



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Faint of Heart

The faint of heart need not apply. That is what it should say on the job flyer for announcing a new opening for a fire chief's position. But it doesn't. And a result hundreds if not thousands of individuals every year apply for a job that they often wish they hadn't.

Maybe you are one of those. Maybe you are one of those that have not made the decision but may need to make it in the near future. Maybe you rare one of those that had made the decision in the past and can't really understand what I am talking about. You are my kind of chief.....

What gave me the idea for this article was conversation with a bright and upcoming fire officer at the National Fire Academy. We were standing in the Ott House (a place where many major decisions regarding the fire service have been made) and he asked me if I would suggest what he should do to get ready for a chiefs test that was coming up in the very near future. The conversation went on for about five minutes when he interrupted me to ask "aren't you going to try and talk me out of going for the job?" ^I stated negatively. He returned with a statement that I feel is great significance..."Well, most of the people I have asked for help who are chiefs tell me it is not worth it and that I should stay where I am."

What a tragedy. What a dilemma. Here is a fine fire officer that has a lot to offer to his community being advised to avoid the one job where he has the real opportunity to shape the destiny of a department and they are telling him to avoid it. My next question to him was as blunt as I could make it. OK, do you want me to convince you to take the job, or do you want to know how to get the job?" He answered in the way I hoped he would. He stated he wanted the job and wanted to be the best candidate for the position. Maybe he will get the job. Maybe he won't. But, I will sure tell you one thing. If he does get he had better be ready for all of the brickbats and bombshells that are scaring off the faint of heart.

It begs a question that needs to be answered. Why would anyone want to take a job that many people feel is less than rewarding and fraught with difficulty? My answer is pretty simple. It is because someone has to be in charge and the best person to do that job is a person that has the confidence in themselves that they can make a difference. Being the chief of a fire department today is not for wimps and imposters. It is truly a job that requires a combination of knowledge, skill and ability that is on the par with any CEO that operates in a volatile and hostile environment. The best reason I can think of with respect to why anyone would want to be the chief is to take responsibility for the direction of the department. And, to steal Admiral Dewey's famous line, "Damn the torpedo's...full speed ahead."

This is not to suggest that a person who wants to be chief needs to be obnoxious, arrogant or bull-headed. They just need to be convinced that they have a place in the command structure to make things happen and they will not be denied that role.



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I get the opportunity to counsel a lot of fire chief candidates. As a result of traveling all around the country, my columns in Fire Chief Magazine and a book I wrote called "Going for the Gold" I receive a lot of calls and letters asking me for advice on preparing for examinations. The very first question I ask almost every candidate is "Why do you want to be the Chief?" It is not a rhetorical question. It is not a question to get the person to come up with a creative answer. It is very basic. The reason that it is very important is that the reason a person chooses will be the crucible in which they will be tested the hardest.

If a person chooses the job for rewards, be they financial or emotional ...then if the rewards do not emerge, they will be disappointed. If the person chooses that they want to bring about change ...and the change is hard fought or resisted, they will be disappointed. A person's choice of reasons for seeking the highest level of responsibility in a fire agency is a decision that should never be taken lightly. It should always be considered to be that person's goal in their career choices

From my perspective as a counselor to these candidates I never question the candidate's reason. However, once it is stated I then focus in on how they expect to evaluate their ability to achieve that goal. And, as you might expect there are many paths to follow in achieving success. Each path is strewn with potholes and dead-end solutions.

While the process of training and education in the fire service has improved significantly in the last few decades the reality is that very few programs really prepare a candidate for the real test. And that test is how to maintain peace of mind in the midst of constant pressure. Yeah, I know there are fire chiefs out there that don't have a lot of pressure on them. But, I also know that there are many individuals that have chosen to be chief and then have been startled by the difficulty they experience in getting things accomplished. I believe that those chiefs that cannot relate to this concern are not in the mainstream of fire protection. Otherwise, why would there be the phenomena that many fire departments looking for fire chiefs have such a hard time getting a good candidate pool. There are large numbers of highly qualified chief officers at the battalion, division, assistant and deputy chief level that are turning their backs on the chance to obtain that final step. Moreover, there are a large number of chiefs that are retiring expressing bitterness about the dissatisfactions of the job.

My second question to aspiring candidates is related to the goal they have set for themselves. I simply ask, "And, how would you measure your success as a chief if you get the position?" The answer I am looking for here is one of common sense. If the person does not have a framework for assessing their own progress then they will be required to use the baseline and benchmarks of other people in determining whether or not they are doing the job. This leads to the second thing they never seem to teach you in fire school and that is the sense of self-confidence that you need to survive criticism.



