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Do One-Minute Managers Have Enough Time?

The comedian Robin Williams once had a line that went “Reality—what a concept!” The line used to get a lot of laughs probably because, for many people, reality and their desires are often totally separate. Williams’ line capitalized on the black humor of frustration.

As fire chiefs, most of us have to accept the reality that there are many more demands upon our time than there are minutes in the day. Time management—what a concept! In the last couple of years Ken Blanchard suggested a concept called the “One Minute Manager.” There have been subsequent books called the “One Minute Parent”, and the “One Minute Employee.” How about, “The One Minute Fire Chief?”

I am not so sure it can be done. If you have read Blanchard’s book you are aware that he suggests praising and providing feedback to individuals should be done in small doses at the time they occur. That concept has merit. But is one minute enough? Harking back to our reality issue is sixty seconds sufficient time to capture the essence of the situation or to give an individual the feeling of praise. In actuality, I don’t believe Blanchard ever meant that the entire concept has to be crunched into that sixty-second time frame.

It doesn’t take much of a mathematician to figure out that in a given day there are some 480 opportunities to become a one-minute manager. In any given workweek, there are 2,400 opportunities to be a one-minute manager. In a given year of activity this means we have the opportunity to be a one-minute manager 100,000 times. Mind-boggling, isn’t it?

Perhaps in the fire service we can accept the concept of taking slices of time to accomplish specific objectives, but I suggest the time element needs to be structured around a concept more in keeping with the needs of the fire service. In contemplating this idea I was reminded of the fact that the fire service is extremely time-oriented to begin with. How do we measure the development of progress of a fire? By time, of course. How do we measure the effectiveness of our response patterns in our communities? By response time. How do we measure our training programs and the amount of time devoted to our various activities such as public education and fire prevention? By documenting hours.

In searching for an analogy in the fire service, I was reminded that one of the most critical decision-making processes we engage in is called “size-up.” In our capacity as fire officers almost all of us have had that experience of leaving the fire station knowing we have a response time of approximately four minutes to arrive at the scene of an emergency. There, etched against the sky in daylight, is a billowing cloud of black smoke. Or, at nighttime, that rosy glow of loom-up, has told us that we had better have our act together as we arrive on the scene. Four minutes and in those four minutes we try to consolidate



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and utilize an entire lifetime of experience, knowledge and education in order to make sound decisions under a highly stressful set of circumstances.

So, what I would like to suggest for fire chiefs is that instead of us becoming one-minute managers, we become five-minute decision-makers. The concept is the same as Blanchard has suggested. As chief officers we should focus on feedback and achievements in our subordinates and programs. However, in the fire service, instead of finely slicing the element of time into sixty-second portions, I am suggesting we utilize the same methodology we use in controlling major emergencies. That we take five minutes to consolidate, integrate, and synthesize our knowledge and experience as we work our way through the management of a fire department on a day to day basis.

Let me be more specific about how the five-minute fire chief might function. Let's take a staff meeting, for example. I once participated in a staff discussion that went something like this: As we all sat around the table, it was obvious we were going to be asked to "participate" in a decision-making process. However, the individual who was chairing the meeting had a body language posture somewhat like a skeet shooter. You could almost hear the click-clack of his loading a round into his mental shotgun, as he prepared to deal with the concepts that were going to be generated. The problem was laid on the table, and solutions were suggested, true to form. The ideas fluttered into the skies like so many pigeons—or skeet clay pigeons. Boom!--Boom!--Boom! Each and every idea was abruptly shot out of the sky with a statement like—"That won't work." "We've tried that before." "It's too costly." Etc., etc., etc.

A five-minute fire chief would not do that. Instead, the chief would take sufficient amount of time to absorb the idea, allow it to incubate for a few moments, and see if it generated additional responses of other members of the staff. Instantaneous feedback is far worse than no feedback primarily because, in some cases, instantaneous feedback is almost always negative. It has the tendency to inhibit the growth of ideas, instead of encouraging them.

Another example of the five-minute fire chief might be to reward people for performance. I recall an incident where a chief officer attended a class called "Non-Financial Incentives." Immediately upon return to his office he called all of his staff together, sat them down and stated unequivocally, "You guys listen up because I am going to motivate you." Guess how much motivation actually occurred! When people feel they are given praise artificially or being given an insincere pat on the back, it's almost worse than no compliment at all. Instead, the chief might take the time to ask himself this basic question: "Why did this person do what he just did?"

The five-minute fire chief reinforces reasons that people engage in positive behavior rather than discussing the result of the behavior. It might only take sixty seconds to say "Great job, keep it up!" A few more minutes spent in understanding the reasons why the person engaged in the positive behavior



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might result in additional reinforcement, such as, "That new training program you just developed is certainly going to be of value to our recruit firefighters."

What do you think we ought to do next? Why hasn't our driver training program been as successful as your new concept?"

A five minute fire chief should take the time to contemplate the reasons for success before acknowledging the. Hastily drawn praise that is too general will be lost in the conversation. On the other hand, well-developed and specific acknowledgment of successes forms the foundation for continued success in that same general area.

The one-minute criticism has its disadvantages also. Before someone criticizes a behavior it is best to take the time to understand exactly what is being criticized. I recall an incident in my own career involving a fireground command that was severely criticized by my superior. I had arrived at the scene of a high-rise fire approximately ten minutes before the chief. Upon my arrival, the fire was in the flashover stage and boiling out of a window on the eighth floor. A second alarm was struck. The dispatcher notified the chief, who responded to the scene of the emergency.

Upon his arrival, the second alarm companies had already arrived on the scene, the fire was totally under control, and there was nothing showing to the exterior of the building. The street in front of the involved building looked like a wrecking lot for used fire trucks. As far as the eye could see there were flickering emergency lights. Not a firefighter was in sight, except for one pump operator who was providing water to the standpipe.

Without a moment's hesitation the chief asked, "What the heck is all this equipment doing committed at the scene?" He was very distressed to think we had all these resources not being put to work. Without asking for an explanation he gave a one-minute dissertation on the effective use of equipment. Unfortunately, he did not take the time to evaluate the reasons for my making a second alarm. To make a long story very short, later the chief did get all the information and apologized for being so abrupt the point is this: One minute feedback requires several minutes of analysis.

The five-minute fire chief does not draw and fire for effect. The "Ready-Fire-Aim Syndrome" does not result in improved performance. Instead it results in a form of institutionalized paranoia where people are looking over their shoulders to see if the chief is going to criticize a given behavior without giving the person the opportunity to explain his justification.

So, there we have it. Maybe you are already a one-minute manager. Maybe you are already a sixty-minute fire chief. In all cases, the amount of time we spend directing, counseling, and providing feedback to our subordinates is essential to the overall momentum of our organizations. Whether we do



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it in one-minute increments or if we take five-minute blocks of time, it is important that we provide an application of these principles.

The only thing that counts is that you have a time management system that works. With all due respect to Ken Blanchard, we don't need to be clock-watchers—we need to be people movers.