



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE SO REHEARSE YOUR ROLE

Very few actors go in front of a camera, or onto a stage to conduct a performance without practicing the scene in advance. There is entire body of knowledge in the field of theatrics that deal with the issue of how to properly lay out a person's actions and their dialogue to have the greatest impact on the viewing audience. Contained among that body of knowledge is a concept called the "dress rehearsal".

The dress rehearsal is for real but not really. In essence the dress rehearsal is when everything is brought to bear, but there is still time taken to evaluate the performance. The dress rehearsal assumes the performance is ready for primetime, but allows for a last chance to seek improvements. During the dress rehearsal all the lines are spoken, the costumes are worn, the make-up is applied and lurking in the background of the activity is the hope that there will be acceptance. If the dress rehearsal goes well, things usually look good for the viewing audience. In the final analysis the consuming public either accepts the performance or rejects it based upon their values. .

In the firefighting business we very seldom ever have dress rehearsals. We tend to have opportunities to fail to win or lose. What I am talking about is the idea that we spend a great deal of our time in preparation but seldom conduct the dress rehearsal. We just wait until the event occurs and hope for the best.

Let me give you two specific examples that fall into this idea. The first of these is the concept of how you are going to handle a major emergency. Can you have a dress rehearsal for something that hasn't happened yet? Well, there is even a term for that. It is called "pre-fire planning". One of the mechanisms that can improve performance in real incidents is to have mentally fought a major event in your mind without actually suffering the community loss.

Many years ago, I produced a column called Walter Mitty Firefighting. In that column I proposed that we can sometimes improve our performance on incidents by playing a little game in our mind similar to the Walter Mitty story of reenactment. I am not going to repeat that column but the idea behind Walter Mitty was that he would place himself in context of an event and then imagine what it would be like for what he was going to say and do.

The best way to describe those practices today is the use of case studies. Pre-fire planning and case studies are two rails on a track that can definitely help you improve your performance. The resources available for this type of mental activity are increasing by an exponential rate. One only has to look into the NIST and the NIOSH documents and see a literal cornucopia of mental activities in which you can engage in a dress rehearsal exercise.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The only thing you need to do to maximize that experience is to find the set of circumstances that you have in your community that are similar to those described in the case study and then let your imagination move forward. What lessons can you possibly learn by studying other people's tragedies? The answer is, everything.

The same type of dress rehearsal I would like to advocate is that for getting ready for promotion. By now, you have probably taken hundreds of hour of training and education classes. You may have had hundreds of shifts on duty. You might have been involved in the biggest fire your community has ever seen. Or, you may never have taken a class in your entire lifetime, gotten all your knowledge by reading books when everybody else is watching television and you have never been an incident commander of anything bigger than a single family dwelling. Are both of those scenarios in anybody's potential profile? I certainly think so.

Yet, ambition and enthusiasm for upward mobility is not always linked to preparation. Sometimes there are criteria for us to take a test and sometimes that criterion has nothing to do with success or failure on the job. What is the corollary to the dress rehearsal for being prepared for a promotion?

My answer is the fire officer designation program sponsored by the Center for Public Safety Excellence. I categorize it as being a dress rehearsal because it is the only process that I am currently aware of that really evaluates the candidate from top to bottom and side to side in terms of what they have actually done versus what the requirements for the job are.

If you are an individual who is preparing themselves for upward mobility, one of the dress rehearsals that you can engage in is to submit your life experiences to the Fire Officer Designation program and find out what your strengths and weaknesses are. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The reason you have nothing to lose is based on the idea that everything you have done takes you where you are and if there are any deficiencies in your background resolving those deficiencies will allow you to go where you want to go.

There you are, two opportunities to have a dress rehearsal. In the case of being more adequately prepared to handle incidents, the consequences can sometimes be measured in your personal credibility and in consequence. Knowing what to do and when to do it and how to do it is one way to develop a reputation for being competent and capable. Doing all those things at the time that an event is transpiring may result in the reduction of loss of life and property. That is a rewarding experience also.

My second suggestion for a dress rehearsal is a little more personal and to be honest more introspective. If you are honest with yourself and you take a look at what you have done to build yourself up in preparation for your career you might find yourself wanting. There is nothing negative about that. At the same time you find yourself having the ability to improve your performance when it comes time to put your reputation on the line to take a promotional exam.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

In either case will you emerge weaker than when you went in. I can assure you that actors on a stage often treat the dress rehearsal as proof positive of their performance. So, in keeping with the theatrical metaphor, “break a leg”.

First published Fire Chief, August 2012
© 2012 All Rights Reserved