



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## The Four Minute Mile

Who first broke the world's record on the 4-minute mile? Sports enthusiasts might be able to retrieve that name, but not many others. Most people have forgotten him. Chances are most people today don't even recall the name of the individual who accomplished any individual feat in the past that has since then been passed up. At that time, breaking the 4-minute mile was considered to be almost an insurmountable goal. Just for the record, his name was Roger Bannister. He broke the record on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1954 at Oxford University. His record was 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds I remember because at the time I was running on a high school track team and he was one of my idols.

The significance of Bannister's event was not in the breaking of the record. The significance of it was that nobody had ever felt that they were capable of achieving the 4-minute mile until he did it and then suddenly people all over the world were able to break the 4-minute mile. Today in the era of super athlete it is unlike that anybody would get real excited about the accomplishment. In fact it is considered the standard for all professional middle class runners. We now deal in world records that are shaved off literally by hundreds of a point.

The name of the game is setting the goal. For once, the goal has been achieved. Then it becomes increasingly easier for other people to achieve the same goal. In Bannister's case, his record only stood for about 6 weeks. Australian John Landy broke it with a 3 minute 57.4 second run. This is an important lesson for us in the fire service to continue to focus our attention upon.

Quite frequently individuals go to workshops and training seminars in which they are advised to go home and set goals. However, most of us miss the main point that the goal is not supposed to be something that they are already doing. It is something that they should be shooting for. It is higher in aspiration than commonality. Goals if they are too easily accomplished simply mean nothing.

Leaders in the fire service need to be reminded from time to time that goal setting is not a case of regurgitating the status quo, but rather changing the height of the bar or the level of effort required to achieve a specific task. In reviewing numerous departments' goal statements I am often disappointed to find that basically what they are describing is past practice instead of future achievements.

In looking at goal statements there are few things that I look for that are indicators of whether or not the writer of that goal has attempted to elevate the organization by setting the goal. Key words that I look for in the description of the goal are things like improve, increase, decrease, accelerate, and even eliminate. When I see words like maintain, sustain, deport, or other words that imply in that goal that it is nothing more than keeping something alive then I know that it is not truly a goal it is merely a statement of intent.



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As fire administrators we often fall into the trap of setting goals that are based on tradition because quite frequently our budgeting practices and our day to day policies and procedures are aimed at averages. In other words, the status quo is a lot easier to sustain than it is to modify. Therefore goal statements that direct the organization to doing pretty much the same thing that it has in the past are very easy to come back later and evaluate and say that you have accomplished them. Of course you haven't done anything but then on the other hand you have done what you said you were going to do. In the literal sense of the word this is not goal setting.

I once heard a quotation that a person's grasp should be just beyond their immediate reach. The statement was intended to imply that if you could easily reach something then you do not have to strain yourself in order to acquire it. The same might be said for goals. They are not really things that we should be expecting to see accomplished over a short term period of time. Literally a goal in the sense of a game is a place in which an object must ultimately end up in order to score a point. If individuals could achieve goals easily on the playing field then there wouldn't be much interest in the competition. The same can be said for the goal setting in the context of an organization. If we can't actually say that we have to struggle a little bit in order to achieve the goal then for all intensive purposes it doesn't mean much.

Take a look at the goals that you have set for your organization. Are they ones that you can almost go on auto pilot to achieve? If that is true, then what do they need leadership and management for? It is sort of like a team that had been allowed to go on the playing field with no opposition. If they could just run down at the end of the court and dunk the ball in the basket and just accumulate points one after the other with no effort being taken to prevent them from scoring the point then who cares. As we review the goal statements in the context of fire organizations we have to ask our self the question, what is opposing us in the achievement of our goal?

There are several different components that confront us in the fire service. First and foremost is the element of fire. Any goals that we set in the administration of a firefighting agency should be directed towards the fact that the fire will be competing with us to keep us from achieving that level of accomplishment. Whenever we look at goals respective of fire obviously we have a competition in the form of the frequency of fire, the severity of fire, the consequences of fire, i.e., the loss of life and property and in some cases even the environment.

Another field of competition is that of maintaining technical competency. The fire service does not live in a vacuum. We are a profession that is designed to be on the leading edge of both technology and society. If a new problem is being created that threatens the lives and property of our citizens then one of the goals of the fire service is to be ahead of that curve.



