

Who Moved the Finish Line?



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A once-popular management book was based upon a rhetorical question: “Who moved my cheese?” I purchased a copy and spent time reviewing the concept behind the catchy title. Now it rests on the bookcase along with its brethren. That must have been more than 20 years ago.

What brought it to mind recently was a conversation with a chief officer who was discussing the process of change. He said that not only had someone moved his cheese, but moved his finish line as well. He declared that the constant pressure of change today has caused him to re-evaluate when he is going to retire. In his case, he had wanted to retire later but is thinking about pulling the pin now. For him, this act would signify that his race is over.

For his organization, however, the race will continue. The system keeps evolving, with or without our presence. Somebody still has to make the tough decisions. But when experienced personnel retire early because of the stress they are trying to avoid, they leave their fire departments even more vulnerable.

By pretending there is a finish line to this process, we are engaged in an exercise in futility. It may be the cause of unnecessary stress on who are currently in a position of authority today. They keep on thinking that it will all be over soon. It won't be.

Our individual careers are not like a foot race — though they might seem like a sprint in some cases, and a marathon in others. Rather, the fire service really is more like a relay race that started a long time ago and is not over. Each of us has been given the opportunity to carry the baton for awhile, but sooner or later we need to hand it over to someone else. The finish line is so far into the future that we cannot even begin to see it.

The reason there is no finish line is that we are never finished. No matter what each generation does to reduce the risk, there are always new risks. Every new technology that makes it easier to combat emergencies eventually is plagued by a new and emerging problem for which the tool becomes obsolete. Budgets

cannot just keep escalating as if there is no tomorrow, because in some tomorrows there will limited funds.

One thing is for sure: We should not despair from this phenomenon. It is what should sustain us. We should be delighted that we were given the chance to carry the baton.

It's a real tragedy to see so many individuals reach the end of their careers disappointed, even angry about one or more of the current economic problems facing their profession. If only we could extract a pint of blood from every candidate when they graduate from the academy, full of enthusiasm and passion, and infuse it into the their blood stream as they approach retirement — perhaps then we could stem the tide of frustration. Everyone who is leaving embittered could possibly restore that sense of meaningfulness that came with choosing the fire service as a career in the first place, if we could give them that transfusion.

I'm not writing this column to trivialize the nature of our current problems. To the contrary, it's my belief that we need to pay very close attention to them as we hand the leadership reins to a new generation. But I do say hand off the baton — don't toss it over the proverbial shoulder as if it was something to be disposed.

What change is even further down the road? Will there be a rehabilitation of our profession from the economic losses we are experiencing right now? Probably. Will the fire service come out of this looking differently than before? Possibly.

Who is going to facilitate these changes? Not you or I. Instead it will be our successors who now have been handed the baton. Kudos to those who ran the race over the last 20 years. They should be allowed to go to the sidelines and get a breather. But they should not be considered dropouts from the race. Any person who carried the baton successfully should be looked upon as an asset to the team and stick around to help coach their successors.

To paraphrase Robert Frost, we have miles to go before we sleep. ■