



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

GET READY — GET SET — GO!

If you were going to run a foot race this is exactly how it goes. You walk up to the line and you stand there and relax. You shake out of the tension in your muscles and get yourself mentally prepared. Then the person who is going to call the race gives you three commands. The first is — get ready! What you do at that point is you place your hands on the starting line and your feet in position but you do not tense your body. The next command — get set! At that point you do tense your muscles and put your body in a “cocked” position and you get ready to race. Then the command and the crack of a weapon shot — go! You take off like a bat out of Hades.

That’s the way we run foot races but it is certainly not the way that we live life. Yet there are very distinct parallels between those three commands and our effectiveness in dealing with things on a day to day basis. There is a get ready period. There is a get set period. There is a time when someone says go that we have to start taking action. What got me thinking about this particular metaphorical discussion was a recent conversation with a fire captain who said, “I am really getting tired of the rat race”. Because of my peculiar sense of humor I then started visualizing rats getting ready, getting set, and running the kinds of races only rats can run.

Once again, we are not rats we are human beings. Most human beings would like to feel that what they are doing is not racing with rats but rather making significant contribution to the profession of their choice.

We are fire fighters. And most of the people who will be reading this article or material are going to be fire officers. If I can use the metaphor here then perhaps we can relate it to the fact that almost all of us are going to have to come to work on a daily basis and we have one of two types of assignments, i.e. fire suppression or are staff i.e. fire prevention and training. In the case of the former there is a 24-hour shift. In the case of the latter it is an 8-hour workday.

Do these three stages have anything to do with how we ought to be thinking about our jobs? Is there a make ready period? Is there a period where we must anticipate an action and are there times that we must operate at maximum speed? Well, obviously I think the answer is yes or I wouldn’t be wasting my time putting this article together.

Let’s talk a little about the concept of make ready. Almost anybody who has taken a fire service instruction course knows that one of the things that determines good instructors and bad ones and what makes mediocre instructors and excellent ones is the period of time set preparing to do something rather than actually doing it. In the case of the lesson plan concept it means sitting down and thinking in advance of what you are going to do and how you are going to do it. This results in the development of a “plan”. Anybody who has ever taught a lesson plan knows that the plan is not instruction and instruction



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is not the plan. The make ready period primarily assures that you have the following things in place i.e. the right tools, the right information, and the right processes. Therefore, in our jobs of managing our time and our productivity we have to spend some time planning the plan. I can't tell you how much time is to be devoted to this concept because quite frankly it has different time elements depending upon the kinds of jobs that you are trying to do.

For example when a person is functioning in the role being a staff officer it is different than being a shift officer. If a staff officer walks in the office every single morning and no grasp of what the operational priorities of the department are and does not have a plan of operation then they will spend their entire day shuffling papers and feeling frustrated.

On the other hand if you have made ready for the job and know what the operational priorities are, be sure that all your proper tools are in place and have an established, fixed process in your mind of how you are going to pursue your way through the day's events is you can actually get something accomplished.

Let me shift back to a fire company operation. Everybody knows that fire fighters work on shifts. However if you walk in the shift on the very first morning of your daily cycle with no grasp of what is going to be expected over the next cycle of your days on you are going to spend a lot of time reacting to things.

A company officer needs a bigger picture than just a regular 24-hour shift or for that matter even the group of shifts that make up the cycle. A good company officer recognizes that a year's period of time makes up the envelope in which all the activities that will play themselves out in that fire department. On any given day any number of things can prevent you from performing your job sequentially. Typically people believe that we received most of our interruptions from emergency operations.

However closer observation will reveal that there is a lot more interruptions that are caused by things other than emergencies? A piece of malfunctioning apparatus can be more distracting than an incident. An urgent phone message from the Chief of the department bypassing the Battalion Chiefs all the way down to the troop level can cause a daily calendar of events to be tossed into the trash can within seconds of receiving that phone call.

So, make ready in the case of almost all fire officers is to make sure that you have the big picture. Know what your resources are. Know what your limitations are. Know what your tools are. Know what the limitations of those tools are. If you have a good firm understanding of what the operational expectations are of any given job then you could look at any crisis in context.



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However, if a crisis becomes the focal point of your activity, then closure or performance can get lost amidst all the ambiguity and conflict caused over shifting focuses and failure to bring that crisis to a closure.

