



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

By The Grace of God

Have you ever heard the term – “there but for the Grace of God go I?” Anybody who has heard that expression has probably recognized that something that happened to someone else could just as easily have happened to them. When you think about it, the idea is a somewhat sobering and humbling experience.

The minute you recognize that a tragedy that has struck another human being could just as easily be visited upon your person, you really begin to develop the characteristic of empathy. Maybe you personally have never said that, but I can't help but believe that most of you who read this column will have heard that term in conversation.

I am really not going to talk in this column too much to those that have never experienced it because I am not sure that they would ever get it. But, for those of you that have had an epiphany, I think it is something that we should spend a few moments exploring in the perspective of what it means to learn a lesson from other people's tragedy.

I have born witness to many individuals who have been very critical of other human beings behavior especially when they make mistakes. With very little regard for the facts, sometimes people will start making statements about another person's misfortune by saying, “I wouldn't have let that happen” – it would be a cold day in ...”

I am not going to cite any specific event that promoted this column other than to state that it came to mind after reading and reviewing a lot of the rhetoric from a series of a loss of life for firefighters under conditions that have yet to be totally and fully explored. And, I am not talking about any specific incident here. Please don't try to interpret this as being an observation based on a singular incident.

This column has been welling up for several years by reading the various messages issued by our brethren who use the internet to express their personal dissatisfaction with their peer's performance. There but for the Grace of God goes anybody or everybody in my opinion.



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Whenever something bad happens to another fire chief, the very first consideration that we should be giving to the condition is not a rush to judgment but rather an intense desire to understand what happened. As long as we are throwing clichés around, it is time to look before you leap.

It is not uncommon for very outspoken people in the fire service to express an opinion of dissatisfaction about the performance of other individuals when there is a tragic outcome without realizing that they are just a few moments away from the same thing happening to them. Personally, I don't think that they are being hypocritical when they express their opinion. I just don't think that they realize their vulnerability when they do it.

We should all remember when something bad happens to another person; many times that person that it is happening to wasn't even there.

Earlier in my career, I witnessed a fire chief suffer a series of barrages and criticisms from outside parties. The uproar began within minutes of the death of a firefighter. All eyes went on the chief. Unfortunately, he was a 1,000 miles away attending a convention when it occurred. Almost everybody in the Chain of Command of his own department, who did have personal responsibility for the individual, raised their hands, rotated and aimed their criticism of the chief about something he should of, could of, and would have done to prevent the fatality from occurring. All of them attempted to shift the blame upwards.

Yes, chief, the very people that you rely on to be the ones to execute your policies and procedures can very well turn on you in a heartbeat. When you express those scathing remarks about the performance of another individual, please remember that it is like authorizing people to do the same thing to you if something bad happens in your organization.

My recommendation is that you are very discreet and maintain a certain degree of concern for facts before you begin to express opinions. Now, what I mean by facts is not looking at a single slide that someone projected on a website or a couple of paragraphs in a blog expressed by someone, but rather the facts as they develop after the mist of combat has evaporated.



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My second recommendation is that you begin to think in terms of principles and practices rather than in terms of personalities or personal performance. If one goes back and looks very carefully at a lot of the line of duty deaths, which firefighters have experienced, there is almost always some degree of forewarning involved. That forewarning may not be clearly evident at the time of the incident but it is not unlike what happens in the airline industry when they investigate a crash. Often they will find out that there was a sequence of events that led up to a series of circumstances before something really bad goes on.

One of the greatest programs that I think has been instituted for the American Fire Service is the Near Miss Reporting System. What I think is the true tragedy is that not everybody is contributing to it in as sincere a fashion as they could. I have personally witnessed a couple of close calls on fires that I know for a fact the people were too embarrassed to do anything about it by contributing to the body of knowledge.

Along these lines, fire chiefs ought to become just a little bit more familiar with the concept of fault tree analyses. What I am suggesting here is that instead of trying to figure out who did something wrong, it is best to find out what went wrong and what the consequences of that particular event going on in the overall sequence of events. One of the best person's in an organizational structure to be the custodian of this type of inquiry, is the Fire Marshal, after all they are the custodian of most record keeping systems.

Granted, we have devoted a lot of energy to our line of duty deaths program (LODD) and as touching and as human as that particular ceremony is, I can't imagine that anybody that works for the LODD program would be upset if year after year the number of people being inscribed on those plaques got smaller and smaller.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the line of duty death finally came down to something that was literally unpreventable and unavoidable such as the tragedy that occurred to our firefighters on 911?



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Too many people find themselves on the line of duty death plaque as a result of failing to connect a seat belt, failing to do a push away from the table with the firefighters diet of carcinogens, cholesterol, and calories set out on the fire station buffet or they engage in activities that could almost qualify them for being in the annual Darwinian Dummy Awards program.

The next time you receive a notice that something has happened to a neighboring fire chief, don't start using the self-fulfilling prophecy attack of "I knew it was going to happen sooner or later"—but begin with the idea in the back of your mind, "I wonder if it could happen to me?" We need that simple step backward before you launch forward and you will often learn a lot of very valuable lessons.

One of my fire chief friends in the aftermath of one incident called me and asked me what I suggested to do in the aftermath of the event. I asked him a simple question, "Do you have similar sets of circumstances in your town?" His answer was affirmative. My next response was, and then goes study them. A couple of weeks later he called me back and advised me that he not only found those conditions, but had a very interesting conversation with members of his department so that they could document, define and then detail what they were going to do with those circumstances if something went bad. There but for the Grace of God he might have avoided his own version of the catastrophe.

None of us are perfect. None of our organizations are perfect. Bad things are going to happen to good people. Doing the wrong thing at the wrong time is going to continue to kill firefighters. But none of that should be fodder for us to feed upon its professionals. Replace the concept of "there but for the Grace of God" with the admonition "Thank God I was watching out for that".

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