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You know going back to the conversation with my ambitious friend of a few paragraphs ago; I believe that he will succeed primarily because he wants to succeed. No one should ever aspire to the position of chief with rose-colored glasses perched on their noses. This is a tough job and it is getting tougher every day. What we want in the fire chief is a person that can move the organization through the tough times without being debilitated by it. It requires that a person that has to ask, “why should I become the chief” be disqualified at the outset. If anyone has to be recruited or convinced to compete for the job they lack the inner fire that is going to be needed when the organization suffers chilling setbacks.

Recently I received an email from a fire officer that eloquently expresses a short list of the job requirements for a leader in the fire service. They are:

- You can't lead without vision

- You can't lead without understanding your people

- You can't lead without their respect

- You can't lead without their trust

- You can't lead without their confidence

- You can't lead when no one else will follow

This is pretty good advice for anyone contemplating the addition of that fifth bugle to the cluster or speaking trumpets on their collar.

This perspective is also a pretty good foundation to build upon if a person wants to be the chief. Why do you want to be the Chief? There are a million reasons why. You might want to review those traits above and reword them into goal statements, i.e. you might want to be the chief to gain the confidence of your personnel that there is a better way to operate the department.

In the final analysis you must have a set of personal goals that allows you to first compete for the job, and then become an effective and satisfied person in completing the job.

Forget about all of those certificates on the wall; keep the degrees in the desk drawer when you are contemplating the top job. The final step is not all about qualifications; it is about desire and passion. Anyone that chooses to make that last step needs to know that they can and will do what they have set out to do, and that any setback in the achievement of that goal is a function of other people's lack of perspective on the real goal of being a chief. That goal is to take responsibility for the direction of a fire agency that has been established to protect and serve the citizens of our communities. The fire chief's



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job has never been about personal glory, retirement benefits, power over others, or any other warm and fuzzy feeling about being popular or whatever. It is about doing the right thing. It is about doing the right things. It is about being ready to handle both challenge and adversity without being emotionally drained. It is about strength and confidence that the mission is very important to our society and that only a few very select persons are actually capable of doing that job at any given point in time.

Do you really want to be a fire chief? Only the strong of heart need apply.

Ronny J. Coleman Resume

(Please feel free to edit down to the space needed)

Ronny J. Coleman is currently the President of the Fire & Emergency Television Network, otherwise known as FETN. He also serves as the Senior Consultant for Citygate Corporation, a Management Consulting Firm. He formerly served as the Chief Deputy Director, Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and the California State Fire Marshal. He has served in the fire service for 39 years.

Previously he was Fire Chief for the Cities of Fullerton and San Clemente, California. He was the Operations Chief for the Costa Mesa Fire Department and has served in both the United States Forest Service and U.S. Park Service. He possesses a Masters of Arts Degree in Vocational Education from Cal State Long Beach, a Bachelors of Science Degree in Political Science from Cal State Fullerton and an Associate of Arts Degree in Fire Science from Rancho Santiago College.

He has served in many elected positions in professional organizations, including President, International Association of Fire Chiefs, Vice President, International Committee for Prevention and Control of Fire (CTIF), and President, California League of Cities, Fire Chiefs Department.

He has held professional memberships in many other organizations, such as the International Association of Fire Chiefs, International Fire Code Institute, Conference of Building Officials, National Fire Protection Association, and the Institution of Fire Engineers, USA Branch. The British Chapter elected him as a Fellow of the IFE.

His experience includes progressive responsibilities for creating or implementing fire protection policy from the local, state and national levels. Besides regular day to day duties he has served as Chairman of the IAFC Fire and Emergency Services Accreditation Task Force, Chairman of the NFPA Committee on Motion Picture and Television Production, NFPA Standard number 140, Chairman of the Risk, Hazard and Value Evaluation project (RHAVE), U.S. Fire Administration, Chairman of the Urban-Wildland Interface Code Committee, a member of the Oversight Committee for the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), and member of a consensus committee for Liquefied Petroleum Gas



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Negotiated Rule making for the U.S. Dept of Transportation, and Chairman of the Orange County Emergency Medical Services Committee.

Currently he serves as a panel member on the re-constituted "America Burning" panel and the Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Commission on Fire Accreditation International. Since retirement Chief has been serving as a consultant to local, state, federal and international organizations.