



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Game is Called Because of Rain

I overheard a conversation the other day between two fire chiefs. The first one was telling the other that this job wasn't any fun anymore. He was being asked to explain everything he did and, worse yet, he was expected to justify what he was spending. The other person was agreeing and took it one step further. This person said he was giving serious consideration to retiring and getting the heck out of the business.

This is too bad. The reason why is if there is any point in time in which an organization needs good leaders is when the going gets rough. Anyone can run an organization when things are going well. It's really not hard to be much of a manager when you have all the money in the world. How difficult is it to lead a group of individuals who are all very content to move in a particular direction because there is no conflict in goals or priorities?

To the contrary, when an organization finds itself going up against rough times is when leadership becomes one of its most important organizational elements. Granted, it may not be any more fun but personally I don't ever recall seeing in a job description that having fun on the job was a predominant job factor.

When I started preparing this column, I felt I might offend a few friends by suggesting that now is not the time to abandon ship. All those years of experience we have accumulated building our organizations had a price to be paid also. The insight and wisdom that is generated by all those years is of immense value to the fire service. Just because it gets a little tough on us doesn't mean it is time to pull the disappearing act.

Instead, what we ought to be focusing on is how to work smarter instead of working harder. There will be tremendous challenges for the fire service when we approach the end of this century. They are not unlike the same ones that our predecessors faced in the 1800's when they looked at the end of one era and the beginning of another era. It would be interesting to know that this phenomenon of wholesale disillusionment and frustration because of change is not exactly a new circumstance. To the contrary, it happened in the 1880's also. There are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals who chose to no longer be associated with the fire service because of the advent of some brand new technology; the steamer and horse drawn fire apparatus. There were those who had weathered the firefights associated with the civil war and had manned the braces on newly operated pumps who simply threw their hands in the air and abandoned their career because of a change in technology. I admit I am beginning to understand why many fire chiefs want to withdraw from the service because of the intense personal criticism they are coming under. It has been noted in California, for example, that more fire chiefs have been terminated or asked to leave their jobs in the last two years than any other single position in local



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government. It is tragic but not terminal. Just because a neighboring fire chief is under attack or any number of issues does not necessarily mean we're all under attack.

What it does mean is that we in the leadership role in the fire service better start understanding why people are under attack. If it is because you are trying to bring about change and there is resistance to that change, we are not witnessing assassinations, we are witnessing casualties. We are seeing people who are under attack for incompetency because they are failing to respond to the needs of their organization than we are observing a weeding out process.

One consideration that every fire chief needs to make these days is whether they are vulnerable to become a combat casualty and taking on issues in which they are not supported by city management or city council or they are being weeded out because they are simply not paying enough attention to what is going on. In effect, the outcome is the same in both situations but the impact upon a person is tremendously different.

Recently there was a situation in which a chief fire officer in a fire department was removed from duty because of alleged improprieties in a code enforcement process. This person could have avoided the problem by looking the other way in the code violations and perhaps would have been able to retain his job but would have lost his integrity.

When we accepted the badge to become a chief officer in an organization we should have recognized that we have a price to pay in exchange for the compensation which we receive.

Let's go back to the earlier conversation with the two chief officers. It is easy to empathize with their frustration and disillusionment. I interjected myself into the conversation and asked the rhetorical question of would they abandon a fight against a conflagration if they were incident commander and things were not going well against them. Their indignant response was appropriate because no self respecting fire officer would ever abandon the fireground merely because they face adversity.

Yet, in the continuation of that conversation the individuals expressed a continued willingness to leave the battleground of fire administration because there are very few rewards and recognition for succeeding.

This phenomenon is going to require some soul searching on the part of the fire service. If we continue to lose the leaders of the fire service because they feel embattled and abandoned, those who are expected to replace them are going to find a chilling atmosphere to succeed within. Unfortunately, I don't have a lot of suggestions on how to dispense with that feeling of frustration or how to diffuse the impact of all these crises on you individually. What I can suggest is that we take a retrospective look on what the proper role is of a command fire officer in the service. If we understand what our true motives



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are of wanting to take leadership in a fire organization and we truly understand the scope and complexity of the problems our organizations are facing, this type of an environment should be a place where we would want to find ourselves.

When a sporting event is called because of the storm nobody wins or loses, you merely abandon the playing field. If you've ever gone to a baseball game and sat in the stands, you have probably thought to yourself that the game doesn't get rained out. Then as the storm clouds built and the potential for a downpour increases your level of anxiety probably depended a little more on how exciting the game was. If it was a ho hum game you cared. If your side was winning, all you could hope for is that the score would stand if the game had to be called because of rain. That's a pretty mediocre emotional set of circumstances. Contrast that with being at the World Series game and it is the bottom of the 9th. The score is 3 to 2 with your side on top and the opposing team is at bat with the bases loaded. Stepping up to the plate is their best hitter. You are probably hoping with all your heart and soul that your team has their best pitcher on the mound. I think it somewhat humorous that the baseball industry awards the relief pitcher of the year recognition of being "the fireman of the year". The level of emotion that is generated under those circumstances is one of elation, enthusiasm, and competitiveness. That's a far cry from being rained out of a game.

I would like to draw that analogy to the role of the fire chief under today's working conditions. If you want to call the game because it is raining, it depends on who is on top when the final rain drops finally fall. If you look upon yourself as the relief pitcher standing on the mound making sure you are giving it your best shot to make sure your team wins, then you may win or lose but you'll certainly know that you finished the game.