



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Good Enough for Government Work

It's not just a saying; it's an indictment. When someone uses the phrases; it's good enough for government work it cannot help but be negative. The inference is that government workers do not perform to the same level of competency that their counterparts do in the private sector. Is it true? Do we in government feel that if we do just enough to get by that its good enough? I hope not, but its food for thought.

The only way we can determine if this little jibe is true is to take a close look at ourselves with respect to accepting or rejecting the work that is delivered to us. When I say "us", I am speaking to anyone in the chain of command who directs, then evaluates the performance of subordinates. In the fire services hierarchal arrangement this means that it starts at the company level and goes all the way up to the fire chief. One might make the case that there is one more step beyond that; the Chief Elected Official of the AHJ; the Mayor or Board Chairman.

If anyone in that hierarchy accepts inadequate performance and that judgment is sustained upward, then mediocrity can quickly become the benchmark of performance. When mediocrity becomes the standard the overall organization can quickly obtain the reputation of being less than adequate by its own customer base.

Fire agencies tend to be pretty defensive about this topic. We almost all think of ourselves as number 1. El Primo. The best fire department in the county, state, country, world (you check off which level of pride you possess.)

At one level I think this perspective on our profession is well deserved. For almost 300 years now individuals have been engaged in fire protection in this country. Many of our communities have faced some of the most catastrophic events imaginable. Thousands of firefighters have made the final sacrifice. Hundreds of thousands have started, participated in, and retired from careers that have made significant differences.

But, at another level we must always remember that resting on our laurels may not be as solid as it used to be. The times are really changing. You've probably been besieged by speeches and articles on the topic, so I won't dwell on the usual buzzword; change. Change has always been a part of the process. Go back and look in the history book. No one can deny that we have made a quantum leap forward in the technology of fire protection. No doubt, we will continue seeing wave after wave of new technological advances emerge over the next 100 years. No technological change is not what we are talking about here.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

What this column is all about is the process of valuing our organization, and even our individual contribution to the overall fabric of society by expecting excellence. In short, it's about whether the firefighter is going to remain an icon of achievement, or slip into the ambiguity of mediocrity.

Despite our personal perception of our value to society, there are elements in our society who see the fire service as just another barnyard creature feeding at the public trough. Whenever we get an opportunity to demonstrate our prowess at the thing we are most proud of; emergency events, they grant us recognition, but the fame and glory are fleeting.

Moreover, there are elements in our society who are now advocating an expanse of our liability for performing on these same events. To the degree that fame and glory can be followed by blame and criticism there is little time to enjoy the glory.

The remedy to this evolutionary process is to make sure that we are perceived as being both credible and competent at the totality of what we do, not just our fire fighting schools.

This is where the "good enough for government works" mentality stands its acid test. For, I would submit that we often fail to be as concerned about all of our competencies as we are about our fire ground management skills. If we are what we say we are, we are a 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, year in and year out SERVICE!" Acceptance of mediocrity during any phase of that passage of time can reduce the pedestal we have been placed upon by our performance under combat conditions.

There are those who will disagree with this scenario. I respect that. Perhaps you have personal experiences in situations where no matter what happens the department basks in a rosy glow. You should be very grateful, because it's not true in other areas. Others may feel that there is only one reason the fire service exists and that is to be there when people need us on an emergency; the rest is prologue. Again, if that's all that's expected, your organization is fortunate.

What I am proposing in this article is a new cliché. It goes, "no one works as good as we do to make government work." This is a reversal of acceptance of mediocrity. It is a mindset that we can do better in just about everything we do when we put our minds to it.

This is not a proposal that we go into a frenzy of performance improvement. This is not a suggestion of creating new committees or bureaucracies, even new buzzwords. It's simply a proposal that every one of us who directs, supervises or evaluates subordinates, do everything we can to stamp out mediocrity.

You would think that by now we would have developed some kind of system to get rid of marginal performance. To the contrary, I believe a lot of the attempts to make our organizations more stable have resulted in them becoming more static. What I am in reference to is the almost manicured present



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

of standardization and uniformity that results in “minimums” becoming the maximum. It’s sort of like a sporting event where the race is won by everyone that finishes with a uniform time period.

I have at least three strategies that I believe we can all use that will provide some relief and at the same time allow us to live within an environment of compliance and conformity. They are; eliminate excuses, return work for revision, put a spot light on superior performance.

The first tactic is pretty simple. As a person who directs others, we should be real clear on a few things. What we want to see accomplished and when we want to see it completed, you will notice I DID NOT mention how to do it here. Granted, we need to tell some people, sometimes how to do things, but those are usually reserved for training of new, inexperienced personnel. In the context of this tactic, I am talking about what you should be doing with personnel who are already trained and are experienced. Tell them the goal, tell them the deadlines. Then watch and wait.

