



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Selection

Benjamin Franklin never took a test to become fire chief. In the first place, nobody called him fire chief. In the second place, it was pretty hard to test for something that nobody knew what the job functions were going to be. In the earliest eras of the American Volunteer Fire Service, the process of selecting the top individual was much more Democratic. As a matter of fact, the more I read about the early days of the American Volunteer Fire Service, the more I am convinced that the whole concept of election of our leaders which ultimately resulted in the revolution against the tyranny of England had his genesis in fire houses. So, that was the favorite method of selecting the head of the department. It was a popular vote of the membership. Granted, there was very little distinction between the person who was selected as the head person and the individuals who were part of the volunteer fire force. It was a very unsophisticated level of fire protection. Apparently there was nothing wrong with using the election process versus any other degree of evaluation because the volunteers had to believe in the person that they were following. His process established at least one of the elements of the American Fire Service and that was the sense that the chief usually came from one of the ranks.

Later on, this process of politicizing the fire chief's position would have negative consequences. For example, Boss .... who became infamous because the ... hall scandal actually got his start as a foreman of a fire company. The strength and concurrently the weakness of the volunteer fire service was his willingness to select people as leaders based upon their popularity rather than their performance. Nonetheless, this process remained in place for well over 100 years.

Then concept of selecting fire chiefs using different criteria began to emerge with the creation of paid fire departments. As has been noted in many other documents, the paid fire service actually was spawned by a riot of the volunteer firefighters in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1851. The city fathers were so disturbed by the rowdiness of the volunteers that they decided to replace them with a full time force - and at the same time adopt fire steamer technology. The blow to the fire service was severe. In the first place, it took the concept of the fire chief out of the hands of the electorate and put it in the hands of the elected officials. The second was that the grasping of a new technology i.e., fire steamers, met a tremendous decrease in the need for staffing of large volunteer fire departments and therefore, it may well have been the first example of the so called "downsizing" that we experienced in the fire service.

It's not that the volunteer fire chiefs had not developed very large constituencies and power bases. Some of the more popular fire chiefs in the late 1800's were selected by their peers, but were highly respected by their elected officials. Among these were John Decker of the Chicago Fire Department and "Gentle Jim" of the New York City Fire Department.

The concept of picking the top firefighter as the fire chief did not necessarily evaporate when the



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selection process moved from election to selection. Generally speaking, the individuals who emerged as the first paid fire chiefs were individuals who had made reputations for themselves as very effective fire ground operators. Gentleman Jim Gulick, as well as many of the volunteers in the large metropolitan areas were well known not only the elected officials, but by the population in general.

Probably, among the first fire chiefs to be selected based on sure competency, we have to go to Europe to look at. The fire master of the Edenboro Fire Department was a young man by the name of James Braidwood. Braidwood, who came from a family of carpenters, masons, and building construction trades, had made a name for himself as an effective firefighter in the Scottish Capital. He was selected to become the first paid fire chief - although they called them "Fire Masters" in the U.K. Unfortunately, James Braidwood who also developed the first training concepts used by the fire service, was to suffer the same fate of many firefighters - he was killed in the line of duty at a warehouse fire in London.

He had migrated from Edenboro to become the fire master of London in the mid 1800's and was succeeded by a gentleman by the name of Eyre Massey Shaw. So, Eyre Massey Shaw was actually a military officer with a high degree of personal charm and political savvy. He was selected to become the fire chief on the basis of all three of these characteristics because he was extremely competent. He set the ground rules for many years to come.

He examined the era from 1850 to the early 1900's with a lot of paid fire chiefs who were selected in various communities throughout the United States, but there was no uniformity in how they were selected. Going back to a statement made earlier about popularity and competency, there is no doubt that most of the individuals who were selected as fire chiefs were able to demonstrate their skills and abilities to the satisfaction of the elected officials or they wouldn't have stayed there. There are marked cases where there were individuals who were unselected as fire chief and went their unheralded way for a variety of reasons, too.

The development of the concept of actually holding an examination for a fire chief paralleled the use of the same process in industrialized America. More and more after the turn of the Century, it became clearer that individuals who wished to succeed, must meet some kind of minimum threshold to demonstrate vocational competency. Originally, however, most of these examination processes were relatively limited in scope. In some cases, the selection process consisted of a written examination based upon the department's policies, practices and procedures. Later, the process was to incorporate the use of oral interview techniques. More often than not, the oral interviews consisted of neighboring fire chiefs who were invited by a community to sit as a board to determine the qualifications of someone who would soon become one of their peers.

