



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

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## **WHAT IS YOUR SIGN?**

by

**Ronny J. Coleman**

Remember the old conversation starter: What is your sign? It was often used as a means of initiating a conversation between a man and a woman with some degree of anticipation that the answer would provide subsequent conversation. You a Gemini? It would sometimes lead to social interaction. Other times it would lead to immediate dismissal.

Somehow or other, I think all that dialogue back in the Age of Aquarius was pretty stupid. It is now a new century and the word sign might even have a different connotation than it did back then. For example, I have heard that gangs use signs as an indication of loyalty and communication. But more importantly what do we use signs for in the fire service?

The answer is simple. We use signs to warn us of danger. One of the earliest set of signs that I recall was the NFPA 704M labeling system that gave firefighters a warning regarding what they were getting ready to face in hazardous materials situations. The diamond shaped NFPA warning system showed responding firefighters what to look out. Hopefully, they paid attention before they got hurt.

What got me started on this discussion was some recent debate about different kinds of placards that we are putting on buildings today in hopes of letting responding firefighters know what is going on inside the building. I am not going to elaborate too much on what specific subjects were being covered by this dialogue, as much as I would like to focus on what those placards actually mean and why they can be dangerous to us in some ways.

If we put anything on the outside of a building that is intended to keep us out of trouble from something on the inside of that building, there are two essential criteria that must be met. The first is that the sign must be readily accessible and visible to the responding fire company. It has to be seen for it to be obeyed. Secondly, it must trigger a specific behavior on the part of the fire service personnel, specifically the incident commander, because if firefighters continue to proceed in spite of that sign, the warning is useless. We have proof that this has actually happened in incidents.

This debate resulted in me doing some research about how the general safety industry regards signage with respect to warning employees of danger. There is an entire body of knowledge that is being used by the safety industry that is separate from what we in the fire service take for granted with our warning systems. Our tendency is to look at only those types of signs that we



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have required posting, i.e. Knox box signs, hazardous materials warnings, and perhaps even access signs.

What I am talking about is even more fundamental. Have you ever read the definition of the signs that OSHA wants to have posted in work places in order to keep people from being hurt on the job? Section 1910.145 of OSHA defines tags as follows:

Danger: "shall be used in major hazard situations where an immediate hazard presents a threat of death or serious injury to employees. Danger tags shall be used only in these situations."



Warning: "may be used to represent a hazard level between "Caution" and "Danger." instead of the required "Caution" tag, provided that they have a signal word of "Warning," an appropriate major message, and otherwise meet the general tag criteria of paragraph (f)(4) of this section."



Caution: "shall be used in minor hazard situations where a non-immediate or potential hazard or unsafe practice presents a lesser threat of employee injury."



Do we have any such signs on our place of work? Leaning a little bit on my friend Sean DeCrane's comment, that the fire ground is our place of work, as opposed to the fire station, raises a question; are we adequately giving firefighters a warning about what they are about to go up against in the various labeling schemes that we have encouraged?

If you are reading this column from the perspective of fire marshal, you might say to yourself, that you have already seen these signs when you have been out looking at compressors,



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generators, hazardous materials, production facilities, storage facilities, and other sites in which these signs are being posted to protect employees. But do they protect the fire service?

But do they protect the fire service? In my mind, these signs cannot be taken for granted and they cannot be overlooked just because somebody else put them up.

I formed this comparison in my mind when contrasting these signs with the actions of our own firefighters. Where do these signs appear on the fire ground? Perhaps every home that we fight fire in ought to have a **caution** sign on the mailbox. Every home that is two stories or has a basement should have a **warning** sign on it. Every time a building catches fire and there is smoke coming out of the eaves, or emerging from the windows in the basement somebody ought to be putting a **danger** sign on that building.

Granted, we are experts at danger. Our job should be however, to walk away from danger alive. No one has ever built a reputation as an effective firefighter by wounding or killing members of their crew. We are in the business of placing people in dangerous environments.

What I am suggesting is we carry a set of hypothetical labels in the back of our mind, and when we look at different situations we face on the fire ground, we should start setting up warning, caution and danger labels as part of the IAP.

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