



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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You Don't Get What You Deserve – You Get What You Can Justify

That's right! You don't get in life what you deserve, you often get in life what you can justify. I have seen a few other articles that say you don't get in life what you want but what you can negotiate. They all imply that hoping that you are going to get something is probably the worst strategy unless it is backed up by either negotiation skills or justification skills.

Nowhere does it play itself out in a more dramatic way than within the annual budget battle experienced by most fire departments. There is a whole bunch of things that many fire departments wish they have and actually feel they deserve to have them but they don't. And the reason why, is they have never been able to obtain adequate amount of public support to invest in the objects or they have found themselves coming up in second place in the competition for public funds.

Neither condition is desirable for a fire chief to be in. It points out the fact that the process of budgeting is not always just a case of sitting down and making up a laundry list of those things you want. There is a part of the budget process that many people completely fail to pay attention to. And that is the long and somewhat arduous task of understanding why you need something in the first place. If you can't justify it and you can't negotiate it then there is a high degree of possibility that the only time you are going to get it is when there is either an excess of funds or somebody is just feeling downright benevolent towards the fire department.

Unfortunately, this skill set is not usually found between the pages of budgeting 101 and certainly is not something that gets a lot of play at the annual fire academy. However, it is a very realistic set of circumstances. There are hundreds maybe thousands of fire departments out there that are underfunded, inadequately supported, poorly staffed, poorly trained and are under capacity in comparison to the things that they are supposed to be protecting in the community.

Unfortunately the fire service has gotten a bad rap in the budget battle by the fact that we tend to base all of our requests for things on the consequence that might occur at the time of a fire. City Managers and Mayors have often characterized this as "the burning baby speech". It when an emotional argument is used to either justify something or attempt to embarrass the organization into making an investment to avoid public criticism. When it works it works. When it doesn't work, it really is bad.

What I would like to suggest is that there is at least two skill sets that we ought to be placing a lot of emphasis on that are as much a part of the budgeting process as calculating the columns of figures. The first of these I would characterize as building your case. The second set of skills I would classify as debating the consequence.



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What do I mean by these two skill sets? In the first place, writing up the specifications for a new piece of equipment, i.e., a fire truck and/or a new fire station is a relatively simple task. Preparing specifications in some cases is more a case of starting with the old set of specifications and just making sure that you have taken into consideration all of the technological changes. There is really not much creativity into that. That is not the real problem we are talking about. Building a case for a decision that is going to cost the taxpayers hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars starts with a much more fundamental perspective. That perspective is why? Why is this needed? And, I got to tell you there are probably a million different reasons why the various things that a fire department needs to do business are justified. However, most people start off by looking at the price tag of something instead of the justification for it in the first place. That is why I think there are tactical errors being made. I could make the argument that buying a new fire truck when funds are readily available is not much of a technological challenge. The challenge begins when a community starts looking at that fire truck as being very, very expensive and they don't understand why it worked last year and it won't work next year and the year after that. In my opinion there are literally thousands of fire trucks out there sitting in fire stations that ought to be replaced but the justification for doing so has been obscured by the fact that the entire emphasis is on how much it costs to replace it instead of why it is there in the first place.

Building a case means to stop thinking about the obvious and start penetrating the possible. For example, if a fire truck reaches a certain age of antiquity it begins to increase the liability to a community. When a fire truck begins to break down more frequently than it has in the past there is a remote possibility that it takes it out of service more often than it is desirable. The justification for a piece of equipment is not inherent in its specification. Instead the justification is based on a matter of public policy.

Then if we manage to develop a justification, or any given change that we wish to introduce the next skill set has to do with being able to debate the consequences of failing to meet that justification. The fine art of compromise might work in here but I would choose another word. In my opinion compromise has a negative connotation but scheduled implementation does not. And that is what I am referring to here. If you can't always get everything you want then the name of the game is to try to get as much of something that builds towards it. For example, if you don't have all the money to replace a fire truck in one year you might need to be looking at getting an amortization program started. And, if you are able to succeed at that perhaps you need to look at alternative funding schemes such as lease purchase for apparatus. The fine art of debating the conclusion is exercising the "what if" syndrome. What if you make a decision today what will its consequences be ten years from now.

And, one of the arguments that I have made many times in looking at both justification and gradual implementation is that fire departments should become much more knowledgeable about revenue streams than they should be about expenditure columns. Timing, coordination, leveraged opportunities



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often allow you to acquire something that you desperately want without the entire emphasis being on the fact that you are desperate.

And of course, this particular skill set also works much better if you have a context of having a long range plan in mind as you pursue the development of any acquisition. Nothing beats having a sense of where you are, where you have come from and where you want to be. Laying out those parameters does require that an organization have a sense of value about the process instead of about the product.