



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Entropy, Apathy, or Advocacy?

Congressman Curt Weldon says that the fire service is a sleeping giant. If so, we are a classic example of Rip Van Winkle because we have been asleep for a long, long time. Are fire chiefs actually asleep or are we merely lethargic? It has been reported that there are 33,000 to 25,000 fire departments in the United States. Chances are, if you're reading this magazine, you are the chief or a chief officer of one of those departments.

On a scale of 1 to 10, where would you place yourself with regard to being awake and informed on fire service matters (with 1 as total deep sleep and 10 a high degree of mental and physical activity)?

This is a self-evaluation that is to remain private. But it is a question that needs to be asked if Congressman Weldon is to succeed in spearheading fire service advocacy at the national level. If the sleeping giant merely opens its eyes, flicks its eyelids a few times and returns to a somnambulist state, an opportunity will have been missed – an opportunity that may not come around for a long time. You, and every other chief officer in the United States, are needed to continue to arouse public and professional concerns about fire service issues or the profession will continue to suffer from apathy and indifference at the national level.

In a recent discussion with some chief officers, I was informed one reason for this problem is fire chiefs simply don't care what goes on outside their own community.

To the contrary. I see in many parts of the country very successful chief officers who are carrying the battle to the state legislature and winning both public and political support for fire service issues. Many of our organizations have done a fair to excellent job of documenting and highlighting specific fire service issues in the media and political arena. However, Curt Weldon is correct. We are merely a shadow of what we could be if the fire service would mobilize behind specific areas and give unilateral support at the national level.

Another argument I've heard is that we are too fragmented. It is labor against management, management against labor, state organizations against national organizations, national organizations against each other. The formation of the Joint Council of Fire Service Organizations was an attempt to resolve some of these problems. Some issues have been successfully discussed at that level. However, the real power in the American fire service does not reside in Washington, DC. It resides at the desk of the local fire chief. He may know the local legislator or have been involved in circumstances that resulted in the election of a federal legislator.



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Another argument I heard was this: Many fire chiefs are prohibited from engaging in lobbying activities because their views differ from the philosophy of their boss. This may be more of an assumption than a reality. There are laws against public officials taking certain positions as a lobbyist and engaging in certain types of behavior that is part of the political process at the state and national level.

Nonetheless, there is nothing wrong with a fire official engaging in an educational process to inform and advise legislators about the implications of legislation. The proper use of telephones, telegrams and letters are tools as powerful in lobbying as the cocktail parties held in the capitol.

Earlier, you were asked to take a self-scoring evaluation of your level of awareness. Following are some questions you might want to answer in an attempt to make a more objective analysis of your political awareness.

1. Are you a registered member of a political party?
2. Do you vote in any regular election regardless of whether it is local, state, or national?
3. Do you know the names of your state legislators and do you have their addresses and telephone numbers in your files?
4. Have you ever talked with or personally communicated with those legislators?
5. Do you have the names and addresses of your federal legislators?
6. Have you ever communicated with them on issues of national significance for the fire service?
7. Do you subscribe to any magazines, newsletters, or other publications that deal with the political environment at the state or national level?
8. Have you ever participated in the development of a position paper or written document submitted to state or federal legislators?
9. Do you belong to and regularly attend meetings of your local fire chiefs association, state fire chiefs association, divisional fire chiefs meeting or the IAFC Conference?
10. Do you serve on a committee for any of those organizations?
11. Have you ever chaired a committee for any of those organizations?
12. Do you regularly subscribe to or read news magazines that deal with national issues such as *Time* or *Newsweek*?
13. Do you subscribe to and regularly read a daily newspaper?
14. Do you subscribe to and regularly read fire service publications?
15. Have you ever written a letter to the editor of any of those publications?
16. Are you familiar with and aware of the implications of the following: NFPA 1500, NFPA 1403, HR3704, SARA, Title III?
17. Do you have an agreement with your immediate superior regarding what positions you can take on various legislative acts promoted by the state legislator?
18. Do you have an agreement with your superior regarding actions you can take with regard to legislative actions taken by the federal legislation?



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Very few people can answer all those questions affirmatively. Perhaps more important is the fact that there are many people who have a difficult time answering more than a few of them. Most of us will probably fall somewhere in the middle. Being average is not all that bad, except that average doesn't seem to be winning us the battles that we need to win at the state and national level on fire service issues. Congressman Curt Weldon with his simile is emphasizing the fact that we must intensify our activities if we're going to be more effective. A 10% improvement on a national position could have significance in a very short period of time. A 25% increase in participation by fire chiefs in the information, education and advisory process could have a dramatic impact on legislation.