



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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Esther Williams and Fred Astaire

Back in the 1940s there was this absolutely fantastic pair of ballroom dancers. Their names were Esther Williams and Fred Astaire. In countless shows and in movies galore, the two of them danced to the delight of the observing audience. It was years later when I believe someone asked Esther Williams what it was like being Fred Astaire's partner and she reportedly responded "I did everything that he did except I did it going backwards and in high heels".

What Ms Williams was trying to say that she was an equal partner in the exhibition of the dance expertise. And that her dance steps were no less complicated than those demonstrated by Mr. Astaire. Yet, historically that credit has never been given to the female dance partner for having to do her performance with a few handicaps.

I am not a ballroom dancer myself, but I do seem to recall that it is the male's role to lead and the female's role to follow. Hmm! In other words, leaders have to dance to the tune and the followers have to do it also but they sometimes do so with a handicap. Is it harder to be the leader or is it harder to be the follower?

But more importantly, in looking at the dancing duo was the fact that they were partners. One actually knew what the other was going to do before they did it. They were able to synchronize their activities and efforts to make it seem almost magical. They truly were properly matched up.

This analogy came into my mind recently when I was reviewing some of the classic conflicts that seem to raise themselves in our profession. Examples of these were labor versus management conflicts. Volunteer versus paid conflicts. Urban versus rural conflicts. EMS transport versus non-transport conflicts. Take almost any set of two things that are causing conflict in our profession and ask yourself who is the leader and who is the follower and who has the toughest row to hoe.

There certainly appears to be a large area of potential improvement when it comes to making a determination of how these partnerships could potentially function in a more positive fashion. I would go so far as to say that anything that is divisive amongst our sphere of influence in the fire profession is essentially destructive to both parties with equal measure. I have seldom seen really serious disputes ever turn out without leaving a residual harm on whoever walked away thinking they were the winner. Even winners wind up with scar tissue.

The dispute between whether a fire department operates with volunteers or has paid personnel is a classic example of this phenomenon also. To the best of my knowledge what truly drives whether or not fire protection is being provided by a volunteer fire force or by paid force is almost entirely linked with



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the economic capacity of the community. Volunteers don't prowl the street at night trying to find a way to subvert the paid staff. There are natural forces that cause a volunteer department to transition to a combination department and then to a full-time department that have nothing to do with the tasks being performed by the firefighters.

To use even a more incestuous conflict, how about the battle between fire prevention and operations. Where are our resources being spent? Why is it that disputes of this nature tend to become highly personalized instead of focusing on the facts?

To go back to my dancing duo analogy, what made Fred Astaire and Esther Williams look so good was that they both knew the rules but they also knew their roles. They were able to improvise when they had to but essentially they knew the principles behind what they were doing so well that innovation took on the look of being well practiced.

The word dancers used to describe this phenomenon is called choreography. It's parallel in our world is responsible management and leadership through coordination. We need to spend a lot more time trying to figure out how leaders and followers can unify then we spend on arguing over ways to be divided.

There are several techniques one could adopt in order to achieve this objective. Among these is the classic text "Getting to Yes". This simple paperback contains some of the building blocks of communications that can create that kind of choreography in an organization. However, it cannot be just treated as a book sitting on a shelf that you pull off for periodic discussions. It has to become cultivated into the organizational structure.

Differences in opinion do not always have to become divisive. One set of facts does not necessarily mean that the other set of facts are untruthful. As I am finishing up this column, I got to thinking how some of you might have decided that I missed one major point and that is talent. Both Esther Williams and Fred Astaire were incredibly talented people but they didn't get there overnight. They took their basic skills and abilities and continued to practice what they did as much as they possibly could. I would carry that forward in this conversation by saying that conflict resolution is not just compromise. It is a whole range of behaviors that people can begin to learn as early as when they are playing in the sandbox in kindergarten. It is a skill set that can continue to be honed as a person climbs the various steps on the promotional ladder. It is a skill set that properly cultivated can become a second nature. How you apply this concept is really dependent upon your desire to have a reputation as an organization that gets things done and gets them done right.

You may have heard the old cliché "lead – follow, or get out of the way". What I am suggesting here is you can lead sometimes, you can follow sometimes but in both cases the outcome can be magical.