Notwithstanding the increase in examination processes, there was still a tendency in the early 1900's clear on up to the 1950's to place a high premium on seniority in the business. More often than not, the



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person who migrated to the top of a fire department was someone who spent a lot of time in the ranks. This was especially true in larger organizations. In order to overcome the tradition and bureaucracy within many fire departments, it was virtually impossible for a fire chief to be brought in from the outside. For approximately a half a century, almost all of the individuals who became paid fire chiefs started at the bottom as an entry level firefighter and worked their way up through the ranks one or two year rank at a time.

Professional mobility or moving from city to city was also restricted a great deal by the benefits (or lack thereof) of pension and pay. Initially, almost all of the retirement systems that came into existence were funded by local communities and there was no ability to transfer from one to another. Compensation and benefits for things like long-term health care and the after affects of injuries on the job, were virtually non-existent for the first half of this century. Therefore, most fire chiefs were selected from within organizations.

The end of the Korean War saw one of the first major changes in the quest for the development of fire officers. With the end of the war came the G.I. Bill of Rights and an opportunity for veterans to go home and go to school. The ideal of attending classes and competing for scores and examinations, soon raised the level of competition between a peer group that were command level officers during this era. Notably, at the same time, the examination process for fire chief began to focus more and more on technical skills rather than time and grades. Granted, most of the individuals who were able to pass these extensive written examinations were individuals with a great deal of experience initially. However, over time the grasp of technical knowledge began to diffuse itself into other ranks in the fire service.

Concurrent with the increase and the technological and competency of chief officers, was also the significant increase in the number of fire agencies that went from volunteer to paid. Although there is no scientific data to back up this statement it is pretty clear that between 1940 and 1960 a significant number of fire departments that had previously been volunteer began to develop fully full time paid staffs. This is especially true in areas that bordered in some of the metropolitan areas impacted by the growth and defense spending. It was also not uncommon for top-level chief officers in some of the larger communities to migrate out and become the first full time paid chiefs for some of the departments that were created from nothing. On the one hand, this was a diffusion of the technical skills that the larger fire departments were able to acquire in a short period of time. But, the corollary to that was that many of the departments opposed the "big city approach" and there was actually a lot of conflict during this period of time.

Through the 60's and early into the 1980's the way that individuals prepared themselves for becoming fire chief was a combination of both experience and education. There was a concentrated effort to improve the level of professionalism in this country. For example, this was the timeframe in which 'America Burning' was written. It was also the time in which professional standards were created and



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adopted by many of the states. The effect of these improvements was to continually raise the level of competitiveness for individuals who wish to be the chief of a fire agency.

The first major departure from the written exams/oral exams process was the creation of a concept called the Assessment Lab. The Assessment Lab started to become popular in the late 70's and hit its stride initially in the early 80's. This type of selection process was oriented around the idea that knowledge must be demonstrated in order for it to be properly evaluated. The primary criticism of paper and pencil tests and even oral interviews was a fact that they didn't really get to the depth of the real person behind the job. The concept of the Assessment Lab itself came from the military in World War II. It originally was used by many of the military organizations to select their candidates for highly specialized jobs, especially organizations such as the CIA.

The Assessment Lab was designed around the idea that you could simulate different kinds of work behaviors and candidates would be able to provide you with some inside on their performance by doing what they needed to do in front of a group of "assessors." The concept had a lot of merit.

However, like all other forms of testing, individuals begin to study the test instead of studying for the job. There was a whole body of knowledge built up about how to take assessment labs so that you could score well. Unfortunately, these classes did not place a lot of emphasis on the candidate's integrity and as a net result the assessment lab then became more of a role-playing scenario for people who were good at role-playing instead of becoming good at being chief. Another element of competition that snuck in the 80's was the idea of the Executive Recruitment. The concept of Executive Recruitment has been around the industrialized world for probably over 50 years. It's a simple idea. Instead of going out and testing the Universe to find the right person for the job, an organization finds a "headhunter" whose job it is to understand the occupation and at the same time, understand the talent pool that is available. The purpose of the headhunter is to go out and to select individuals so that the screening process had a higher degree of possibility of success.

