



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Happy Birthday to You

Is there anyone in the entire world who does not know the words of the “happy birthday” song? Granted, in some cultures and in many different languages the words might be varied, but the sentiment transcends how it is expressed. When we were young, it is a joyful thing to hear it sung to us because it is a road sign relative to reaching some level of maturity. As a young child, a birthday is often a signal that allows you to do something that you want to do but have been prohibited to do because you were too young. As you grow older the song begins to mark different road signs in our life. Birthdays often mark maturity, experience, obtaining wisdom, a driver’s license, the ability to vote, and so forth. Sooner or later we stop getting excited about them because they tend to signal our approach to middle or old age.

This year I celebrate my 69 birthday. Probably the most interesting aspect of that event is going to be the fact that I recall almost all of my “deci-dates” as if they occurred yesterday; the 20th, 30th, 40th, 50th even the 60th. Why has my 65th birthday resonated so specifically? Partially it is because I remember an old, and I do mean old, firefighter at the California Fire Show in Costa Mesa sitting around about 1965 and regaling us with stories of his experience as a member of the Los Angeles City Fire Department. He even proceeded to tell us stories on how he drove horse drawn fire apparatus for the LAFD in the first part of the century. He had retired in the late 40’s or early 50’s and was about 65 when I met him. Undoubtedly he is now gone now. Unfortunately I think I have turned into him. Granted, I do not have the experience of driving a horse drawn fire apparatus, but I do recall when we not only we wouldn’t wear breathing apparatus, but also were ridiculed if we did.

Time marches on doesn’t it?

Or does it?

Many of my contemporaries have retired, but are not too tired to keep on doing things. I constantly find myself reflecting on my experiences that seem as fresh as they occurred yesterday. I also find myself visiting a lot of recruit academies, officer training programs, departmental retreats, retirement dinners and a host of other fire service celebrations in which the past is often regaled. In fact I was at one last night where a fire department celebrated 50 years of experience on the part of one of their members.

This sojourn took me to a department that had a wide range of fire officers that ran the gamut from being born in the early 1930’s to individuals who have been born in the 1980’s and were all part of the same fire department. That is a fifty-year life span. As we discuss the present status of the fire service it was pretty clear that the group possessed both areas of agreement and disagreement about the present



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state of the fire service, but each generation was looking through a different lens in terms of what they thought needs to be the solution.

If you have been around for a while and have been studying management in the fire service, you may recall the lectures of Morris Massey. His premise of “you are what you are because of what you were then” His theory was recognized by many fire officers as a reflection of how generational gaps are created within fire agencies. With a tip of a helmet to Massey we shouldn't forget that lesson too soon. Reality is really different when viewed through the experience journey that we accrue before we ever become a firefighter. I may be wrong, but most of us don't get a badge until we have experienced one decade as a child, one as a pubescent youth and then we enter into adult hood ready or not. Those experiences build a lot of our approaches to life.

Well, Massey should have gone a little further with the fire folk in terms of defining what that “way back” stuff means in creating the culture of the current fire service. We are what we were when, when we began our probationary period in the fire service.

This column is being written to the fire service so I think it is fair to ask this question; do we train recruit firefighters to be able to cope with the changes that they are going to experience?

Or, do we give them a sea anchor of tradition to prevent them from trying to change the fire service too fast? Or, is there a third question? Do we fail to address the process of change in the fire service until we have to confront it and deal with conflict within our organizations?

I have always been interested in the idea that we train our recruit firefighters with information that is basically nothing more than a regurgitation of the past. It is not without some consciousness on our part that we expose our young firefighters sometimes to our oldest and most experienced firefighters for purposes of trying to make them competent. But, we also expose them to the bias and in some cases outright attitude of resistance to change that often exists in our more senior members.

I think I can speak to that issue today because I am not longer one of the “young turks” I am now one of the old guys. Many of you out there will probably find yourself among that same group also. When we train our recruit firefighters we want them to be exposed to people who know what the heck they are talking about. That is what the term experience has come to mean in the fire service; reality from the fire ground. However, it is also true that in some cases individuals have a great deal of time on the job but don't have a lot of real fire ground experience. They have tenure. They may not have had time to obtain wisdom but rather have been more affected by the culture that goes on around the dining room table.



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I will not criticize nor deny the fact that the culture that goes on around the dining room table is very much a part of what makes this occupation very much different than other types of jobs.

Short of the military could you name any other group of people who work as closely together as we do in a team environment in close confined spaces for extended periods of time. The only other metaphor that I can come up for this environment is being on a real intense athletic team that must play games frequently such as baseball and football.

