



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

All Things to All People

How many have you heard this question during an oral board examination; what is your leadership style? What was your answer? I always found this one question to be a really interesting test of practicality. This is because those that tried to answer the question with a textbook answer usually missed the mark by a long way. By alluding to the fact that they are complying with somebody else's version of leadership it often lacks a sense of commitment. I also found that people who said that they didn't really have a style but based it upon a sense of conditions that emerged, i.e. the situational type of leadership sometimes didn't fare well with the oral board because they seemed to be wishy washy. The answer to what is your leadership style is really a little bit more complicated than a simple oral board question.

For, you are what you are. You are the type of leader that you made yourself into. Forget labels. Forget titles. But, remember the theories.

In a recent column in Time Magazine, one of the editors made a statement that there are probably more books on leadership than are true leaders in society. If that is true, then we have an over abundance of words on the subject, and, minimal capacity to deliver on those words. The same thing could be said about the concept of leadership within the fire service. There are lots of books about it. However, there seems to be a paucity of people who are willing to stick their neck out too far for fear of getting it cut off. As we so often see with leaders in the fire service, they are often under attack for unpopular and controversial positions. Seldom do we reward leadership for anything unless the leader complies with traditional solutions.

This phenomenon is very clearly spelled out in a book I recently read. It is called "The Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice". It was recently published by the Harvard Business School. This is not really a textbook. Instead it is a colloquia. A number of authors who are writing about the topic were searching for some thread of continuity that sews leadership theory all together. Unfortunately, the Harvard Business School editors and contributors could not come up with a definitive theory of leadership that everyone agreed with. This puts us back to trying to understand what leadership theory is all about in the first place.

In this publication, the editors have indicated that they believe that the vast majority of academic research and so called theory development on leadership has been abandoned by the academic community and relinquished to popular writers and management consultants. One does not have to go too far to see the potential truthfulness of this statement. Go to a B Dalton or Borders bookstore and look at the number of books on leadership sitting on the shelves. Many of them are nothing more than regurgitation of personality styles. Most of them are named after someone. They have titles such as Lincoln on Leadership, Atilla the Hun on Leadership, Mahameta Gandhi on Leadership, Patton, Eisenhower, etc.



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If you wish to have a really definitive answer on what kind of style of leadership you possess, you need to know about those theories. But, unless you are imminently successful and someone is writing a book about you, it is unlikely that your name will appear in front of any of those titles.

Much has been made about the concept of situational leadership. I have interpreted situational leadership differently than many others. I don't think it means changing your leadership style to adapt to an individual set of circumstances. I think it's changing your environment so that your leadership style works.

As we have already stated, reading about leadership doesn't make you into a leader. Believing that you want to be one is a starting point, however. Leadership also consists of having a really clear cut understanding of human behavior and its relationship to your personal skill set. Instead of worrying about which theory of leadership you are following, you need to be worried about who is following you.

In one of the texts I read they discuss the concept called "The Charismatic Leader". That is the person everybody wants to follow seemingly, but yet there are multiple other types of leaders that are clearly outlined in these hypothetical context that people follow also. The first question you need to ask yourself is; is anybody following where I am trying to go?

If the answer is no, then forget about what theory you are going to answer your question with during your oral and begin to worry about whether or not you understand what it takes to galvanize other human beings.

Probably the best answer I ever recall receiving through my hypothetical question on oral boards came from a young captain. When he was asked what leadership style he had his response was "an effective one". When asked to clarify what he meant by that statement he began to reiterate what his goals were within his organization. He was strongly driven by a passion to influence the outcome of the organization and had engaged his subordinates into the process of being the best fire company in the department. He questioned himself from time to time to determine whether or not people were accepting his beliefs and made necessary adjustments to continue to communicate and obtain their support. But the watchword for him was effective. I doubt seriously that anyone observing this young captain would have doubted his assertion because he was known within his organization as being someone to go to, to get something done. Isn't that what leaders do?

So, for purposes of this column, I would pose the question back to you as a reader. What kind of leader are you? If you answer it with a textbook answer then you are probably a theoretical leader. If you answer it with something that emerges from your heart and head at the same time, that tends towards making things happen, then perhaps you have a better than average perception of your leadership style.

If you can't answer this question without resorting to theory, then it is time to reassess what you are doing with your time. A strong sense of self-awareness and an intense desire to improve your ability to



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affect the work ethic of the people that work for you might be part of your career development process in the very near future.

In the final stages of your leadership opportunities, you will probably have the ability to look in the mirror and tell yourself whether or not you made a difference. Hopefully the face you see looking back at you will not be diluted by any sense of false achievement but will be reflected in the fact that others carry on where you have left off.