



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## End Runs, Shortcuts and Personal Betrayal

We are really going to take off on a different tangent this month. I would like to talk to you about something that you can either do yourself or have done to you and the consequences of the act. What I am talking about is when we find ourselves in a very frustrating situation where the person directly above us is oppressive and unresponsive to something. To the degree that we feel intensely about solving it, that we have to make a choice. Are we going to go around them? Or, are we going to remain intimidated? Or, is there any other option?

Before you answer that question, I would like to remind you that before we finish this column, you will need to recognize that whatever choice you make, you are giving the same right to anybody who works for you. In other words, if you select the option of going around your boss to solve a problem, then you better expect people to try to go around you when they are frustrated with your decision making. This is a classic example of like father, like son.

The reason I bring this up is a series of discussions I have had with chief officers who are either angry at their fire chief or fire chiefs are angry with their city manager about something and they feel compelled to make an end run to try to put some political pressure on that person to change. Does it every work out very well?

Well, let's explore the concept a little more. An end run is exactly what it sounds like. You do not address your problem with the person you are angry with, but instead focus your time and attention on somebody who is way up in the hierarchy. You are choosing to bypass multiple steps in order to go to them to express your complaint in hopes that you won't get caught and be punished. When end runs work, I guess there is very little criticism. But more often than not, end runs don't work. The reason that they don't is that regardless of what the outcome is there is resentment and hostility when the tactic is employed. The person with whom you are angry or frustrated with feels betrayed in the most commonly accepted definition of that word.

One of the things we need to establish about this type of relationship is that there is a hierarchy of interest here. If you were in a supervisory position, i.e. you are the fire chief and someone's does an end around on you, I will guarantee you, you will get upset. Conversely if you are a staff officer and you are looking above you and getting ready to decide whether you are going to make an end run or not, you are getting ready to take a great risk for a reward that may not be as meaningful as you would have hoped it to be. As you might expect, end runs are almost always done in the cloak of darkness. People back away from a problem, take three steps sideways and start climbing some other type ladder to find someone who will listen to them. But it is hardly ever in daylight. It is an easy behavior to emulate because we see it in many lifestyle decisions outside of the fire service. There are a lot of other terms



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that are used to describe this type of behavior. One is back biting or stabbing. Another is political activity and perhaps the most demeaning is the use of the phrase “cut throat.”

So, remembering that you can either be the person who wants to look for the other avenue or you can be a person who someone wants to get around so be careful as you move ahead with a decision as to how you think this can best be handled.

In the title I alluded to the fact that there might be a shortcut. That is what I would like to talk about from this point forward. Have you ever heard the term “may I have permission to speak freely?” I have seen it in a few movies mostly with respect to the military. But I have also seen it in the real world. If you have the ability to have open disagreement with someone and yet at the same time shy away from open hostility, the short cut is to ask permission to thoroughly address the issue and then be given permission to review the problem with a third party.

I didn't say that this is going to be easy by the way. A friend of mine, Chief Marc Revere, often talks about what are called courageous conversations. That is what we were getting ready to describe here is a set of circumstances under which you have to make a choice. Do you want to go around somebody or do you want to let them know that you are going to take your problem to a higher level of discussion?

Nobody is going to be comfortable in these circumstances. Especially you. If you are the person contemplating this strategy, and you have a boss that lacks some of the human relation skills that we would like to see in our boss, this can be a fearful set of circumstances. On the other hand, if you are the superior officer and someone comes up to you and says they would like to carry out this type of thing, you have some pretty tough choices yourself. You can either accept it and engage in the dialogue or throw a temper tantrum and hope that it will all go away.

The best way to make this conversation work correctly is to make sure that you have exhausted all your other options before even entertaining it. In addition to that, before you exercise this option you need to examine your own motives very thoroughly. Is this really a decision that you are willing to take this level of risk on? Part of the decision making process will also involve your personal assessment of what you are going to do if you ultimately lose in its entirety.

What got me to think about writing this particular column was a phone call from a chief officer who was asking what I thought about him going around his fire chief and the chairman of the board to reverse a decision the chief had made. I started searching my repertoire of textbooks, courses of instruction I have taken and previous conversations with other chief officers and I have discovered that there is mighty little information on this particular topic. I am not saying there is not an answer out there in a textbook somewhere but from my point of view, this is unexplored territory until you actually begin to enter that territory.



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So there you have it. If you are on the bottom looking up and you really feel strongly about something that you want to pursue it, it is best to sit down with your superior officer and see if you can come up with a solution before going any further. If you are on the top looking down, you have to make a choice as to whether or not you are merely going to intimidate the questioner of your activity or whether you are going to engage in a form of decision making diplomacy that will become more useful in the future.

These are choices you might be faced with at some point in your career. If you haven't thought anything about it, I will guarantee you the decision is going to be very tough. On the other hand if you have thought this process through and you made some decisions on what you think you will do then put your plan of operation into affect and then see where it takes you.