I began to notice that there is a difference between meaningful conflict and meaningless conflict. The difference between the two is that sometimes there is conflict over principle and sometimes you have to stand up for what you believe in, and as a result of that, you might find yourself on the outside of another group that may believe in a different set of principles. Meaningless conflict can deal with things that have nothing to do with the real world other than just personal preferences, i.e. a person cannot really articulate their rationale behind feeling the way they do, but rather they just say because I say so.

We live in a world of harsh realities. Those individuals who are overly complacent can sometimes be rolled over like road kill. We also live in a world in which people who cannot get along with others often find themselves shut out of the decision-making process and in some places rendered irrelevant because they are no longer a value to the overall group. It would seem to me that the thing that every chief officer needs to think about is what is their working relationship with their partners in their profession? If it's working, one should have some real good reasons why it is working. If it's not working, one should have the desire to examine those reasons and see if there's a way that they can be improved.

It is also my belief that not very many people want to live life in misery. And, when an individual is experiencing difficulties with other individuals, it's unlikely that they're a very happy soul. Such a condition should cause anyone to sit back and ask themselves why they are experiencing such negative feelings. A strong mind focused on such an issue cannot overlook the fact that playing well with others also means we have to be willing to compromise and in some cases consider the other person's point of view.



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Perhaps this is one of those phenomena that you need to take a look at the next time you stand in front of a mirror. As you examine your personal behavior, are you someone that people look forward to interacting with, or are you someone that people avoid? Are you someone who contributes to the group's effort, or are you someone who subtracts from it? On a scale of one to ten, how do you rank yourself as being a person who influences the outcome of a particular process? After you contribute your input to a process, do you remain angry or do you reconcile it to the fact that you win some and you lose some?

It may seem like a long way from the sandbox on a playground to the top office in a fire department. If your kindergarten teacher who gave you "plays well with others" were to give you an evaluation today, what do you think they would write on your report card?