



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Does Practice Make Perfect?

There is a story that I have heard that may or may not be true. It concerns a lost tourist who was walking along a street checking out the sights, when they approached a world class musician to ask for directions. Allegedly, the person asked the man, “how do you get to Carnegie Hall?” The musician replied; “practice my friend, practice!” I am not sure if the story is true, but the point certainly is. There is not one performer in that hallowed hall isn’t very, very good at what they do because they practiced their skill over and over again.

I guess that might be one of the reasons why most people are terrified of making public presentations, because they have so little opportunity to practice for the opportunity. Many people fear public speaking as if it were a punishment instead of an opportunity.

Yet, many of the opportunities to influence public policy requiring fire protection changes, especially in the arena of legislation and regulation While there is a lot of paperwork, it usually requires that someone make a public presentation to convince elected officials to act. In many cases it’s a onetime event. While it might take months to go through the documentation preparation time, an actual policy presentation may boil down to a handful of minutes in front of an elected board. You can’t afford to blow it. And, if you approach it the right way, the potential for having a negative result decreases rapidly. The approach I am going to suggest is based upon the wisdom of that anonymous musician from long ago and the advice of a contemporary leader in the modern world. I am in reference in the latter to Lt. Colonel David Hackworth. He thought that practice does not make perfect. Instead he stated: Practice doesn’t make perfect. It makes it permanent! If you practice wrong, then don’t expect a perfect performance, only one that has been repeated.

Hackworth’s corollary to the Carnegie Hall scenario is that if you want to succeed, you need to practice exactly the way you expect to deliver the message. Perfect practice makes perfect performance. Perfect is not just repetition. It is attention to detail.

The reason the topic is important to the fire service is based upon the problem that public speaking skills are not highly prized as a personal skill set when testing, selecting and orienting entry level firefighters. It should come as no surprise that many individuals build very successful fire service careers without ever having to do much public speaking. Some people are even proud of that profile. In addition it is not often considered an important job skill as a person promotes up the ranks.

And, it’s not that there are not opportunities to communicate with others using public speaking skills. For example, most anyone who has been at the rank of officer has had to conduct some form of lecture or class. That is not what I am referring to. Teaching others is not the same as public speaking. On the surface, they appear the same, but there are subtle differences. For one thing, the relationship of



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between the parties is very different. As a teacher, the exchange is flowing from expert to novice. In political environments, information flows from advocate to judge. In fact, public presentations contain education elements, but the results are more based on salesmanship than technical knowledge. So where does this leave you as an advocate of a new policy, proactive or procedure. My answer is simple. If you want to be an advocate of change in a political, governmental structure you need to be an effective public speaker. And, if you want to be an effective public speaker you have to speak in a public forum as often as possible. And, you ought to have a plan.

Consider preparation as being as important as delivery. Don't prepare any speech that calls for more than 3 items to be brought to the attention of the listeners. 3 is a sort of magic number of things that a person can relate to in a verbal environment.

Attention - Strong opening

Interest - How does it relate to me

Detail – What do you need to know to understand the main theme of this speech?

Action – Strong ending

Finding your center point

Staying relaxed

Be careful with humor

Understand body language and gestures

Visit the location before you make the speech. Pay attention to the smallest of details. Where are you going to stand, what amplification system is in Place, where are the people who are to listen to the presentation located. What visual aids are you going to use? What backup do you have if the projector malfunctions?

Effective presentation skill is not always a function of person being extroverted, or having a great personality, but instead this skill emerges from being well organized, having a plan of operation, a point to be made and the willingness to call for others to act upon what you have suggested.