



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Can I Count on You?

Five powerful words: can I count on you? There may not be a single human being who has been involved in a relationship with others who has not uttered that phrase. It is concurrently a question, a plea, and if accepted an obligation and responsibility. It should never be asked, if it is not needed and it should never be promised, if it isn't intended to be fulfilled. Can I count on you!

Yet, almost everyone has been disappointed at one time or another when someone was not there to be counted on when it really counted. Perhaps it has happened to you. Perhaps you have failed to deliver something yourself. Is this something we should just consider as a common human frailty and move on? Or, is it something we should pause for a little bit and contemplate it as a clue to all of our relationships both internal and external in the fire service?

For purposes of this column, I am going to select the latter. Otherwise this would be a very long column. The fire service is rich in relationships. I am not too worried about who we can count of in the firehouse. I selected the our external relationships because there is a belief by many people outside of our profession that fire protection cannot actually be measured very well, so they either feel we are doing an excellent job and gloss our performance over, or they wait until we make a mistake and air it on the front page of the local newspaper. Those five little words that were stated in the previous paragraph however, provide a clue to some of the things that we ought to be providing our communities. Some people will never understand why a fire department really exists. Frankly, they don't get it. But those that have focused on the trust, respect, loyalty, effectiveness and efficiency of fire departments have come to recognize that performance measurement is rapidly becoming part of our overall credibility.

The concept of being able to rely on another person is not new. It is probably as ancient a hope or desire and perhaps one of the most basic human desires for achieving positive relationships. It reflects a need to meet life's demands of sustenance. We even have a name for when it happens when it doesn't happen; disappointment, broken promises, and let downs. Anytime an organization doesn't meet expectations, the person who is experiencing that failure of expectation feels it deeply, while a person carrying on the activity that result in the disappointment may or may not even feel an ounce of remorse for letting that other person down.

Let's go back to the first three paragraphs. Again, let's revisit those five words I wrote there. Can I count on you? Each in them is a quality relationship between people. Every one of them depends upon reciprocity to exist on a sustained basis. Simply stated, trust and all of the other things such as loyalty and credibility are often based on equal proportions on both sides of the parties involved agreeing on the performance. A high level of engagement is also reflected in the behavior that goes on between parties. Therefore, if it deteriorates on one side, it may not be noticed.



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What got me thinking about this phenomenon was a TV ad I observed one night. It consisted on one individual speaking to his collective staff about a project. He gave the appearance of passing out assignments and in reality was expressing some prejudicial expectations. It really went something like this – “Bob, can I count on you to talk a big game and not deliver?” “Suzy, am I going to get the same old lame excuses as in the past?” “John, will you fail to live up to your potential again?” I think it was some kind of an ad for a training company. It was funny, but sad in a tragic sort of way. Rarely are we honest in expressing or giving our thoughts out when it comes to asking for someone to promise to perform. That is too bad. Because if we go back to the phrase we started with, it is a question that should never be answered superficially. It should be examined as if it were given with your right hand raised as if you were given an oath of allegiance. It is a promise. It is nothing more, nothing less. It is an agreement to finish what you start – or, to be able to explain how or why you cannot finish what you have begun.

After turning off the TV I went to my in basket to review a set of notes from a staff meeting from a fire agency. Without betraying any trust as to who the department was, I was reviewing the feedback that the chairperson was giving in the meeting. I was struck by the fact that the meeting was riddled with individual comments not based upon what it was promised but with what it actually provided. The dialogue was more finger pointing, and excuses. It was more declaration of competition than cooperation. No wonder the department is frustrated. No wonder the staff is aggravated. They cannot count on each other.

Don't get me wrong here, this happens to be a pretty good department overall. It is just that the department is going through a lot of change. Change creates transition. Transition creates gaps. Gaps create misunderstandings. Misunderstandings destroy trust, loyalty and respect, etc. The beginning, but not the end of a proverbial viscous cycle. The answer is complex. Any simple short answer would probably continue creating problems for this organization. However, it is pretty clear that to continue with the behavior of not having the ability to count on each other is counterproductive. It is much more complicated than that. If you have every experienced other people not being able to give you what you want from them, it may be time to re-evaluate you. Before you start worrying about them, you need to ask yourself some questions about yourself. And, if you are going to be one of those that find yourself in the scenario I just discussed, you need to go from a them to an I. Now, Stop! Yes, stopping before you go off again is not a bad thing. In fact it has been a stabilizing influence when transition continues to accelerate to a rapid pace. Here is what you stop to do. Here is an excuse you need to go through.



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How Counts On Me?	For What?	Who Do I Count On?	For What?	How Can I Improve Things

Using this exercise a person can often review their life at a glance. Start your list with those are the closest to you with respect to your desires. If you have these five relationships in your life, you need to be able to measure the degree to which trust, respect, loyalty, honesty and friendship are exchanged. Start filling out the list on the left side first. That is you. If you do not know who is counting on you right now you may have made a lot of important discoveries. If you can't sit there and tell me that there aren't people counting on you, you are missing your role as a leader. Obviously someone is. If you don't know who they are, go back through all of those terms we used before and see which ones are lacking in your life.

How far should you go? I don't know. But I will speculate that the more influential that you are with other people the list can get pretty complicated.

Now go back to that right hand column and start out with who you are counting on to help you in some way. There must be some people that you have asked a great deal of. They are people that you need to have a sense of respect for their contributions to your success. Again, if the list isn't easy to develop, maybe you aren't doing that much in your life. But, don't forget that the same principles discussed earlier relate to things that are going to be done to you and things that you are going to do to other people. In order to count on people we should all be basing our ideas on the fact that there are five relationships we must maintain. One of respect. One of loyalty. One of credibility. One of honesty. And one of trust.