



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Truth and Consequences

There is a city in New Mexico that's named Truth or Consequences. That is a strange name for a city however; there is an explanation for its origin. A TV personality named Art Linkletter had one of the early game shows on radio in which individuals were asked to tell the truth or face the consequences. Linkletter was so popular with this show that the town was eventually named in his honor.

But what if you tell the truth and still have to face the consequences? What I have in mind here is a discussion on what happens when a fire chief is put to the ultimate test of speaking their professional mind and then having it turn back on them in the form of rejection, scorn or even outright hostility from others. If you don't think this can happen to you, then you should read the clipping files in my file cabinet. I have numerous cases in which fire chiefs have gone on record of things that they really felt were truthful that resulted in them receiving votes of no confidence from unions and/or outright rejection by political bodies. In many cases telling the truth has cost people their jobs.

Times are getting tougher. Have you noticed? Budgets are being reduced. Service levels are being impacted. In addition, two other impacts have emerged from the tough times; Fear and Anxiety. The fallout from those two impacts may be well be the loss of credibility of the fire chief with the authority having jurisdiction and the loss of the relationship between the fire chief and those that they have sworn to lead; the firefighters.

This was brought home to me in a discussion with one such individual who felt that he was going to be damned if he did and damned if he didn't. If he told the City Manager what he was really thinking he was probably going to be in a lot of hot water with his boss. On the other hand, if he told personnel on the floor what the "party line" was from City Hall he was going to receive criticism there. This raises a question in my mind as to whether or not it is really true that this is a no win situation.

I know the phenomenon that is going to force this issue to the forefront for many of you. It has already happened to me several times in my career. What I am referring to is when you are brought into the City Manager's office or into a City Council meeting and are told that you have to make budget reductions with potentially serious consequences on your department. Right then and there things start going sideways when someone looks at you and says "ok chief what are your recommendations" going to be? Are we truly comfortable when it comes to sitting in front of a group of people and recommending that our fire department be disassembled after all of the effort and energy we put into its creation in the first place? I think not!

The first place I would like to start on truth and the consequences is to state that I do not believe that it is fair for either city management or labor unions to believe that a fire chief is a bad person because



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they tell the truth. The real issue comes in determining exactly what the truth is. What I am referring to here is the assessment of the process that any good management is going to have to go through in order to live in financial constraints. At the very outset I think it a very important point needs to be made. A Fire Chief facing a budget crisis is not making a recommendation to reduce. Rather they must be prepared to make recommendation on how to assess the consequences of the impact. Moreover, they should be making an assessment that other people will have to determine whether or not it is valid. We live in a form of government in which department heads jobs is to recommend public policy. We also live in a form of government in which public policy makers are supposed to make the tough decision based upon the best possible input from their professional staff.

Let's use an over simplified example to make my point. Let us say that in hypothetical fire department "x" the budget needs to be reduced by a specific amount that roughly equals the cost of a single engine company. The fire chief saunters into his boss's office and says sure go ahead and cut that company- without any evaluation of the consequences, literally they have been taking money under false pretenses. That is not a fire chief at all. On the other hand, if the fire chief takes the point of view that he will not, cannot and will not make any assessment of how to lessen the impact on the community at that point, I would make the case that they may not be that much of a fire chief at that point either. We ought to clear the decks on one settling one big issue right now.

Fire chiefs are not making *recommendations* to *reduce* their budget when they are engaging in this type of activity. They are assessing the consequences of making budget adjustments based upon their best professional judgment. . Communities often find that there is a structural deficiency between the revenues and their expenditures and they through the appropriate channels of communications have to set priority. They are the ones that make the budget reductions, not the fire chief. Yet, the appropriate role of an individual who is leading in managing a fire organization is to make darn sure that everybody really understands what options and alternatives are available before any draconian measures are taken to severely impact the level of service.

Yep, that is what we are talking about; level of service. It is what we do on the ground; it is what we deliver to the scene of an emergency that really counts. And the fire service is probably one of the most difficult professions for the novice to clearly understand what level of service means. By that, I draw another simple analogy. If I tell you that your garbage is only going to be picked up once a month instead of once a week that is a pretty clear indication that your level of service has been impacted. On the other hand if you have never had a fire in your house and have never called for emergency medical service and you feel that your taxes are to high, hearing someone say that it is going to take three more minutes to get to the scene of a fire in your house may or may not be an important thing to focus on. And that is exactly what happens in the political process. People who are un-educated can make extremely easy decisions to cut levels of service without any idea of the consequences.



