



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Explosions in the Firehouse

Over the last few years, especially since the advent of the various websites devoted to the fire service, and specifically due to the use of internet news services, many of the fire services stories that are not so good for our reputation have gotten out. The phenomena that many of the stories are so bad is based upon the fact that there are a lot of things that happen in firehouses that maybe we would prefer to not see get the headlines and it contradicts our overall image. I am talking, of course, about those incidents that occur in a fire station or within a fire department that result in criticism of either the individuals involved or the organization as a whole. It occurs when someone gets into trouble.

If it has not happened to you or your department, Congratulations! If it has happened to you I hope that you were able to deal effectively with it and that you learned some valuable lessons from the experience. If you think that is not going to happen to you I hope that you wake up from the denial in the very near future and get ready to address it. Every fire chief in this country is just one shift away from an incident that can affect a career or deal a blow to the department's credibility. Every fire station is only a few minutes away from an incident that could explode into front page headlines. If you are taking the issue seriously, I hope that you are planning to do conduct an assessment and seek some initiatives to prevent negative cultural events from occurring in the future. Where should you start?

What I am focusing upon in this column is the reality that there is a culture in the firehouse that can be either a positive or negative on the environment that is created for both labor and management. Being painted with a controversy often tarnishes both the guilty and the innocent when they both are wearing a uniform. There is a culture in every firehouse that can be encouraging or discouraging to the individual firefighters that we have placed there. There is a culture in every fire house that can create or destroy the reputation of an organization in a matter of moments. Which environment exists in your firehouse?

After collecting about 200 news articles about flare-ups in firehouses I have made the observation that in almost all cases the behavior that is subject to the criticism isn't something that just appears out of the specific circumstances, but has a build up period of being sanctioned in some form or another by the organization. Some have called it the Culture of the Firehouse. Others have characterized it as the Culture of the Fire Department, a more general statement. And, at the largest scale possible it has been referred to as the Culture of the Fire Service. Which one is it? Or, could it be all three?

Let's start with defining the word "culture" According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary the word culture is a 15th century word that was derived from the Latin culture, which was a word that described the tilling of land. Used as a noun it generally means the following: the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties, especially by education; expert care and training; enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training; integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding



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generations; the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of racial, religious, or social group. It is also described as the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time; the set of attitudes, values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or social characteristic.

If you want to know what a fire house culture is just add the word fire house in front of most of those definitions. But, you must also be willing to live with this particular restriction; it all depends upon which level of the fire service, the fire department or the individual sub-component you are talking about.

Just for the heck of it, I went on Yahoo.com and typed in the word firehouse culture and got 22,500,000 hits. The list was divided up among both positive and negative stories. So, I guess that there is little reason to debate the existence of a culture in this business is there? I guess the real question for this column to discuss is what do those millions of hits really mean to us and then, more importantly to you. What was most revealing in viewing many of the hits was the terrific price been imposed on organizations that have experienced negative events, and how little the positive events seem to make up for the negative ones. In summary of this review the attaboys don't seem to make up for the A- "you know what" that follow.

By the "us" in that previous paragraph I am referring to all of us; the members of this fire service profession. We have characterized the fire service as a brotherhood. And, that has offended the female gender. We have characterized it as a family and that has proven to be both a positive and negative connotation with some of the acts being committed in the context of culture as being nothing less than brutal and anything but familial. We have an image that is very positive in the minds of the public that can be marred by failing to live up to that image at the lowest possible level. As a profession we have to admit to having a culture. It is our legacy. It is the past of the profession that has created both the positive and the negative aspects of this phenomenon. The only question that remains as a profession is what is an acceptable culture.

What is the image of our profession? Many will answer that with a positive statement that somehow wraps itself around the hero image. Currier and Ives started it. But it has been impacted along the way by everything from the adventures of Squad 51 to the antics of Denis Leary on the television series - Rescue Me. Toss in Steve McQueen from the Towering Inferno, Kurt Russell from Backdraft and John Travolta from Ladder 49 and John Wayne from the story of Red Adairs live, and you have the possible setting for a new rock sculpture in the Black Hills alongside of the Presidents. Does anyone remember the names of the stars of Third Watch? Perhaps they can join the others in the sculpture.

