



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## **Contract with America**

A few elections ago there was a political figure who suggested that there needed to be some changes made in the way we do business in this country. He called it: "Contract with America". Sounded like a great idea at the time, but I don't think I have heard anyone use that phrase in a political context for a long time now.

Of course, you and I hear about contracts all the time in fire department jargon, because they are a common mechanism of establishing expectations between two or more parties to set some specific activity to be accomplished. Unfortunately, we are also hearing that some contracts are expiring in the labor arena and there is stress and strain associated with that dissolution because of the current economic scenario. There is a new phrase going around called "the new normal." Generally it is regarded as a buzzword for things are not going to be the same in the future as they were in the past; things are going to be worse.

Maybe so. Maybe not. Which one do you believe? If you are an optimist you say "it's gonna get better". If you are a pessimist, you're saying, "it's gonna get worse". If you are a realist, you are saying, "I'm gonna try to make it into an opportunity".

Here's what I mean. The new normal could be a different way of looking at the relationship between the fire service and the community. Maybe it's time to rewrite the contract between ourselves and those we serve.

Of course, I am not talking about a labor contract. I'm taking the same road that the politician marched down in suggesting we need a new set of expectations of what we are doing based on finding out what our customers think we ought to be doing.

Some people would argue that we already have some sort of contract. After all, don't they give us funds to provide fire protection and we go to ALL of their requests for service? Isn't that a sort of "agreement" we have in every community. Granted some places we can't provide much in the way of service. In some places they won't provide enough money to satisfy the basic need to provide that service.

So what am I suggesting? I'm suggesting that we revisit this concept by engaging in a dialogue with our community based on a whole new idea. The idea is that we ask them what they want, before we tell them what they are getting. Instead of going out and telling the public what wonderful jobs we are doing providing rapid response times, shiny fire trucks, handsome and fit firefighters in full PPE, perhaps we should ask them what do you expect from us when you dial 9-1-1?



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I have had discussions with a lot of fire officials that believe we have already done this. But, I'm not sure we really do know what people want from us.

Doesn't it strike you as strange that we got to be America's heroes when 348 firefighters were murdered in a terrorist incident, and we have become the focus of derision and disrespect over budget and ethical issues all in the same decade?

What I am proposing is that we take this opportunity right now to go after the SIGS, PIGS and DIGS. Those are acronyms for special interest groups, public interest groups and designated interest groups. They are the public and they are all sitting out there helping to create the new normal. In fact, many of them believe that they are going to be the architects of the new normal. We need to be talking to them. We need to be talking to them right now, not years from now.

You see, all of these groups have an agenda right now. We need to learn everything we can about it. We have an agenda right now too. We need to be explaining ourselves to them without being defensive.

And while we are doing that, we need to listen to them. We may not like what we hear, but we need to listen to their interests and concerns. Their concerns, their fears, and in some cases, their goals are going to be part of the new normal as we move forward.

Rather than crouch below the window frame to avoid potshots from outside, now should be the time we reach out and talk to people about their beliefs, expectations and attitudes about our service. It will probably not result in anything as formal as a contract dialogue, but it could provide you with some accurate and useful information on how to shape your departments actions in the future. It could help you understand and formulate what strategies will be useful in achieving your strategic objective.

On the other hand, it could be painful. I'll admit that you may find hostility instead of hospitality. Again, those are the pessimistic view of all challenges and conflicts, but remember, I'm suggesting this behavior based on realism. Here's what I think we have opportunity to learn. I think we still are in good grace with most people and yet they are disappointed in us for some of our behavior in the past. I think they still want a quality fire service, but don't want any smoke and mirrors. I think when they call 9-1-1 they don't want heroes; they want competent, capable, caring people to help them in their moment of crisis.

Why don't we get up from behind our desks and go out into the field and talk to those folks about something that is more likely to happen to them; a medical aid or a weather disaster.

One opener might be for us to take advantage right now of one of our emerging roles in society. Maybe we ought to be proving that we are really the All-risk service we claim to be. Have you ever thought of



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using your fire inspection visits and pre-plan sessions as an opportunity to pass along information on how to be better prepared to handle a community disaster? We are not only capable of preventing fires, but perhaps can be helpful in preventing unnecessary losses from disasters. The idea here is simple.

Next time, instead of handing out a citation, hand out a disaster prevention pamphlet. It could be very relevant if Mother Nature keeps up her furious assault on our cities and towns. Open up the dialogue.