



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

*Ronny J. Coleman*

---

## Elephant or Mouse Bullets: The Correct Ammo for the Job

A city manager I worked for once told me that everyone who holds a leadership position has a symbolic revolver that contains six cylinders. Three of these cylinders are bored out to carry “elephant” bullets, like the .44 Magnum Dirty Harry carries. The other three are fashioned for “mouse” bullets, the .22-caliber size.

The real trick, according to the city manager, was matching the correct bullet with the right problem. Throughout most everyone’s careers, top-level managers face various crises. Some are monumental and require a tremendous amount of energy. Others are relatively minor, but they are important to others we work with, so they also have to be dealt with well.

The first trick is to make sure you never use a bullet unless you have to. Avoid firing a weapon at every problem.

When a situation requires pulling the trigger, make sure you match elephant bullets with elephant problems and mouse bullets with mouse problems. Any mismatch is liable to result in a catastrophe. If you use an elephant bullet on a mouse problem, you’ve wasted a resource. If you fire a mouse bullet at an elephant problem, you get trampled.

My interpretation of the city manager’s analogy is that there are times when a leader has to judge whether or not a problem is worth making an issue over. If the issue is important to you, you must be ready to use power. If the issue is important to someone else, but not so critical that it would cripple the organization, then you must use persuasion.

When you use power, do so in a way that makes it clear you mean business. When you are using persuasion to avert a crisis, the basic reason is that the other person cares more about the problem than you do.

This happens often in the fire service. Frankly, when discussing decision-making, most people tend to think more critical decisions are made at emergency scenes. I disagree. The areas where the mouse and elephant bullets are going to be used most frequently are in program advocacy, labor/management relationships, and jurisdictional and political disputes.

When it comes to actually using power or persuasion, there are no magic formulas that help determine which is appropriate. The decision is up to you. You need to use power when it is used against you. You also should use persuasion when you don’t want to overreact.



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

---

Be careful picking the things you're willing to stand up and fight for. Elephant bullets should be reserved for situations in which there is no room for compromise and where the consequences of failure are serious to you or your organization.

You can't afford to bluff or posture in hopes that the other person will back down when the stakes are high. When the hammer comes down during an elephant exchange, you still have to aim accurately if you hope to survive.

You have to be equally careful to not let a mouse-size problem become a liability by failing to deal with it. If it results in a larger issue, then it is time to use all of your communications skills to resolve it. When you use a mouse bullet, it should be more subtle, more like you didn't want to do it, but it had to be done.

In reality, we are not in the business of pulling any triggers. These are just analogies, but they have real counterparts in the shape of problems and crises that demand action. Happy hunting.