



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Disney, Dobert or Dyno-O-Mite

Do you have to have good speaking skills to become a fire chief? The answer is no! Let me rephrase that statement. Do you have to have good speaking skills to become an effective Fire Chief; the answer is maybe, one more time. Do you have to have effective public presentation skills to become a successful Fire Chief? The answer is yes! I can't recall the number of times that I have heard potentially very good candidates for Chief Officer positions tell me that they just can't stand to make public presentations. So what! I failed high school speech myself. Fear of public speaking happens to be one of the most common anxieties everybody faces, much less someone whose career could hang in the balance over a decision made by a political body.

My reason for posing these rhetorical questions is based upon my observation that many very competent Fire Chiefs fail miserably when they have to stand up in front of a microphone and make their case.

In fact I have actually written several columns on this topic over the years and included presentations on presentations and many of the speeches given over the same time frame. Yet, I still hear from people today that they are deathly afraid of standing up in front of a group of people and articulating a position.

So, it raises this question. If you are not a good public speaker and you need to be one how do you get there from here? Well one of the things you need to realize today is that technology has improved significantly to make even the lamest public speaker look like a pro.

Remember the old analogy that a "picture is worth a thousand words." Disney has proven that on the picture screen time and time again. We now live in a media dominated culture. If you expect to become a good presenter by standing up in front of a group of people with nothing in your corner but a piece of paper with notes written on it, it may not be entirely successful.

When researching this topic for a discussion with some Chief Officers I found several really good textbooks now available to help the Fire Chief do a good job up in front of a crowd. These three documents are:

These books take us through the world of computers, power point and power presentations.

One of the best suggestions I can give you on how to be a better public speaker is to remember that you are not speaking to the public you are communicating with a policy body that may have the ability to respect or reject your ideas. Therefore, the mindset that a good presenter should develop in presenting these kinds of affairs before the City Council is that of an Attorney not of a after dinner speaker.



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Now what is it that Attorneys focus on most? Facts! Yes, just everyday plain old garden-variety facts. If you mix the combination of using up to date technology to present your facts with a point of view that you are an advocate to achieve a particular solution you would be amazed to what it will do to improve your communication skills. The second best suggestion I can give you is to find someone in your organization that has an interest in the technology and let him or her play. I don't mean play in the sense of being unfocused. I mean play in the sense that a person takes a topic that you are attempting to articulate and massages it to where it becomes entertaining. In an MTV world even the most jaded of City Councilman and alderman expect you to put a presentation on that will keep their attention span focused. It is not necessary for you to become an expert in the technology to achieve that. It is necessary that you respect the fact that somebody has to do it.

My third and last suggestion is very simple, practice. Practice on your family, practice in front of a mirror; practice in a room all by yourself with nothing but a tape recorder. Practice learns to take the facts that your power presentations have already given to the audience in a visual way and make them your own voice and its own inflection.

This ladder element is a lot more important than most people give it credit for. Granted there are some individuals that could stand up and deliver a speech at the drop of a hat. More power to them. But I am not speaking to them. I am talking to the Fire Chief who's very thought of making a presentation makes them weak-kneed. As I have said in other columns before, practice does not make perfect. What practice makes is permanent. Colonial David Hackworth made this point in a book entitled "About Face" when dealing with the training and education for individuals in combat infantryman. Yet the same admonition applies to people who have to muster up the courage to make a public presentation.

You may not be perfect but after a while you should be able to develop a sense of permanence. What you can do through practice is to gain control over your vocabulary, your sintacs, voice inflection, body language, facial expressions, and even get control over that funny little feeling that gets in the pit of your stomach when you stand up in front of a group of people. Disney has taught us that entertainment can sometimes win out over content. Dilbert has taught us that we can make fools of ourselves if we don't adequately prepare for the task we are facing. And, television has taught us that if you work hard enough at anything you can become "DYNO-O-MITE".