

# CHIEF'S CLIPBOARD

## Votes of no confidence

When dealing with hierarchical power, authority and responsibility, even the boss likes to be accepted as "one of the gang." Most of us have a difficult time dealing with rejection.

What a fire chief expects from a fire department often is not what everyone else wants. This situation sometimes results in a conflict that is expressed as a "vote of no confidence."

Fire chiefs cannot give votes of no confidence to their own personnel. But, when a vote of no confidence is expressed about a chief, it can have damaging effects.

It is important for fire chiefs to understand the meaning of a vote of no confidence. It may never happen to you, but if it does, you must be emotionally and intellectually prepared or it could be devastating to your career.

Most votes of no confidence intend to portray that a person is incompetent or incapable of providing leadership. It is based on the premise that if a large number of people say something is wrong, outsiders tend to accept this opinion as evidence that something is wrong.

However, votes of no confidence are not necessarily questions of competency. In some instances, there is a power struggle.

There are several things fire chiefs should do to prepare for a possible confidence showdown in the organization: know your strengths and weaknesses; maintain liaison with your superiors; and be realistic about what is happening in your department. Remember, "reality" is somewhere between what you think is happening and what everyone else



By Chief Ronny Coleman

thinks is going on.

In reviewing situations involving individuals who had difficulty in their organizations, two predominant characteristics exhibited were tendencies to underestimate their adversaries and to make light of serious circumstances.

It is natural for individuals to disagree. But, when a conflict arises, the chief must not retreat and become isolated from the problem. This allows the adversarial relationship to grow.

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**"Look for ways of bolstering your strength by reinforcing other people instead of merely reinforcing yourself."**

Inconsistent leadership is another characteristic that can be exhibited by individuals who confront a vote of no confidence. Inconsistency can be as bad as isolation because individuals, who wish to discredit a chief, can claim

these inconsistencies are proof that the chief is not focused. People also might begin to manipulate these situations.

If managers are experiencing difficulties within the department, they should not attempt to hide the conflict from a supervisor. It is also dangerous if you fail to communicate the problem and someone else reports it to your superior. Do not go running to your boss every time there is a problem. However, it is important to maintain open channels of communication so that when conflicts arise, everyone can address them as problems to be solved rather than personnel conflicts to be settled.

Communication is important, especially if you are faced with a public disagreement. If the groundwork is laid properly to justify your position on specific issues, it is probable that your superior will support you.

Whenever people face a conflict that seems to be based on one of their own weaknesses, they should not attempt to justify their weaknesses or gloss over their significance. Look for ways of bolstering your strength by reinforcing other people instead of merely reinforcing yourself. Seeking advice from others is not necessarily a display of weakness.

Even when serious conflicts arise, it is unlikely everyone in the organization will be completely disappointed with your performance. You should be willing to discuss the issue with those who have different opinions.

This is not an easy task. However, in an age when the world super powers can tear down concrete walls and rip up barbed wire that has divided an entire globe, there is no reason why fire chiefs cannot sit down with adversaries and dis-

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cuss differences of opinion.

How you behave after a vote of no confidence is as equally important as your previous actions.

You must take responsibility for your actions. If you handled the matter openly, focused on results, and did not isolate yourself, you should not have to apologize for your position on the matter.

In addition to knowing all the facts, you should know what your limits and levels of authority are in dealing with issues that led up to the opinion differences.

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Either work with your superiors to prepare a joint statement or present your position clearly to the public or adversaries within the department. Refusing to deal with the media, or with those with whom you disagree, only creates a perception of fear. If someone says he or she has no confidence in you, you should not act as if you have no confidence in yourself.

Focusing on results instead of causes means you should avoid trying to find who are the “ring leaders” of the opposition. Even if you know, it won’t benefit you to point a finger at them. If someone indicates he or she has no confidence in you, ask the person what you can do to restore it.

In reviewing many votes of no confidence, it is my observation that there are no winners, just a series of losers. Even individuals who are expressing dissatisfaction with leadership in their department often end up losing. That is because the department’s credibility diminishes in the community as a result of internal disagreement. These results can have a long-lasting impact on the morale of an organization.

You must be internally prepared for a vote of no confidence. Adversaries might attempt to assassinate your character, and you have a right to fight back in a responsible and positive manner. □