It became obvious with the use of assessment labs and then with the concept of the headhunter that it was no longer a necessity to start at the bottom of an organization and move up until you ultimately were given the chance to become the chief. Instead, the concept of professional mobility began to set in. Communities became more and more willing to accept candidates external to their organization. Candidates became more and more willing to exchange one set of benefits for another. The net result was that in the 80's and early 90's there was a great deal of professional mobility in place.

But, one of the other problems with this professional mobility and raising of the level of skills required, was that the job of fire chief was becoming less and less fun. At one time, the fire chief was looked upon as being a really honorable job and hardly anybody in the community would ever think of challenging the fire chief's authority. However, over the period of time that the fire service was changing, so was



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society. Many of the benefits of becoming the chief had become less desirable.

Among these was the idea that with some enactments of Federal Legislation, often times lower level chief officers made more money than the chief of the department because of overtime. There was a considerable increase in the potential of the fire chief being held accountable for something that his or her department did increasing liability. And with the idea of professional mobility, came the potential of conflict between labor and management. This was primarily because an individual who came into the department from the outside often did not have a lot of the institutional memory of the organization and therefore, often struck out on issues that were foreign and distasteful to the labor group. It became less and less desirable to become a fire chief at the same time it was becoming harder to become one.

That pretty much takes us up to today. If there was any kind of slogan for becoming a fire chief, it might be the one that the military used a few years ago I didn't promise you a rose garden." The job of being the fire chief is a lot more complicated, a lot more comprehensive than it ever has been in the past. The non-financial motivation to become a fire chief in today's environment is driven much more by internal forces than it is by external ones. No one in their right mind who is a competent chief officer, who works fire suppression duty work, duty shifts, would cause a person to give that all up to become the chief of the department.

Or, perhaps they would. Over the years we have talked about selecting fire chiefs. What I believe is occurring today is that fire chiefs are selecting themselves and then entering the competition in order to find out if they can be given the opportunity to fulfill their own wishes and desires. I come from the school that says that there is no such thing as being "tested" for fire chiefs. I think you are selected based upon the fact that you are what you think you are and whoever is hiring you knows exactly what they are getting. That's the basis for much of this book. A person can be extremely intelligent, technologically competent and be a total disaster as a fire chief. Others may be extremely personable, have all the charisma in the world and lack the ability to be decisive. What the fire chief of today is, is a rare combination of all of the skills and abilities that are needed to run a fire department and they are most successful when those skills and abilities are linked up with an organization that needs that combination at some point and time.

No matter what process is utilized by an organization to find that individual, the individuals who enter it must be as prepared as they can be. You don't study to become a fire chief. You study to be able to do the job of a fire chief and then you are selected from among your peers in accordance with a lot of other dimensions other than technical competency. Granted, we don't elect our fire chiefs anymore. But, a modern fire chief has to have the ability to provide leadership and management at the same time. This often involves being recognized by the individuals in an organization that a person who can be followed. And, while we recognize the fact that fire chiefs must have served sometime in the ranks to be able to adequately relate to the people they are leading, it is not absolutely essential that they spend most of



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their career there anymore. The fire service is slowly sorting itself out into two groups of people. There are officers and there are individuals who probably would rather remain as firefighters for their entire career.

What is important for the fire service to recognize is that seniority is not the leading criteria for making a person the best fire chief of the future. My personal philosophy is that a person who does each and every job that they are assigned as well as they possibly can, is obviously a candidate for upward mobility. It's unlikely that a person graduating from recruit academy looks down at their watch, glances up to a calendar and then says, well in 22 years I'll be the chief of this department. None of us approach our careers that way. Yet, we must make a conscious decision on our part to prepare ourselves to be the fire chief, if in fact, that ends up being ones goal in life. I'm not entirely sure when it happens.

In talking this over with an awful lot of my friends, I've found out that many times individuals did not know that they really were going to be interested in the job until the opportunity was right there in front of them. That's got to have a certain amount of scariness to it.

On the other hand, there are individuals who started planning and maneuvering their way to become the top dog so early in their career, that they failed to gain the depth and experience that is absolutely essential as they moved upward through their ranks. There's a balance here somewhere. If I were going to come up with a set of guidelines, it would consist of the following statements: A) Do everything you possibly can to make yourself as competent as you can in the job you are doing today. B) Prepare yourself as quickly as you possibly can to take the next position in the rank structure when your confidence level allows. C) Never accept any more responsibility than your emotions will allow you to control.

If you want to become a fire chief now is the time to think about it. If you already are one, perhaps it's time to reflect upon it. If you are really not sure, read the following chapters.