And, we have done a fairly good job of trying to tell our story as the epitome of the hero by our development of books that range from real world accountings of fire fighters operating under the stress



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of combat to fictionalized stories that lionize the behavior of the characters that wear uniforms and badges in imaginary stories. Several books in my collection are based on storytelling about pranks and antics that were once prized as examples of firehouse humor. As a book collector I add several of the books to my collection every month. I bet you have one or more on your bookshelf too. However, those are acts of individuals, not organizations. And, moreover, many of these books herald a past that does not exist today.

Furthermore, the question of overall image is an easier question to answer than the next three levels. We all benefit from the association with the Hero. Let's dispense with the obvious and suggest that our overall culture is a value driven one that is based upon the idea that those that are willing to put themselves into harm's way to protect life and property share a culture of courage, commitment and competency that demands a fairly high level of personal knowledge, skill and ability. We do have the trust of the American Public. We are America's Heroes - There may be a lot more to it than that, but that is a good start.

The next level is going to be harder. Much harder. What is the culture of your department? Wanna get more difficult? What is the culture of your platoon; your battalion; your individual fire company? What is acceptable and unacceptable at those levels is an order of magnitude more important than the previous paragraph in creating an image. In fact, I can go so far as to say that it is possible to believe in the culture of the fire service overall and commit absolutely heinous acts at the lowest possible level. There is proof of that in the millions of hits that I got from the Internet. One headline stated it succinctly; Firefighters Halos of 9-11 tarnished.

As I reviewed the printouts of the articles from the news and the internet I started to formulate a series of questions that you might find useful in assessing the potential for a cultural bomb going off under someone's watch.

One other point I would like to make before going off into this subject. If you are getting some butterflies at this point because you think this is going to be a bashing of what others might have done – forget it. This column is not about some self-righteous way of leading or managing a department. It is about the reality of working with human beings in the context of a high responsibility/high stress work environment. This column is not going to make any judgments. It is only here to draw attention to the potential for getting into a situation that could compromise an organization.

However, this column will recognize that there is a parallel process that is gaining momentum in the fire service today that may be applicable to this discussion and that is the focus that is being placed on the concept of ethics. These are not parallel issues they are concurrent and at some point will intersect with either positive or negative consequences. Again, this column is not going to suggest any individual course of behavior. It merely recognizes that, at any time, there but for the grace of god, go many of



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you. If you have thought about this maybe it will turnout one way. If you have not thought about, it may turn out a different way.

The following is description of the series of questions that a chief fire officer might ask to assess the culture that exists in their firehouse.

1. What are the distinguishing characteristics of a lifestyle in our fire stations?
 - a. Describe the positive and negative aspects of how camaraderie is developed and sustained.
 - b. How is teamwork created at the lowest possible common denominator – the fire company?
 - c. Does familiarity breed ever breed contempt?
 - d. Is it really true that captains are neither fish nor fowl and will not address disciplinary issues?
 - e. What has gone wrong in fire station culture in the past?
2. Is there any difference in a firehouse when individuals eat together as opposed to those that do not share meals?
3. Is there any difference in a firehouse when individuals sleep in common dorms as opposed to individual rooms?
4. What is the level of tolerance for “hazing”?
5. What is the level of tolerance for humor?
6. What sort of behavior constitutes sexual harassment?
7. What does the term “zero tolerance really mean in an organization?
8. What happens when an individual has a breach of confidence with other team members?
9. How is a person initially accepted into your firehouse culture?
10. How much are recruit firefighters taught about acceptable and un-acceptable behaviors in the fire stations?
11. How is membership in that culture sustained?
12. What are the rites of passage expected in you department?
13. Would the average person in your community be offended by these rites?
14. How does a person get rejected by a firehouse culture? What are the consequences of that rejection?
15. Who is responsible for the maintenance of discipline at a Fire Company level?
16. The Battalion level?
17. The Platoon level?
18. The Departmental level?
19. If there is a serious incident that occurs at a station, what is the level of tolerance for covering it up?
20. What is the net effect of the “code of silence” on the credibility of the organization?