What does “get set mean” to the fire officer? In another writing for the fire service, I created what I called the crisis box that compared time and deadlines. Paraphrasing that article here I would note that in almost every case in what we are expected to do we have an awful lot of options when we have no deadlines to meet. When the deadline is set, then the number of options start becoming reduced almost for every hour that passes. Crisis occurs when we have deadline and we have picked among those options and are then forced to make a decision that feels uncomfortable.

So, in the context of managing a fire officer’s time deadlines are the “get set” period. If you are told to do something or have something finished by a time certain the get set period is one of narrowing your focus to pay attention to what is about to happen.

The best example I can think of, of a get set process is called flow-charting or GANNT charting or for that matter any kind of charting. It consists of sitting down and determining that a deliverable must be available at a specific time and then you work backwards by establishing different steps that you must accomplish in order to achieve that. This is a little bit different than the get ready time because now you are talking about specifics. Get set means that something is going to happen. Whether it is the completion of a project or for that matter even a simple task. The get set period consists of commitments.

What brings increasing value to you as a fire officer is your credibility in bringing closure to the things that you have established as your goals and objectives. Talk is cheap in any business. And walking your talk is incredibly difficult when other people are constantly interfering with it. Yet, a distinction between the average officer and an above average officer is their ability to meet deadlines and to bring projects to close.

Go! That is simple enough. Essentially it means take action. If you followed the line of logic as the previous two components when a person has been given the authority and or the responsibility to act they need to do so with passion and finality. We think of ourselves as being fire fighters. We are very well attuned to the concept of going from zero to maximum performance speed in the shortest period of time possible. The best example of this is the period of time between the bell going off or the PA system blaring in a fire station and our getting behind the wheel of whatever vehicle we are going to drive code 3 to that scene of emergency. At the fire captain level it is an instantaneous reprioritization of everything that is going on in the firehouse. While we may talk an awful lot about the fact that fires are a very small percentage of our time and that even EMS is taking up a larger percentage of that emergency response role, the bell going off is an indication of a command performance.



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That command performance is not played out behind the doors of the firehouse. It is one of the few activities in which the public has an opportunity to actually evaluate the performance of a fire department. Their first assessment begins with the speed with which you arrive at the scene of their specific emergency. However even those individuals who didn't call you to the scene then get a second bite out of the apple by being able to evaluate your performance on the fire ground. Anything that gives the impression of calm, cool and collected response to crisis increases the credibility of a fire organization. Anything that looks even moderately chaotic or even just a little disorganized begins to have its impact on the credibility of the department.

Even a staff officer needs takes pause when they hear the bell or alarm go off at the station. You can't tell me that even some fire chiefs do not slow down in what they are doing long enough to listen to a dispatch as it goes out. Even staff officers have interruptions to their prioritizations created by anticipation for the specific emergency that will escalate to the point where it requires their participation and performance also.

When we go back to the "rat race" concept there is an interesting phenomenon. With notable exception there are very few ties at the end of the race. Generally speaking there is someone who can use the make ready period to get themselves in the right frame of mind that is better than everybody else's frame of mind. There is something about the way some people can poise themselves to take action that they have a calm, cool, collectiveness about themselves so that when they get set there is a minimum amount of stress upon them. Then, once the word has been uttered to go there are some individuals who possess stamina, energy, mental focus and sheer intestinal fortitude that makes them win the race.

While I have used the concept of a race metaphor to describe managing your time I cannot honestly say that the person who runs the fastest is always the most important here. As a matter of fact I will shift my metaphor to difference between a hundred-yard dash and a marathon. The race starts off with a whole bunch of people at the starting line and ultimately results in only one or two people really being way out ahead by the time that they are ten thousand yards down the road. In a sense we in the fire service are in this for the long term. We are not short distance runners. The goal part of our life is very real.

If we consider that we must endure, then we have to pace ourselves by realizing that the big picture is often more important than the specific irritations of an event that occurred to us once a shift or once a day. If you are a big picture person you have to realize that sometimes others will pass us up on short term issues, but then you will pass them up as they lie exhausted along the way because they have failed to take into consideration their own strengths and weaknesses.



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The condition that you should be looking for to create good management of your time is this. You should be ready to do just about anything that is thrown your way. You should have a plan in mind for what you are going to do to keep anything from turning into a crisis and you should have the stamina and mental framework to be able to endure.

Lapsing even further into the rat-race metaphor we must remember the Aesop fable regarding the tortoise and the hare. Frenetic activity and acting out how terrible things are for us may make for drama and encourage other people to feel sorry for us but it has nothing what nothing to do with our actual performance. Sticking to our guns and accomplishing things each and every day can put us all in the winner's circle if that is where we want to be.