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My suggestion for remedying this whole situation is pretty straightforward. If you are the fire chief and you find yourself in a scenario in which someone brings you into a meeting and states unequivocally that something must happen with your budget, it is time for three things to occur. The first of these is for you to have one heck of a good portfolio of information already available before that question is ever asked. The second of these is to have a game plan with options and alternatives that you have already thought about in advance rather than waiting to come up with them at the last minute. The third is to employ extensively the concept of participative management in making the decisions with regard to what your plan is going to look like.

Let's take point number one first. If you are not doing a good job of measuring the performance of your department don't expect the politicians to accept anything you tell them in a crisis mode. If you are not reporting to them the performance metrics of fire companies, your fire prevention bureau, your training division or for that matter any program that requires funding to maintain a level of service then essentially those people are deaf, dumb and blind. I have watched with a certain degree of alarm over the last ten or fifteen years the erosion of fire departments doing an adequate job of keeping monthly and annual statistics on their workload performance. Granted, there are lots of efforts to try to stem the tide of that sort of analytical apathy but I often feel it is too little too late for many departments. For example, there is a document put out by the International City County Management Association dealing with performance metrics. I will readily admit to you that that the document they propose is a really difficult document to read through. Yet contained amongst all that statistical mumbo jumbo are performance statistics that are absolutely critical that are going to be needed in the event that service level roll backs become an issue.

This is not an article about statistics so I am not going to go over them. However, I will state upfront that if your database cannot support your ability to predict the consequences of budget rollbacks then your statistics mean nothing. Nobody else cares about them. When was the last time you had a civilian walk through the front door and demand to know exactly what the response time is to your house? When was the last time that a citizens group asked what your fractal of performance has been in a specific neighborhood in your community?

Giving that budget reductions are not something you do in a crisis. It really has more to do with how work you put into the development of an adequate database to support measurement of your level of service so that any intended reduction can be evaluated with respect to consequence.

Now what about that game plan? Can you imagine a football coach going into a world championship game with an empty notebook of plays? What if he got all of his coaches in a room and said, "gee fella's we are going up against the toughest adversaries but I just haven't had time to develop any plays and you guys have got to go out on the field and make them up as we go." That person wouldn't stay a coach for very long and they certainly would stand a very minimal chance winning a championship. A



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fire chief in order to be prepared for budget reductions has got to have an adequate review of contemporary standards to know what potential solutions might be there.

Almost instantly when I bring up this idea of solutions I can see people rolling their eyes in the back of their heads. They are probably thinking that the only two solutions are cut staff and cut engines. That is not what I am talking about. What I am talking about is whether or not you have an adequate amount of information on how to do such things as rolling brown outs. I am not talking about just conceptually; I am talking about it practically. How many of you have actually sat down and evaluated your own fire defenses to determine which engine companies would be more likely candidates for temporary reductions based upon workload analysis and consequences of assessment? Nobody wants to talk about these things before they happen and there is an absolute fear that if we even bring them up somehow or other they would be found as acceptable long term solutions. I don't have that feeling about them myself.

Most communities know what the contemporary standard is that meets their needs. To suggest that a short-term solution would be a long term fix for a major infrastructure difficulties in a fire department overlooks the simple fact that communities have memories also. If you suggest, for example, that that the level of service in a neighborhood be temporarily set aside and we don't worry and fret over it, don't worry the citizens are going to be concerned about it also. What we have to have in our portfolio is an accurate representation of exactly what options and alternatives are open to us. Thirdly, we talk about participative management all the time in the touchy, feely world of human resource issues and nobody realizes just how important participative management really is in dealing with budget crisis. This is not time to play games behind closed doors. Everyone belongs at the table, labor, management, administration, fire prevention and training. You need as many eyes and ears as you can possibly get for people to talk about reality.

Admittedly, this is an opportunity for things to go really bad in a big hurry. If everybody walks in a room, sits down and folds their arms across their chests, and says I won't play, it is going to be tough. In my personal opinion that is why one of the reasons why options and alternatives need to be worked out at the staff level long before this kind of a war room discussion even has to be held. But as chief you do have an obligation to make sure that you don't make any moves that you have not contemplated every consequence that could emerge. It has been my personal experience that in spite of absolute hysteria over a potential budget impact that the firefighters are incredibly creative and innovative human beings. Given the opportunity to solve their own problem they are often more creative then they are reactive. I am not suggesting for example that a union leader is going to come into a meeting like this and feel elated about the opportunity.

