



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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DELEGATION OR DUMPING? WHO'S GOT THE MONKEY NOW

What is the epitome of delegation? It's a topic that comes up quite frequently when discussing fire management. Sometimes is discussed in the context of "If you don't delegate there's something wrong with you" Other times it's discussed in the context of "I shudda done it myself because they messed it up, delegation is the birds."

But, back to the question. What is the epitome of delegation? Recently, I asked a Fire Officer candidate if he could give me an example of his ability to delegate effectively. He responded by telling me that he was a coach in a Junior Football league. As he answered, "when I turn those kids out on the field to play the game, it's all delegation."

And so it is, for the coach cannot play the game personally. Everything that is done on the playing field is a result of preparation for the competition. The coach is there for advice and counsel, but the plays are pulled off by the players. Sometimes we win, sometimes we lose. Remember the famous quote that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton??

The significance of these examples should not be lost on the fire service, especially to the Fire Officer. For the task of delegation is critical in fire protection. The Fire Officer is like that football coach, creating plays, causing practice to occur, and developing strategies. But, in the final analysis he is condemned to set on the sidelines and win or lose according to the ability of his players to carry out the mission of the organization. Sometimes our successes on the fireground are based on how well we have prepared our people to carry the ultimate delegated task fire combat.

Delegation is not just a theoretical term. Utilizing it properly is probably the part of the being in charge of an organization. Delegation is not the easiest thing to do. It requires a great deal of patience and risk taking. These are behaviors that are really foreign to the style of action oriented fire officers. But, it is also essential to the productivity and professionalism of a fire agency.

I once had a city manager that had a rather straight forward policy in delegation. He stated "delegate ruthlessly." This could be translated into the idea of sending everything downhill in the organization until everyone was overwhelmed, except for himself. The implication of this policy is that the boss gets rid of every task he can to a lower subordinate. This frees the boss up to do other things. But there are variations on this theme that are all over the spectrum. I have seen officers that were so drastically controlled that they could not roll the wheel of truck without a superior's permission. The opposite end of the spectrum encompasses officers that feel that they own their own little portion of the fire department. They have their programs, their projects and their pride.

The Fire Chief should periodically review the policies and procedures of the department to see just how much authority he has vested in his different levels of management. And, if the problems of the organization seem to be bogged down at the upper levels, perhaps it is time to delegate the authority to act to a subordinate level. Don't delegate ruthlessly, but try to provide the working levels in the organization with the authority and resources to act on problems.



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Don't pass monkeys downward, but pass down opportunity for people to participate in the problem solving process. Of course, there is one caveat. If you don't think that your people are trained or you don't trust them then don't delegate.

That leads us to the second aspect of delegating; Trust. Developing trust involves developing a relationship between superior and subordinate that is not unlike the relationship between a coach and his players. If I can be forgiven for my continued use of the football analogy, I would like to draw one more observation. All teams, even championship teams have spring training and they practice before every game. The fire services version of spring training is our training and education programs. Our version of practice is either simulation or probationary periods.

In order to maximize delegation in an organization the Fire Officer must make a commitment to training and education. Simply stated we cannot expect personnel to perform unless they know how to perform and it's our job to tell them how to do the tasks. Training can take on many different faces. This training can be in the form of formal training and education, interdepartmental training, mentoring, role modeling and even performance reviews. In all cases, the superior has to perform as a coach. You not only have to teach the plays, but also the game plan.

Obviously there are problems in delegating. If it was easy then just about everyone could do it. There wouldn't be any reason for managers, i.e. Fire Officers. It takes time to define tasks so that they have a relevancy fit. It takes even longer to establish that trusting relationship. Effective delegation doesn't just happen by doling out responsibilities. It evolves.

But, remember the law of evolution. Darwin stated that there is a tendency for the strongest of the species to survive. As effective delegation evolves in your organization it too will get stronger. It will increase both your personal and departmental ability to survive; to win and keep on winning. As Fire officers we are playing for some pretty high stakes in the game of fire protection. Don't ever forget that while the players fight it out on the playing field it is almost always the coach they carry out of the stadium on their shoulders.

Usually we relegate glory upwards. However, we only gain glory by delegating downwards to the people that are there to carry out the mission we are in charge with managing.