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21. If there is an incident in a fire station and it results in disciplinary action, what is the punishment for the person who reported it?
 22. What is the punishment for someone that observed it, but took no action?
 23. What kinds of behaviors are tolerated in the firehouse?
 24. What kinds of behaviors are absolutely not tolerated in a firehouse?
 25. Would the conversation around the dinner table or in the apparatus room be heard by the other members of society with the same level of acceptance?
 26. What does the term "crossing the line" really mean?
 27. What components of firehouse culture result in consequences in the field of gender or other aspects of diversity, i.e., religion and race, sexual orientation?
 28. What happens when political debates occur in a firehouse? Are people that are not in the room more likely to be criticized than those in the room?
 29. What are the most positive aspects of firehouse culture in your department?
 30. Has firehouse culture in your department changed in the last five years?
 31. Has firehouse culture changed in the regional fire service the last ten years?
 32. Has culture of the fire service changed in the last twenty years?
 33. Does working for a busy station impact the culture versus working in a slow station?
 34. Does the level of education of the individuals in a fire station effect the culture?
 35. Does the fact that the fire department operates an ambulance or a paramedic system affect the culture in a firehouse?
 36. What are the primary determining facts as to whether or not an individual has high morale?
 37. What are the primary determining factors that determine whether a fire company has high morale?
 38. What are the determining factors as to whether an entire fire department has high morale?
 39. What are the outside signs, i.e., to the public that there is bad morale in a firehouse?
 40. How would you characterize the reputation of your department in the community?

If you thought about the questions as you completed the survey you might have had some of the same thoughts that I experienced in writing it. Did you have a moment of pause when you remembered some of the things you did as a firefighter? I know I did. Did you recall anything that you or a member of your department did during your last recruit academy that could be misinterpreted? Did you have any sense of regret for doing something in the past that you wished now that you hadn't? I certainly had that feeling when I wrote the questions. Were there some questions that you started to defend your personal position on the topic before you answered it. If you are normal you might have.

There are also some serious consequences associated with these questions. I was not able to tally up the costs of the numerous lawsuits that were described in the internet search, but the judgments ran into the millions and millions of dollars. The costs of the associated lawsuits were not even tallied. Those are taxpayer's dollars. They are the same dollars we are trying to get allocated to provide staffing and



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program activity for our agencies. The dollars may be transparent to the budget, but they are real dollars. Careers have ended from these events. Families have been disrupted by these events. The consequences assessment of the type of problems that have emerged from this area is both complex and threatening. All fire service leaders should be concerned about the trend and pattern that these problems suggest.

Today we are suggesting that our fire stations are safe havens in many communities. Many departments have opened their doors to battered women. Some states have made the fire house the preferred location to drop off an unwanted infant so that it can be placed into care. Many individuals drive down the fire house every night never really thinking about what is going on the local fire station. They rest on the knowledge that if they call upon that station a crew of people are going to show up in less and do something to make their day get back on track. We have the public confidence.

I once wrote a column entitled A Symbol is a Promise, during which I discussed the idea that some of the symbols we use such as the Maltese Cross, the Badge and other symbols of authority contain an unspoken contract with the society that recognizes them. There is an implied set of behaviors that go along with that idea. The culture of an organization that sets a high priority on respect, dignity, discipline and sense of duty will go a long way towards sustaining the credibility of those symbols. The opposite results in erosion of them.

We can lose credibility in a matter of moments when some type of behavior violates what the community thinks is an appropriate way of acting. If we want to retain that confidence the entire rank and file of the fire service from the newest probie up to the veteran firefighter that is about to leave the service into a well deserved retirement need to be asking themselves the basic question of: Am I doing the right thing?

Lastly, I do not want this column to take on the aura of a sense that the fire service is doomed to become a sterile and hostile workplace because we have squeezed the adventure and excitement out of by becoming a humorless and perhaps characterless profession. To the contrary, I think that what I am suggesting is that we need to create a culture that gives ample consideration to grace and courage in the line of duty as background for our interaction around the dining room table. We have the obligation to create a workplace free of violence and animosity. The public may not tell us that this expectation is there, but it is.

The community is likely to serve as judge and jury and vote with its support or denial of the fire service programs in the future.