Mediocre performers have a tendency to do two things in this environment. They come in late, with an incomplete product, and it’s almost always someone else’s faults. It’s never them. Sometimes they blame their subordinates; sometimes they blame their peers, family, outsiders, or even the weather. The more daring of the mediocre may even blame you.

It is most important that you never accept excuses, but always try to determine reasons. For example, it is legitimate to find out from a subordinate why they failed to deliver a project on time. If they lacked training, experience, knowledge, skills or abilities, these are capable of being remedied. You can explore with them the other reasons they did not deliver; lack of planning, lack of setting incremental milestones, yes, even lack of resources. These too can be remedied.

What you must focus on are facts, not opinions. If some failed to complete a task because they were given two other countermanding projects that consumed their time, that is a fact. But, if they state that they weren’t finished in time because “they felt that no one was helping them out,” that’s an excuse.

Not accepting excuses has a short little epiphany that summarizes this phenomenon. It goes like this; you say you can’t do it, because you don’t want to do it. A shorter version: Can’t do, means don’t want to. In either case accepting a person’s excuses that they can’t do something is an acceptance that they never will be able to do it as long as you accept that response.

This leads to tactic #2. Return work for revision ruthlessly. Many of us, and I will even admit to this myself, are often tempted to rip a project out of a subordinates hands and just “do it ourselves.” This is an absolute positively wrong thing to do, and absolutely and positively assumes that the level of mediocrity settles in the organization.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

No matter how hard this is to accept, you have to send poorly structured work back to the person with the assignment. Obviously, there are consequences of this. First and foremost is the dilemma of failing to meet deadlines. The second most obvious consequence is that it imposes a burden upon the superior to serve as counselor and mentor. You cannot just retain a poor product with an admonition to do better. Rejection should be accompanied by suggestion on how to improve the product. One must stop short of actually doing the revision.

One of my chiefs used to send things back to me with notes and lists of texts and references I could use to do a better job. He often gave me samples of other people work in a similar area. He also spent a lot of personal time with me asking a single question; "How can you improve this?" In turn, as I have supervised others I have tried to do the same. I believe I have improved upon the model by trying to expose my subordinates to others that can serve as their advisor and counselor. The basic rule in this tactic is to never do for another person, what they can learn to do for themselves.

The longer we allow our people to lean on us, the more difficult it is for them to walk alone. This is a tough tactic at times. Temptation occurs at every juncture, especially crisis. The degree to which we can see our personnel improve as they try, fail and try again is the degree to which they can sustain the organization after we have moved upwards and even out of the organization.

I would suggest that failure to utilize this tactic in many fire agencies has resulted in serious problems with the departure of a highly competent officer who did not practice this tactic. It is not uncommon for the sudden loss of a single powerfully equipped individual to create a very serious vacuum in the department that impacts everyone.

The last tactic is to hang a lantern in success. This has at least two components: individual success and organizational success. They are both equally important in eliminating mediocrity. You can have one without the other. But without either, the organization is static.

Individual performance is actually the most important to recognize, because it's both internal to the organization and important to the person. What is being proposed here is not another warm fuzzy, attabooy type of thing. Unfortunately, a lot of personnel recognition programs have been diluted by focusing on the need to recognize someone that they often end up recognizing someone that doesn't deserve it. Instead I am suggesting that we hang a lantern on the product produced by a person. The criteria should be that we could clearly see that the product came about because of a person's performance, not their position.

Hanging a lantern on it merely means making sure that everyone knows who did it. Sure, this concept applies to teams, too. But here I am talking about highlighting a person who has taken on a task from start to finish. Their fingerprints are all over it. You don't talk about how great THEY are, you talk about



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

GREAT the product is. Trust me, a light shown on a product; project or performance casts a glow that easily allows the person responsible to be recognized.

The same thing applies to team efforts, but with a slight trust. Once a team effort has been recognized internally, it should be recognized externally as well. I do not have time in this article to go into an extensive inventory of available lampposts to hang a team product on.

At a minimum, you should consider submitting to the various local, state and even national award programs for consideration. Getting it published by professional magazines is another likely place for peer recognition.

The very factor in both of these tactics is to be very careful to reward extraordinary efforts. Nothing kills praise of performance any quicker than the perception that is perfunctory or superficial. If you don't mean it, don't turn on the light. If you really mean it, do it as soon as you can, for recognition for past performance fades quickly. If you will notice, for example, whoever wins the big football game, they get the trophy right then, because next year it may be a whole new ball game.

These three tactics, especially if used in sequential order can do a great deal to assure that our department, or even as a component of a department will continue to improve over time. It does not guarantee that failure will not occur, because they will. Sometimes, we have to give up on those who are doomed to be marginal performers. But, when this process works the organization becomes stronger and stronger as the individual grows in capacity.

Wouldn't it be neat if sometime in the future someone rejected a product or a process because "it's just not good enough for government work?"