



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

CEO, CQI – or CEU's?

By

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Are you the boss? Are you high up there in the command structure of your organization? If we used the words Chief Fire Executive, would you respond by saying yes? Are you the Fire Chief- or the Fire Marshal?

Congratulations.

The next question is: are you the best you can be or are you resting on past laurels. This question can be further clarified and a specific answer given by responding to the following inquiries: When was the last time you learned something new? Last year? Last month? Last week? How about this morning?

If you are having a hard time answering that question, you might start thinking about how well you are doing in your job as the CEO. There is an old saying that if you aren't getting better, you are bound to be getting worse. Nature abhors the status quo. If you aren't learning, you aren't living. So, let's go back to the opening paragraph and ask those questions again.

What did you learn in the last year? At one level, if you are in a job that requires decision making, the concept of experience plays a big part here. If you acted on things you should have learned a lesson about something every time. Can you recall what the lessons were?

The concept of continuous quality improvement comes to mind here, for this is the timeframe we can truly reflect upon at both the individual and organizational level. Are you better at something now that you weren't one year ago? How about your personnel? What did you find out from them that have allowed you to see improved performance from them? Does your assessment the last year include the idea that your work product has improved?

At this level of discussion, CQI is not an abstract theory. It is manifested by incremental improvements that have resulted in a better you, or a better crew. Again, let us go back to the opening paragraph. Do you have to wait a whole year to seek improvement? I don't think so. It would just as easily be yesterday morning when you finished reading a textbook, or reading an email, or talked to a colleague.



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You see incremental improvement occurs in both passive and active behavior on your part. According to the infamous Yogi Berra, the New York Yankee Legend, “you can learn a lot just by listening.”

That is where the CEO job description fits into CQI. If you want to improve, seek out new information and add it to your experience portfolio on an ongoing basis. This leads us to assessing some of your personal behaviors. Such as what do you read to be current? Who do you talk to, to be informed? Do you actively seek knowledge or are you waiting for it to drop into your lap? There is another 3 letter acronym that might apply: Continued Education Units – The CEU.

CEU is a term readily accepted by many professors such as doctors and attorneys, but is sometimes overlooked in our profession because it is sometimes not readily achieved in a formal fashion. If you are a person who thinks that you already know everything, then the CEU means very little. If you are a person that recognizes that knowledge is increasing your clarity and that access to that new knowledge gives you more influence over the future, then the CEU is your tool of choice.

As I prepared this column, I was thinking of how these two concepts of CQI and CEU, are like the double helix of DNA. As we proceed through our lives, we have an opportunity to create a stronger more resilient and more influential profile for ourselves by recognizing these two concepts in our daily decision making. By raising them to a level of consciousness where we actually apply them on a daily basis we can project a higher level of performance for tomorrow.

To go a little further we need to explore the opportunities in both a formal fashion and an informal fashion. For example, you could take a class. That is a formal activity to improve performance. On the other hand you could read a book. That is an informal way to add to your knowledge. In both cases they are conscious decisions. They can be mutually reinforcing. You might take a class that exposes you to a new book. Or, the class may expose you to an idea that you have to pursue by reading more about in many other forms.

Let's take a quick examination of your personal efforts right now. What was the last book you read because you chose to do it? What the last class you took because you wanted to learn a specific thing? What was the topic of the last speaker you went to hear at the last conference you attended? If you can answer those questions without hesitation you are on the right track. If you had to think about it before coming up with an answer you are behind the curve. If you can't even remember, then you are in need of remedial counseling.



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This idea is not unique to the fire service. CEOs in other professions are facing the same scenario. Some are growing as the pressure on them increases and some are losing ground. The point is that the ones that are growing are most likely acquiring new knowledge as a part of their survival strategy. They are not waiting for information to come to them, but are actively seeking it out through a continuous personal sense of quality improvement. The topic is not abstract when it is applied to your own behavior and performance.

In summary, when you hear others talking about how hard things are today, ask yourself, how much time, energy and effort have they put into preparing themselves for the task they face. If they have relied entirely on an education that terminated 20 years ago, or experience that was based upon traditional values of the past they are likely to face even greater stress in the future. Then look at yourself and ask what you are doing to give yourself new skills, new approaches and new solutions. In short, when was the last time you reached out and pulled yourself up to new notch on the ladder of success?

So, in my last reference to the opening paragraph, I hope your answer to the question is; just a few minutes ago!

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