Perhaps it is time for us to take a really good look at this idea of what we call generational gap and call it what it really is: a reality that has never really been that different in the past. In order to put this into context let me ask you to answer three questions at a very personal level. The first if: when were you born? What date is on your birth certificate?

The second question is, when did you enter the fire service; what date did you raise your right hand to swear an oath of office to become a firefighter and actually have receive a badge to make you a member of the team?

The last question some can answer and some are only thinking about it. What date are you going to retire from the fire service; what is going to be the year in which your career will be summarized by your family and friends gathering in some social event to either roast you alive or put you on a pedestal as they remark about everything you accomplished in your life?

These three dates are the benchmarks with regard to creating your life. In the sense you can do very little about any of them because they are a sequence in which almost everybody's life tends to follow. However in the fire service there is a nexus between when you grew up, when you were initially trained, and how you turned out as a firefighter.

It is currently 2009. I can use myself as an example, because I already told you I am 69. I was born in 1940, I entered the fire service in 1960, and I retired around the year 2000. At the risk of making an understatement a whole lot of things have changed in this world since I have started that journey in 1940.

Digressing back to my discussion of the old man from LA Fire Department in 1965 he had probably been born about 1900, had probably become a firefighter about 1920 and probably retired from the fire service in the 1950's. It was no wonder that he had a different perspective on the fire service. Just think of the differences that the fire service went through from 1920 to 1950.



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Once again with a nod to Morris Massey I would like you to think of some of the following things; what if you were born in the 1920's and lived your fire service career through the 60's? Moreover, what if you were born in 1970 and are experiencing the fire service from that perspective?

Once again Massey tells us that we need to take a look at where we came from before we really determine where we are going. I would ask you to think about the following things because the answers are going to be different for everyone of you. What was the economy like when you grew up? What type of military and war like activities was our country undergoing when you were a teenager and getting ready to go to college? What was the state of technology when you were a child between the ages of ten and fifteen?

What kinds of music resonated with you as a teenager when you were beginning to think in terms of moving away from family and home? If we developed a matrix that started off, let's say in 1930 because that would more or less line up with somebody who is about 75 years old today we would see that there have been a whole cavalcade of events that have effected attitude and orientation that have changed almost every ten years or so as the various generations have been created. Using my "way back machine" I can recall sitting in a fire house and listening to individuals who were combat veterans of World War II and of the Korean War talk about how they felt about the fire service from their perspective. We didn't need to use the word para-military because to them the fire service was just moving from one type of helmet to another in pursuit of their life.

Conversely I have sat in firehouses today talking to individual firefighters who not only grew up in an era in which the military was abused but literally was demonized. Of course I am talking about the Vietnam War era. Many of the soldiers who came back from that event wanted nothing to do with the military context and were more interested in an environment that provided them with respect, support and even an openness that the previous generation would have denied.

Now we are engaged in a military struggle in which the individuals that are fighting this war will be coming back to enter our workforce probably over a period of the next five to ten years. It doesn't take much of a leap of logic to understand that they will have a different perspective than some of the previous generations. Maybe they feel compelled to go back to a militaristic approach. On the other hand, maybe they will not. I am not entirely sure based upon what is going on today that we should even be attempting to predict that. But, I think we should be paying attention to the implications of it and developing observations and techniques to be able to deal with it effectively.

Once again looking at it from your perspective, this column probably has readership that ranges from people who were born in the 40's up to people who were born in the 80's. You have to interpret the nature of what I just stated in the context of your own life. But, we all share one thing for sure. That is that leaders and managers in the fire service impact the status of the organizations perspective and



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culture at any given point in time. In other words what we say, what we do, how we act or how we refuse to act is played out in the context of our organization every single day. There is no such thing as a generation gap in the fire service. What there is is a common mission shared by individuals with different perspectives.

You are what you are now because of what you were way back when. Our common goal ought to be to make sure that each of the eras that the fire service experiences has the most positive consequence of the contributions from each generation. The rate of change is reaching a hyper speed and there is nothing we can really do to change that. We can only hope to be able to cope,

Recently a fire chief sent me a YouTube video that really typifies this topic. It can be located at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL9Wu2kWwSY> I suggest that you look at it and reflect on the future.

After all there is a point in time in which the number of candles that you have on top of your birthday cake might be sufficient to create a thermal column that will ignite a sprinkler head or at least activate the smoke detector in your house. When that occurs, you should be able to look back along the line of history that you have participated in and answer a simple question: did I make a difference?

Hopefully the answer will always be yes.