



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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BIRDS OF A FEATEHR

by

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When we think of the fire service and its symbols, there are two birds that come to mind. The first is real; the second is mythical. The former is the Eagle, the second is the Phoenix. These two birds are often used in the design of badges and other symbols of our profession, such as shoulder patches. Some people have a hard time differentiating one bird from another on the badge, but there is a distinction in the popular definition of each. Both of these birds are symbols of strength and integrity. The fire service is justifiably proud of both of them by using them in our symbolism.

Unfortunately, these two majestic birds are being shoved aside by a new bird of prey; the vulture. The vulture is circling in the sky looking for fire agencies that are on the verge of demise. Not unlike the clichéd cartoon that portrays a desert scene with a pair of vultures circling of a desperate prospector, there are those who are circling over our collective fire service heads hoping to benefit from our misfortune in the current economic condition. I remember one carton that stated “Patience, my I am going out an killing something!”

Now for the tricky question. How do we know whether we are eagles, phoenix’s or vultures? I am talking about us as leaders of our organization and those community leaders that we need to turn to for support. I am not talking about strangers or new arrivals on the scene. My reference is to those who have been with us in building fire protection into what it is today.

You may call them by different names. Among the synonyms are peers, politicians, community leaders, stakeholders, collaborators, partners, and oh yes, hangers on.

If you remember your fire history lore, Prometheus, a Greek God, gave fire to the human race. For that generosity, he was punished by Zeus, condemned to external damnation by being chained to a rock on Mount Olympus. Every day a vulture would pick at his liver, exacting horrendous pain. Every night the vulture would leave, only to return the following morning to repeat the painful experience.

A modern update could well be the replacement of Prometheus by the Fire Chief, and the vulture replaced by everyone who is berating the fire services for what we have become and how we do our jobs. The metaphor is complete if you compare the vultures coming and going as being



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related to cycles of economic upturn and downturns. Daylight is one thing, Darkness brings another.

Maybe I have taken this whimsical trip just a little too far. This is not the Hellenic era. Most people don't relate to mythology anymore. Let's come back to the age of information and see if those symbolic birds have modern counterparts.

I would submit that the Phoenix is still relevant. The Phoenix represents re-building, resurrection, renewal, even re-evaluation. If we subscribe to the conclusion that the symbol of the Phoenix is personified by those who are working to re-engineer the fire service we can look forward to a new way of doing things. There are the individuals who are pursuing new ideas. They are focused upon innovation. They are the ones following-up on suggestions of improvement. They seek out the innovative, the more effective, and the more efficient to act upon. They are not afraid of change

We have our Eagles too. There are the people who refuse to be defeated by the comments being made to criticize what we are doing. Eagles are continuously seeking more opportunities to be relevant in our modern society by being proactive. They are the tough decision makers.

Instead of rolling the doors down on the fire station apparatus room, muttering their words of concern in private, the Eagles are on patrol looking for opportunity. Recently, I was visiting a major metropolitan fire district that is getting its fire equipment out of the station and into the neighborhoods by doing a door to door survey of opinions about the fire prevention education in the community. This is going on at the same time that there is a major budget battle going on to reduce the level of service. That Chief is not waiting for his stakeholders to call him, he is calling on them. Eagles seek three things; relevance, relationships and resources.

Eagles don't discount ideas because they represent change. They constantly seek to find opportunities that draw the fire service closer to the solution to the controversy. Eagles are not looking for simple solution as much as they are looking for practical solutions.

The Phoenix, on the other hand stands for renewal. If you are not familiar with the Phoenix it was a mythological bird that lived for 1,000 years and then built a nest of twigs. As it was consumed by the flame and became ashes, it was re-created to live for another 1,000 years. The phoenix is the one that rise from the destruction to rebuild and restore organizations.

How do we know we are experiencing a visit by the vultures? First clue is that it's all about them. They don't care about consequences on others. Vultures seek to weaken the organization by adopting both a defensive posture and a sense of defeat. They focus almost entirely on things



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that is the antithesis of organizational values and principles. What is somewhat tragic for our profession is that some vultures are external and some are internal. One of their most predominate behaviors is to respond to any potential solution by a question of: what's in it for me?

Prometheus, whether mistreated or not by the Gods, made a great sacrifice to give the human race fire so we could conquer the physical world. Is it too much for us to ask our society to pay more attention to the Eagles and the Phoenix's as we work through the next economic crisis? I don't know of a better tradition to uphold.

Look down at that badge you are wearing and see if there is a bird on its top. In all candor there are other symbols that are just as important to serve the same purpose. For example, I have seen a beaver used on Canadian badges. I have seen badges that use the Maltese Cross, without the adornment of any avian species. The lesson is: be the person that stands for excellence in spite of the criticism.

It really doesn't matter which symbol is used as much as we remember that the badge represents the core value for which we stand; the protection of life and property. We are obligated to find ways of achieving it no matter what the detractors may have to say about our ways of doing it.

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