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I can give you a good example on what is occurring today. It has been announced that the automobile industry in this country is contemplating the development of electric vehicles. While you and I might seriously debate the cost effectiveness of that decision it is really irrelevant to the fire service. That decision is being driven by societal demands far beyond the scope by the administration of a single fire department. Yet, it points to the absolute necessity for some goals being set for the fire service.

One of the things we have to set as a goal is to be prepared. When electricity was first created and started being placed in houses that created problems for the fire service of significant proportion. However, our expressions of frustration and anger toward this new technology certainly didn't slow down its adaptation by society. Neither will our concerns about electric vehicles. Yet, the electric vehicle creates some curious pressures on the fire service.

For example, we must be prepared to take a look at our regulations with respect to electrical circuitry in businesses and homes that intend to use electric vehicles because the charging requirements impose entirely new demands on the electrical service. Then, we have to take a very close look at our tactics and strategy as it relates to dealing with these types of emergencies due to the environmental pollution problems with acids, off gases, and the shock hazards associated with combating incidents on both traffic accidents and fires. Then, there is the element of protecting our firefighters from injury and perhaps fatality because of an emerging technology.

When it comes to goals in ancillary functions in the fire service it is clear that the emergency medical services arena has broadened the horizon in the fire service. It can no longer be satisfactory for a fire department to adopt an attitude that they will take some basic first aid training and then sit in the firehouse waiting for someone to call for help. There is an increasing amount of responsibility and liability accruing in the fire service because people are not setting goals with respect to the improvement of their capabilities and competencies in dealing with ancillary functions. This same admonition could quite possibly apply to the field of hazardous materials, and whatever new function the fire service finds itself held responsible to deal with.

Another pressure on goal setting in the fire service is that of legality. The era of the fire chief being the person who is most likely to be given accolades no matter what he does is over. We now live in a litigious society coupled with economic interests that now make it virtually impossible for a fire department to avoid being held accountable for anything it does that could have been done better. While that may seem like an over simplification of the legal issue, the fact is it is a tremendous seedbed for some of the issues that we should be setting goals for.

Then, and this is certainly not last because of its importance, but rather last because of its impact we have the problem of personnel management. I consider this to be a significant pressure on the goal setting for many fire departments. It is because 90-95% of most of our budgets are tied up on our



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personnel costs and yet most of our attention in goal setting is external to the department. Personnel management with all of its nuances is an appropriate area for leadership and management in the fire service to focus attention.

I am sure that some of you could come up with other arenas of involvement for goal setting. I have sighted these few because they are pretty obvious and if you examine them closely are frequently the reasons that various fire agencies are finding themselves in difficult times. As an individual responsibly for leading a fire organization fire chiefs should be looking into all of these arenas when it comes to setting their goal statements and their objectives.

Going back to the analogy of the 4 minute mile, it is also important that the goals you set in these arenas are not status quo, maintenance and monitoring goals. In order for the fire service to stay on the edge of its responsibilities these goals must be incrementally adjusted from time to time in order to make the department reach down into itself and improve itself.

It would be hard for me to visualize a professional athlete whose attitude would be that they can keep on winning races if they don't stay in training and don't stay competitive. This is suppressing demand for the fire service. We have to stay in training and we have to continue to improve our competitive edge or we will find at some point that have done that and are ready to substitute their services for ours. In other columns I have spoken to this issue several times especially as it relates to the issue of the fire service being involved in services that are parallel to the private side.

It is not my intention in this column is to argue the case for the fire service over privatization or vice versa. The point I am trying to make here is that the fire service can no longer rely upon good will and past track record in order to maintain its competitiveness regardless. World records are broken almost daily. And if new records are set name replace other names that used to be at the top of the list. The fire service cannot sit back and rest on its laurels. If we wish to remain on the leading edge of our profession we have to stay in the race.

As stated earlier, when Roger Bannister broke the 4 minute mile it was only a matter of weeks before it was broken again and then it became such a matter of common occurrence that we stopped talking about the 4 minute mile and starting talking about the world record holder. One thing is clear. Even if you eat the breakfast of champions unless it is followed up by a lot of hard work and an eye on breaking the record, not resting on your laurels, nothing happens. .