



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## **The Experience Gap**

What is experience? Early in my career, I had a lengthy discussion about this word. As I recall, the debate centered around the fact that some people thought experience was time and grade and others thought experience was wisdom that came from facing reality. Generally speaking, I noticed that those who had a lot of seniority tended to think that tenure gave them a type of knowledge that the junior members did not possess. That was an assumption which was not always true.

On the other hand, I did notice there were some wise members of the organization who never seemed to make the same mistake twice and who consistently got better. Most of them had been out there where the “rubber hit the road.”

The delicate balance in this argument does not center on time as much as it does on value. As chief officers, we have to place value on experience because it is becoming an extremely rare commodity.

Over the last couple of decades I have witnessed a gradual change in the types and magnitudes of experiences being faced by people who are progressing up through the rank structure in the fire service. I believe it to be true that there are large numbers of people with high levels of responsibility in the fire service that have had limited exposure to the actual ultimate test of their knowledge. In short, we have a lot of people who are long on tenure but short on exposure. And, one of the difficult aspects of this is that the price we pay for failure these days is getting higher and higher.

This is not uncommon in high stress jobs however. There have been many times that this entire nation has gone to war with groups of noncommissioned officers, and even general officers who have never actually fired a shot in anger themselves. They were put into the ultimate test of survival with a limited amount of exposure. Then what does it take to insure maximum performance in times of high stress? The answer is relatively simple. It is training.

But, not just any kind of training. It is training that is reality based and continually reassessed for its relevancy to the future. Recently I read a book entitled [About Face](#) by David C. Hackworth. It's a book about military officer's observations and disillusionment with a particular military campaign; the Vietnam War. Without belaboring all the points about the war, there are some outstanding observations in this book about leaders in general.

For example, Hackworth once observed a training exercise in which a group of “friendlies” were suppose to take a mountain from a group of aggressors. Not unlike a bunch of children playing a game of king of the hill, the military organizational structure allowed a training exercise to turn into a foot race for the top of the mountain. The umpires even went along with the observation by declaring that the team who got the most people to the top of the hill were the “winners” of the exercise.

These same combat soldiers, when they went to Vietnam during the early days, were asked to assault a particular hill and they approached it with a king of the mountain attitude. Marching across fields of fire with an attitude of overwhelming superiority the infantry company was literally decimated. Failing to



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follow ground rules of protecting themselves they were following a ground rule that was formed in their training. According to Hackworth he learned in his career from an NCO a very straightforward comment - "Learn it right the first time and you will do it that way the rest of your life. Learn it wrong the first time and you'll spend the rest of your life trying to get it right."

In the current trend in fire service experience we may face a situation that is very similar. We have people learning hazardous materials out of a textbook that, in some cases, is not very realistic. We have individuals learning fire command by taking a course of instruction sitting in a classroom that is not very realistic. The only thing one can learn in a classroom is principles. One cannot learn the subject. For example, you can learn the principles of fire command and reiterate them out of a textbook. However, in order to learn fire command you have to fight fire and stare an emergency right in the eyes to determine if you have what it takes to implement command.

What needs to be done? Many places are already doing a lot of things that will attempt to reduce this experience gap. Hands on training facilities such as the Texas A&M Fire School, the Risk Facility in the Netherlands, the recent urban search and rescue exercise held in Montgomery County, Maryland, etc., are all training exercises aimed at creating reality.

There has been a tremendous increase in the time and interest in simulation technology. The military has already embraced simulation technology for the training of high performance people such as aircraft pilots. We still have a long way to go in the creation of scenarios that really test people's performance. There is a new concept being developed now called virtual reality. This simulation concept allows a person looking through a special pair of eyeglasses to actually see something that is being fabricated by computer technology.

I went through the era when we developed visual simulations for the fire service. I can recall one of the first audio/visual simulators I ever saw was one created by the United States Forest Service and it was built on the back end of a truck. That technology has been used by some people to teach principles but it does not teach command. The umpiring and controlling of these types of simulators often took on a fun and games attitude that not only did not teach the principles but led people to believe that certain behavior appropriate in simulation may work in a real emergency.

Many fire departments have started embracing the concept of TAD (temporary attached duties). Officers who are working their way up through the rank hierarchy are sent to work in the context of another organization that simply has more exposure to major emergency operations. At one point in my career, for example, I was actually given the opportunity to work alongside Chief Ben Renfrow of the Los Angeles Fire Department in order to learn high-rise procedures. The first high rise fire I saw I was actually in charge of, yet I learned a great deal about how to cope with that situation after having shared the experience with a seasoned combat officer such as Chief Renfrow.

Thirdly, one way of closing the experience gap is constantly focusing on the experiences and knowledge gained by others. This sometimes takes on the trappings of a training program. The case study and use of critique approach is one way of reducing the experimental gap. It also requires a great deal of work. There are many excellent documents that can assist us in this area. First and foremost are the



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professional fire publications. Actively reading and especially reading between the lines of incidences that have occurred in other communities can provide us with insight as to our own expected performance. The National Transportation Safety Board also puts out a series of bulletins that gives a complete and thorough analysis of hazardous materials incidents that have occurred. Frequent review of these documents can give us a great deal of information.

Well, as we read this column it is possible that the debate over what experience really is will continue to rage. There are those who will place emphasis on tenure as evidence of competency. There will be those who measure performance and forget about how long it took to acquire it. In the final analysis what will really count is what you or those that you supervise are going to do when they face a once in a lifetime situation where there is no margin for error.

Lieutenant Colonel Hackworth, in his book, makes a case very clearly for reality-based training. In his particular case the evidence was found in casualties that emerged from two armed conflicts. Simply stated, those that learned lived and those that didn't died.

There are many individuals in the fire service who carry around rank and responsibility who have yet to acquire that perspective.