

# Relay Your Message and Pass the Baton



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When I was in junior high school, I was a member of a 440-yard relay team. A relay team consists of four individuals each of whom covers 25% of the distance. There is a person who starts. There are two people in the middle and there is a person who covers the final distance. Each team has a baton that must be handed off to each person in order; the last person must have that baton in his clutches as he crosses the finish line.

One advantage of a relay team is that each member shoulders a portion of the load. Another is that you can leverage the strengths of each member by how you position the runners. If you want to take an early lead, you put your fastest guy first. If you want to put a lot of kick into the final stretch, you put your fastest runner fourth.

A picture came into my mind recently as we were discussing various aspects of succession planning. One individual said, "One of the problems that I am facing is that nobody wants to take over after I am gone."

In other words, he has the baton but has no one to hand it to. Should he keep on running, or should he toss the baton on the desktop, walk out the door, and not worry about the organization after he has left?

There are more and more fire departments having to face up to the fact that nobody has been adequately prepared to take over when the incumbent walks away. Is this a new phenomenon or is it merely getting more attention because of the phalanx of other issues that are affecting today's society?

In thinking about this metaphor, it occurred to me that, in order for the baton to be passed successfully, both the giver and receiver have to be moving. In other words, the hand off was not matter of one person stopping and another starting. Rather, one person would share time and space for a few seconds with another person while the transfer was made — then the other person would move on.

In order to develop future chiefs, candidates have to be running with us. This is the best case I have ever made for delegation of authority. If you truly are interested in succession planning, one of the things

that you should be encouraging is a more transparent insight into the fire chief's job. In other words, get people more involved with what you are doing.

OK, I can hear you thinking — how in the world do I do that? I am not suggesting that it will be easy. But I am telling you that it is a skill that you need to start developing if you want to successfully pass the baton someday. We need to get more people on the track with us and support their development. Right now is a very important time for us to bring people with potential into our organizational structure and ask them for their input on what could or should be done to make the organization continue to function at a high level. One could call this "delegation," but I think there's more to it than that. This is a form of coaching. Using another athletic metaphor, it is more along the lines of being a playing coach, instead of one who sits on the sidelines and sends in the plays.

The relay-team metaphor is misleading in one sense. Most relay teams run a very limited distance. But the process I am talking about in fire-department succession planning is analogous to relay team that can go on immemorial. In other words, the tenure of a chief coupled with the tenure of his successor takes the organization in a specific direction. Do that two or three times in a row and the organization tends to develop a culture based upon that direction.

So, how do you see yourself in the relay race today? Are you kicking it off and have an opportunity to project ahead for future generations? Or, are you a finisher who is about ready to turn the organization over to some other organizational structure, such as consolidation or regionalization? The answer to that question may determine how many other people are willing to run the race with you.

Running the race as an individual may be rewarding. But, running the race as part of a team that together clears obstacles and succeeds because of its collective strength will deliver an extra measure of satisfaction.

Be a winner! ■