



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Second Lieutenant Who?

Are leaders made, or are leaders born? This has been an ancient debate among the human race. I doubt that in the four to five pages of text that I have to develop this article I will be able to resolve that issue in your mind. However, I would like to add a third dimension to this discussion to peak your curiosity. That dimension is, are leaders actually a function of the conditions in which they find themselves?

As a student of leadership both in and outside the fire service, I have been often impressed by the fact that there have been leaders that live transparent, not invisible lives, until conditions are generated to cause them to exercise those leadership skills. In a sense the idea that leaders are made or born is irrelevant unless they can be placed into a set of circumstances in which that leadership skill can be demonstrated for all to see.

I have chosen to use an example of this phenomena one of my all time favorite leaders, General Dwight D. Eisenhower. He eventually became the President of the United States. But, in 1939 he was an obscure army officer languishing in the back water of the military. What if World War II had never been? Is it possible that General Dwight D. Eisenhower would never have seen a single star? Is it possible that he would never have emerged as the President of the United States without World War II? Was General Eisenhower a leader when he was in that ambiguous almost transparent role of being a logistics officer at a remote army base?

I am putting this in the context of leadership for the simple reason that today we are spending an awful lot of time worrying ourselves about succession planning. Maybe we ought to be worrying about making sure we are selecting people that can rise to the occasion once they have been given the opportunity. You know, Dwight D. Eisenhower was once a Westpoint Cadet, a Second Lieutenant, a First Lieutenant, then a Captain – onto Major, etc and never had attracted that much attention. Conditions made him visible but his preparation gave him the ability to take advantage of it.

How many fire chiefs do we know who have worked in relative obscurity until such a time as a major event has traumatized their community? Then depending upon how they handled the situation they either emerged as the latest hero to be invited onto the rubber chicken circuit, or they were overwhelmed by the scenario and retired shortly thereafter? I am not asking you to name specific people but just to ask yourself whether you have seen that phenomenon occur. I know I certainly have.

What this has to do with succession planning is the fact that any one of you – I don't have a department to worry about anymore – can find themselves thrust into the role of leadership because of conditions. It then becomes really irrelevant as to whether or not we were born as a leader or whether we prepared



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ourselves for the leadership role. Conditions demand a specific level of performance.

Now, standing at the peak of that personal emotional experience of being faced with those leadership conditions, turn around and look down the chain of command and ask yourself how well people are prepared to follow you as you move forward.

In the final analysis, you see, that is where succession planning truly begins. It is having somebody ready even if they do not have the opportunity to be a leader. The military makes very serious efforts to assure that there are always people standing on the various rungs on the ladder of success. There is always a second Lieutenant who is coming out of West Point who imagines themselves as being the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In our particular profession, it has been observed that there are many people who are demonstrating the fact that they are not really interested in climbing that ladder of success, especially the top rung. Without belaboring all of the specifics, I think it is fair to say that we have literally paid people to stay off of that ladder by making the working conditions of the fire service more conducive at the bottom than we have at the top.

I don't want to start a huge argument over what those benefits are but rather to recognize the fact that all of our efforts in succession planning are blunted unless somebody is ready to step up to the plate without being overly concerned about whether they are going to be rewarded for it or not.

I have often mentioned anecdotal stories in my column and I want to use another here. I have obtained a great deal of my insight about overnight leaders by talking to other people about what they have experienced in the aftermath of a disaster. One of my favorite stories involves a young Lieutenant in the Roseburg Fire Department. Roseburg Oregon suffered a major explosion back in the 1960's.

There was a Lieutenant in that department who was lying in bed at his fire house when he heard the detonation. When his feet were under the covers he was a Lieutenant. As he rolled out of his bunk and when his feet hit the floor he was the last remaining officer in his department that had authority to act. He became an instantaneous candidate for the type of scenario that I have described. And, he rose to the occasion. I am not sure how many people today remember Don Starmer but I met him as a salesman for Crown Fire Coach in the 70's.

Just think about this for a second – if something were to happen to you right this very moment and your department was faced with a huge challenge, how well prepared are your people to move up that ladder of success?

Going back to my reference to the military model, I can be pretty well assured that Dwight D.



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Eisenhower did not have an easy time as a Second Lieutenant. He “paid his dues” suffering under the direction that was probably more oriented to fighting a war out of the annuals of World War I than he was prepared to take over the huge endeavor of dealing with World War II.

It is my belief that all of the military officers who are being confronted with dealing with our new world dilemma of terror, have all had similar experiences of being asked to do menial tasks as beginning officers. How does one recognize a future general when they only have a single bar on their collar? One clue is to watch how they begin to acquire layers of skills as they work their way up through the opportunities to become General Officers.

This leads to a lesson I think we need to learn in the fire service. We do not do our people favors if we allow them to regard officership as merely an expression of how much money is being paid. Compensation does not generate competency. What creates competency is exposure to difficult sets of circumstances under which a person must grow or go.

In reviewing a lot of literature on succession planning there is a tendency to think that the obligation is on the fire department to provide this successive opportunity. I would take the point of view that it is a fire departments responsibility to create individuals who can rise to the occasion when conditions are critical. And, it has nothing to do with their intent. It has to do with their preparation.

Another perspective I have observed is that many departments think that succession planning is sending people away to school. It is also my personal belief that sending people away to be educated at the expense of the community is an investment for which there is very little return in most cases. Individuals who share in the responsibility for their own succession planning don't need to be ordered to go to school. They seek out those opportunities and are willing to pursue things on their own outside of the influence of a community. Sometimes they emerge outside of the influence of the internal leadership of their own firefighting agency.

And, before anybody thinks I am bad mouthing education – my own personal experience included working from an AA degree to a Masters Degree. I attended school so long that when I graduated from one college, a young lady in the coffee shop told me she thought I was a janitor at the facility because I had been there almost every night for an entire experience working at that college. I am not suggesting that education is not important. What I am strongly suggesting is that the incipient Dwight D. Eisenhower's out there are not waiting for the department to give them a succession plan. They are mentally preparing themselves to rise to the occasion when conditions are appropriate. I toyed with the idea of even discussing the idea of discussing some personal experiences I have had with officers. I am choosing not to mention anybody specifically but I will give you at least one observation. Many of the individuals that I thought were going to rise to leadership roles in the 70's or 80's did not do so. On the other hand many individuals that entered the fire service long before succession planning was a



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theme of the day had risen to fill leadership roles in an admiral fashion.

If you are a chief of a department and have not been thrust into the public limelight by a crisis, that doesn't mean that you haven't had the opportunity to exercise leadership. Your credibility is also linked with your willingness to move the organization towards some future level of performance. If you are a chief officer who hasn't yet to win that final trumpet you need to be asking yourself what are doing about preparing yourself instead of what is the department doing for you. Our professional lives are made up of experience and opportunity. One does not necessarily lead to the other. Success is when an individual is capable of using their past to produce a favorable outcome in the future. That is truly what succession planning is all about.