



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Darwin in the Service

I have a question for you. How many fire chiefs in the United States of America are full time, paid fire chiefs? Next question: how many fire chiefs in the United States are part time fire chiefs, and receive some form of compensation or stipend, but on a less than fulltime basis? Last question: how many fire chiefs in the United States are volunteer and receive absolutely no compensation for their time, energy or effort? I recently tried to find the answers to those questions and found bits and pieces all over the place but nobody has a solid lock on that number that everyone agrees upon.

The column came to mind when I was reviewing who my target audience is for this column. This column is written for Fire Chief Magazine. I am assuming that I am talking to fire chiefs who fall into all three of those categories I just questioned you about. I don't write separate columns for those who are paid and those who are unpaid. The idea behind this column is to talk about the Chief's Clipboard as if any chief is a chief regardless of their means of compensation. I also consider that this column is read by people that may not have 5 speaking trumpets, but they do have a few and they are gold. I have even received feedback that this column is often read by Company Officers with an eye on promotion.

In that vein, I have heard a lot of rhetoric shared amongst various parties that states that the fire service is about to undergo major changes. One contention is that the volunteer fire service is going to become extinct. And that middle management in a paid department is an endangered species. My take these issues is that we are undergoing another evolution. Charles Darwin postulated a theory a long time ago that the survival of a species only results when the organism evolves to meet current living conditions. He called it evolution. Today we call it "White Water Change".

I think the volunteer fire service is getting ready to undergo an evolution. It is my belief that the volunteer fire chief has no less a duty to perform, than a person who is receiving compensation, but the fact is may have a limited amount of time available for to participate in the training and education system we have created for the full time chiefs. And, I do agree that middle management is vulnerable during budget reductions because of costs and benefits analysis that often places little value on the span of control and unity of command issues

It sort of begs two philosophical questions. What techniques does a volunteer fire chief have to know better than the average citizen? And, what does a full time chief know that a volunteer cannot learn?

Let's talk about the volunteer fire chiefs first. The citizen fire chief. Is it really an endangered species?

First off lets discuss the reasons why some volunteer fire departments have disappeared. Their demise sometimes has had nothing to do with the competency of the individual volunteer. I would like to remind everyone reading this column that almost every major metropolitan fire department in this country originally started off as a volunteer fire department. I know I can prove that fact in Los Angeles,



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New York, Philadelphia, Boston and other metropolitan areas around the country. So, why did they give up on their volunteers?

They didn't. The system evolved around the volunteer. There was a point in time that the demand upon a service cannot be provided easily by a volunteer staffing system. Trying to fit three or four emergencies into volunteers day to day life gets to be very imposing. But, it wasn't always that way. One example of a visual representation of our past scenarios could be the cover I have from the Saturday Evening Post from decades ago. It was painted by Norman Rockwell. It shows a fire truck pulling out of the front of a volunteer station and a bunch of businessmen running, discarding aprons and work gear to jump on the apparatus and respond to the community. That used to be a reality in a lot of places that populations were limited. It is still a reality in some parts of the country. Generally, it works well in limited community context. But it changes over time

My definition of limited is any community that has less than 5,000 people in it. It is highly possible that they need a volunteer fire department. It is probably the only thing they can afford.

As we said, times change. As communities become more and more populated, there is more demand being placed on the volunteers and subsequently they had to be replaced by people on a more full time basis. Contrary to popular opinion, if paying somebody makes them better, the real issue was not competency but rather coverage.

So, now let's address what a chief needs to know. I have a very large library in my office on things that some people know, other things that very few know and a whole lot of things that many people do not know. The person that is serving as a fire chief in a community has the same obligations to the staff of the department that the paid chief has. Let's start with one thing; to operate the department in a safe and efficient manner. The community wants another thing - to operate the department legally. Does a volunteer need to know about risk assessment? Does a volunteer chief need to know about NFPA Standards? The answer to all of these questions is the same for each position at the top. However, many people fail to apply the rule of common sense and recognize that there is scalability to each of these bodies of knowledge and that the depth of the knowledge may sometimes needs to be adequately assessed.

In summary, I believe the fire service is undergoing a sea change of expectations that have an effect on every fire agency in the country. If your department is a volunteer department it can no longer remain a social club. You are a viable part of the first line of fire defense in this county. And, if you have an organization that is paid every level in the organization has to pull its weight in terms of outcome. Both of these require a change of attitude by many of the incumbents.

It is a process that Darwin would have easily recognized.