To the contrary, I think this is the time in which we should be asking the labor organization exactly how they feel about issues, but more over that we make sure that both labor and management have a clear



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understanding of what numbers are being talked about and how those numbers are calculated. If we go back to the previous discussion about having a game plan, it should be obvious that this kind of a working relationship doesn't start in a crisis. Instead it starts back at the informative stages of having a staff that knows how to work between labor and management on all issues relative to budgeting. It is my personal opinion that the more that we have our budgeting process taken down to the lowest possible levels in our organization, i.e. at the fire captain level, the more likely people will have a clear understanding of what is at stake.

What emerges from all of this is not a set of recommendations for the fire chief to whack the budget, what emerges is a plan. A cold, hard specific plan. And the most important part of that plan is consequence assessment. It is one thing to make an arbitrary decision to reduce a certain line item in a budget. It is entirely something different to describe that consequence upon the organization. Obviously as budgets get bigger and bigger and the numbers become frighten large this is a scary set of circumstances. But remember this is a plan not a proposal. Service level enhancement is a simple thing to do. Service level reductions are where real management skills are brought to bear. Anybody can spend more money, but it takes a team to live within limits.

I don't know how many of you have gone through this drill out there? I know I have been through it about six times in my fire service career. I, like you, have scar tissue left over from situations in which I was very distressed to be confronted with budgetary vows. Yet, I have also gone through this experience and have come out on the other side with a plan to restore those service reductions as soon as the physical reality would allow.

It has always been interesting to me to go to a fire chief's assessment lab and watch them have a drill where they talk about making a ten percent budget reduction to watch the machinations of individuals trying to impress the peer assessors of how desperately they would cut the ten percent. Reality is that this is not a peer assessor exercise. This is an organizational exercise that requires a long-term strategy. If you are waiting to have your experience in your first budget reduction drill for someone to come down and tell you that you have to do it, you are already starting off behind the learning curve. In the final analysis there is always that scenario in which you are asked to come up in front of the city council and give your little speech. Someone is likely to look you in the eye and say "Chief are these your recommendations?"

I faced that myself several times. I am sure some of you have too. The terminology that I have chosen to express myself at that point may seem a little bit like wordsmithing, but I honestly believe it needs to be the perspective of the fire chief. My answer to that has almost always been that this is my plan of operation to maintain the highest level of service given the financial restraints that we are being forced to operate under. In my opinion we are not recommending reductions we are recommending a plan to maintain reasonable accommodations. We both know there is going to be that uneasy feeling in the pit



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of your stomach while you are waiting for your boss to bite your head off because you haven't subscribed to the party line. Very often city managers and other forms of appointing authorities over fire chiefs believe that we are tradition bound and are incapable of making tough managerial decisions. I tend to disagree with that. However the perception is there and we must deal with it.

In the context of this discussion and this discussion only, it is important how we play our hand.

To share a personal experience, along these lines, I was once required to make a budget reduction in my budget that I had three alternative plans to achieve. My superior selected one of them. When we went to the city council meeting I was asked the same question I was previously. The mayor who I had been working with for many years jokingly referred to me as asking if I had plan B. I in turn came back with the answer, "and plan C also!" He invited a discussion of both of those plans. The outcome of the discussion was the budget reduction was made. Plan B was selected as a result of open dialogue at the council chambers with input from the city council and others about the impact on the community. To bring this article to a close, I feel it is very important for the chief of the department to be the captain of the department's destiny. There are principles involved here that go to the root of the integrity of our role and responsibility of leading an organization.

The fire chief should not find himself in the dais of the city council meeting feeling like a piece of roasted meat on a spit. But neither can we find ourselves on a pillar – pedestal that we can be pushed off either. The proper posture ought to be as if you were at the steering wheel of your organizations flagship. Unlike the military we do not give out purple hearts to those injured in combat, much less providing recognition to those individuals who suffer injury as a result of conflict that emerges from budget battle. If it hasn't happened to you or to your department, consider yourself a lucky person. If it could happen to you in the future consider yourself forewarned. If you think that it can't happen to you then you might wish to consider what will happen if you are wrong.