



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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A Culture of Safety

by

Ronny J. Coleman

Many years ago I worked with a firefighter that had an unusual reputation. Almost every day he came to work he would get hurt. Sometimes the injury was just a bruise or a scrape. In other cases, it would require some form of first aid. a few resulted in a trip to the ER

The event that sealed his reputation occurred on a day when we were building a concrete block wall around the back of our station. We were using a concrete mixing machine that was powered by a small gasoline engine. The person I am talking about was asked to stay away from the mixer because of his propensity for injury. He didn't. As a crew member pulled the rope to start the engine, he walked up to the mixer and started using his hands to rotate the barrel by grasping the top of the mixer ring. Before anyone could react, the gasoline engine fired up. The clutch was engaged. Our hero lost the tips of 3 fingers in the gears.

After that event, we named our annual safety award after him - at best a dubious distinction. Do you have someone that sounds like this person in your fire department? You should try to stay away from them, especially on the fire ground.

This event also resulted in an informal guidance statement to our personnel that they should never hang around a person that is constantly being injured because they might suffer an injury just because of their proximity to that person. While we often honor our firefighters that lose their lives in the line of duty, we don't have any major monuments to those that suffer major injury in the line of duty. These individuals are also paying a price for being in a dangerous occupation. The price tag on those that are injured on the job is significantly higher than the cost for an LODD. And, for the most part it is invisible. If you don't believe this look at the workers compensation costs for your local, regional or state level programs.

Let's distinguish between a dangerous occupation and one that can be carried out safely under dangerous conditions. Being in the military is dangerous, but a tremendous amount of effort is spent on keeping casualty rates as low as possible.

Why are we so proud of the fact that we kill and injure our personnel at a very rapid rate? If the answer is so simple that we want to be looked upon as a community hero, then shouldn't we be limiting the number of combat casualties and really focus upon heroic acts that the hero survives? Let me remind you that the community's memory is very short for the dead ones. I have seen numerous declarations about "we will never forget" that are hollow statements just a few years later. Everyone seems to know about the Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg, but how many of you are familiar with the Close



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Calls Memorial? Don't worry, there isn't one. I am not sure anyone would want to host it as a site.

So, here is my question: Why don't we have a culture of safety that limits both fatality and injury on the job? Can we honestly say that we are doing everything we could or should be doing to make sure that "everyone goes home" as is often stated?

Do you want everyone of your personal to go home? Well, then what are you doing to create a culture of safety? Here is a 10 point "Quick-Quiz" that you can take that will give you some form of assessment of your department's focus upon safety. .

1. Does your department adopt and implement NFPA Standard 1500?  
 Yes  No
  
2. If you have not adopted NFPA 1500, do you have an inventory of policies and procedures that address physical fitness, medical evaluation and the physical ability to do the job under fire ground conditions?  
 Yes  No
  
3. If you do not have written policies and procedures, do you have a plan in place to create them?  
 Yes  No
  
4. Does your fire department utilize any form of "close call" analysis? Especially if there is a job injury during the event.  
 Yes  No
  
5. Does your training division periodically download NIOSH reports on firefighter fatality and utilize them in your department training program?  
 Yes  No
  
6. Does your department have a vacant building policy or program?  
 Yes  No
  
7. Do you have any component of your recruit orientation program that focuses on fire ground safety?  
 Yes  No
  
8. Does your department participate in safety stand down when recommended by national fire organizations?  
 Yes  No



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9. Has your department signed the seatbelt pledge?

Yes  No

10. Could your average 45 year old departmental member have the ability to successfully pass the physical requirements you have for an entry level firefighter?

Yes  No

There you have it. There is your scorecard in the culture of safety. I have limited it to ten so they would be relatively easy to remember. I didn't put a column check box for the answer of maybe, because you either are or are not doing these things. There is no maybe in safety.

Leadership in the arena of firefighter safety, especially in establishing a culture, requires a unique commitment within the department. From the top down, safety needs to be encouraged and from the bottom up, safety needs to be executed. In my lifetime, I have seen an awful lot of people that can talk a good game about safety but when I visit their fire department and examine their records as well as their bulletin boards, I can tell you that this is not something that can be taken for granted.

I once issued a column called "Not On My Watch", which was a reflection of how I got my first orientation on safety from Fire Captain Larry May in Costa Mesa California. Whenever he used the phrase "Not On My Watch", it was pretty clear to all of us that it was something we were personally responsible for the outcome.

Walk through your firehouses, look at your fire apparatus, and talk to your firefighters. If the culture is there, you will see it, feel it and be able to anticipate it keeping your departments name off the front page of the newspaper.