



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

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## Rubik's Cube; the Fire Chiefs Planning Device

One of the things about the way most fire departments are organized is that they tend to take the shape of a pyramid. Lazlo's hierarchy of needs uses a pyramid. However, neither of those pyramids really exists in the real world. They are typification schemes so that we can follow a concept such as chain of command or whatever. Reality is that managing a fire department is more like the Rubik's cube we just described. For example, the six sides of the Rubik's cube all of which have a solid color, more or less stand for some of the more fundamental activities that you must be engaged in, in order to get something done with your organization. If we go back to the old pages of literature and remember the management scheme of planning, organizing, delegating etc, that is one version of it. However, in the contemporary fire department the six sided aspects of managing a fire department really consists of the following:

1. Visioning
2. Goal setting
3. Action planning
4. Resource allocation
5. Performance measurements
6. Evaluation

Now if you visualize Rubik's cube there are nine squares of the same color on each side. What do those nine colors stand for? In order to understand this abstraction of management, I would suggest that these nine things stand for the following:

1. Authority
2. Area of responsibility
3. Objectives
4. Accountability
5. Documentation
6. Analysis
7. Appraisal
8. Recommendations
9. Continuity

If my memory serves me correctly, when you first got your toy Rubik's cube all of the colors were already lined up and the moment you started spinning the toy, you started having green squares mixed in with the yellow squares, mixed in with the white squares, mixed in with the red squares, and it became a real challenge to get them back into a state of pure correlation. What I am about to suggest is the concepts that I have just articulated, the nine types of activities and the six frame of discussions are very much like that Rubik's cube that has been twisted and modified over time.



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In essence, the concept that I am proposing is that if all of these ideas are not infused in the fire department from the top to the bottom and the activities are not implemented by all parties within the organization, then in fact, the department is not over time an effective or efficient organization.

We are not looking for an organization that looks like the perfect cube. What we are looking for is an organization that has been infused with all of the concepts that have been established as being part of the management and leadership of the organization.

Having made that statement, I would like to provide you with a couple of examples of how I believe this is possible within an organization. Let's go back and look at the pyramid that we talked about before. We are reasonably comfortable with the idea that fire departments based on the company concept, i.e. engines and trucks, squads and rescues. It doesn't take much to be able to visualize the A shift, B shift and C shift. But here is a question for you. How well has the organization infused the concept of vision from top to bottom in the organization? Is the vision and organization strictly the responsibility of the fire chief? What happens in an organization if the vision of the fire company officer at station 7 is drastically different than the vision of the battalion chief he is reporting to? In other words there is a version of the six topics described before at every level in the organization – or maybe not!

I can't tell you the numbers of departments that I have visited that have mission statements on the wall that I have been able to go over and put my hand on the mission statement and ask people in the room if they can quote it for me without reading it. The answer is that a significant number of them can't. Then it begs the question, if you don't know what the mission is and you cannot describe the mission at the lowest possible level, then why do you have a mission? I find it hard to believe that in most high performance organizations such as fighter pilots, special operations organizations and ones in which lives are on the line a lot, that have difficulty with stating their mission more often. Most of them can do it from the lowest private to the general officer who is testifying before congress.

The concept of value statements for example is also subject to some scrutiny. A lot of value statements really sound very high and mighty but they are not manifested in the way people interact on a minute by minute, hour by hour or even day by day basis in the fire house. Then, do you have any values at all?

From my perspective of the six sides and the nine functions, we are constantly involved in twisting our Rubik's Cube in our organizations. It has to do with the rhythm and vitality of the organization. There are some organizations that operate with a high level of participation by all parties at all levels and generally speaking those organizations tend to be colorful, chaotic, and competent. On the other hand, there are organizations where a very small percentage of the population feels any obligation whatsoever to take responsibility for their credibility. In that kind of organizational setting the six colors are more or less delegated to six people and everybody else stands back and watches.



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So chief, how is Rubik's working in your department? Is there an infusion of these concepts or are they channeled? Is the organization real or is the organization a mile wide and an inch deep?

I personally cannot answer those questions for anybody who is reading this column. The only person that can is you. As the chief fire officer who has the overall responsibility for your organization, your job description probably contains almost all of the verbiage that I have described in this column. I would be willing to bet that when you went through your selection process you articulated your abilities to accomplish some of these things to the oral board or you wouldn't have been selected as the top candidate. My question to you now is what are you doing about it now on a day to day basis? Is the organization exhibiting an infusion of these concepts or is it a battle on a day to day basis?

By the way, don't go looking for this theory in any management text that is likely to be on the leadership bookshelf. It is not there. I am speaking in this column from a practical aspect from visiting hundreds of fire departments and observing the dynamics of the organization over a rather lengthy period of time. This is strictly a metaphor for the reality of how your organization operates on a short term and long term basis. I have said before and I have continued to believe that I can visit a fire station in most fire departments and spend about an hour around a dining room table and have a really good understanding of the culture of the organization. While I haven't used the word culture, up to this point, the implications of this concept are very much culturally based. An organization that really feels good about itself has a tendency to have that infusion from top to bottom. An organization that lacks identity and is struggling for a sense of self worth often lacks many of these factors at the lowest possible levels. While many fire chiefs would like to take total credit for what their department accomplishes the reality is that if your vision is not supported by your chief officers and your chief officers are not supported by their company officers and their company officers are not supported by their firefighters, then the concept of vision is nothing more than a plaque or poster that somebody puts on the wall. Nothing more.

What prompted the development of this column was a conversation once with a young firefighter. I was conducting a course of instruction for a group and one of the individuals in the audience was an excited participant in every overhead question. His enthusiasm was literally palpable. He was a true believer in his organization and was a true contributor to the organization but he was at the very bottom of the organizational hierarchy. That old pyramid that we have referenced previously was all above him. Yet, the theme in the classroom that day clearly indicated that he was not alone. It was a characteristic of the organization. Everybody drank the kool-aid. They were believers. They would do anything they could to make their department look good.

At wished I could say that every fire department had a culture of competency like that but I don't believe it to be true. As you read this column, you may convince yourself that your department posses that culture of competency. I would challenge you to spend some time being introspective about this visualization of your organization.



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Does the organization truly believe in the six sides of the cube? And, does everyone in the organization have a role to play in the 9 squares on each side? Does your organization have the ability to leverage those opportunities in an ongoing basis?

If the answer to the above observation is yes, then you have a lot to be proud of. If the answer is maybe, then you may have some work cut out for you to develop the culture of your organization. If the answer you come up with is no, then perhaps it is time to take a step back and re-evaluate the culture of your organization.

In the final analysis our organizations are very much like that Rubik's cube that has been twisted and twisted over time to the point where nobody knows how to go back to the state of having all those solid colors on all six sides. We call that organizational dynamics. The department will get better or worse over time. My only reason for raising this metaphor in your mind is to ask you to be thinking about how you are helping cope with a culture of competency.