



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The 64 Dollar Question

Quiz shows give away a lot of money for some simple answers to simple questions. If you are a follower of this particular type of entertainment you have probably seen shows in which people walk away with a million dollars for knowing something that you knew too. It hasn't always been that expensive to ask a tough question for a prize. I can remember a 1940's era radio show in which the top prize was worth \$64. It was never taken for granted that the person facing the \$64 question was going to be able to respond appropriately. Many times they missed the answer. At the time it seemed like a lot of money. Today, it is a pittance. Now you can be made a millionaire on a one hour TV show.

Nonetheless, there is a concept imbedded in both in the old time version and in the new version. That is the idea that question to win the prize always is the toughest one to answer. In your life you are going to be asked a lot of questions. Some of them you will be prepared for. Some of them you won't. Interestingly, some of the questions for which you do not have an answer may be more important than those you already have an answer for.

Here for example is my version of a modern 64 dollar question based on when you decide to become a fire marshal? What did you do about it?

I am not asking when you decided to become a firefighter because that, in many cases occurs at an age so young that it is a very tentative assessment of your whole life. Becoming a firefighter was likely based upon a lot of other values such as having a job and earning a living. Sometimes individuals chose the fire service because it was seemingly a rewarding career. Others joined the fire service because it was in the family genes. For others, it is just a job.

So, I am not asking when you decided to become a firefighter. What I would like to know is when did you decide that you wanted to become the head of fire prevention bureau?

I have had this conversation with hundreds, maybe even thousands of individuals. I have met many fire marshals in my career and I have heard a wide variety of responses.

This topic came into sharp focus recently in a conversation with Dr. Denis Onieal at the Fire Academy. If anyone has ever heard Dr. Onieal's discussion on professionalism and his question of how does a person go about becoming a fire chief, you might recognize this dialogue. I would submit that very few people actually start a fire service career with that goal in mind. I am not saying there aren't a few because I know that I have heard folks say that it was their lifelong desire. If you have wanted to be the top dog practically from childhood more power to you. But the vast majority of firefighters simply don't think that way. To the contrary, if we were going to compare a firefighter to a nurse and compare the fire



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marshal to a doctor, we can easily see that very few nurses grow up to become MDs. There are a lot of MDs that have never served as a nurse in their lifetime. But, we have this entry level point as a firefighter as a starting point to almost all of our careers.

Again, the 64 dollar question, which by now is the 64,000 dollar question, is; when did you make that decision? I am talking about you; the individual who is reading this column right this very moment. Was it an epiphany? Was it an opportunity? Was it born out of competition? Was it prompted by a desire to control your own destiny? There can be any number of answers for those questions.

As I was preparing this article I thought of a parallel question that goes right along with it. Why would anybody in their right mind want to be a fire marshal today? Isn't it true that there are many fire marshals that are under siege? Isn't it equally true that there are many fire marshals today who are shepherding their fire department through very tumultuous times because they possess the unique skill set and have personal attributes that are giving their department a chance for survival?

This is a magazine that is written primarily for fire prevention bureau personnel. The magazine is commonly read by those who are only one or two steps away from that top position and they are equally important in this discussion. Today I am talking to Fire Marshals. If you are a member of department and reading this column, what is your game plan for the future?

What are you doing to get prepared for that inevitability of becoming the fire person in the bureau? And I call it an inevitability because at some point in your life you will have to make a choice as a subordinate chief officer as to whether or not you want to make that final step. The question is, are you ready for it?

If you have contemplated these questions in the past, it is not necessary for us to dwell on specifics but it is important that we address a couple of generalities. The first of these is, are you really ready for that final step? The second question is what are you doing to eliminate any deficiencies in your background that will cause you to fail if you take that step?

The answer to the first question comes from self-assessment. You and only you know what your strengths and weaknesses are. You ought to be the most authoritative human being in the world on what you know and what you don't know. Moreover, you should be the resident authority on what it is you know for sure that you will stand on when you are under stress. I am talking about of course principles and values.

The second question, how much time have you spent doing "career planning"? Once you have completed self-assessment, what are you doing to make sure that you don't arrive at the final career rung on the promotional ladder with a big hole in your resume?



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So, take a look at who you are today and what you stand for and look down the highway 25 years from now. If you are already a chief, what are you doing to set the example for your subordinates in terms of career planning and self-assessment? If you are an individual who aspires to be the fire chief and have suddenly made the decision that you want to become competitive, what is your plan?

I hope both of the types of readers that I have just described are out there and taking notice of this phenomenon. In spite of the fact that we have some of the best educational opportunities that have ever existed for the fire service, and the fact that we have the most prolific writers producing textbooks and manuals and you can literally paper the walls of your house with certificates if you took all of the training classes that come your way, there are still doubt in many people's minds that there is a straightforward path to the job of being the fire chief. I believe that the journey begins with a single step: your commitment to plan for that eventuality.

There once was a movie that was entitled "The Accidental Tourist". What you do not want to be is the accidental fire chief.