



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## The Hatfield's and McCoy's

One of the most famous feuds in folklore consists of the two families; the Hatfield's and McCoy's. I am not entirely exactly sure what caused the original problem, but I remember reading about the Hatfield and McCoy's as a young child. Reportedly they fought back and forth for decades with members of each family killing or injuring a member of the other family. They continued doing bodily harm without any regard for the original reason for the disagreement. The Hatfield's and McCoy's were the epitome of conflict and absolute failure to address an issue without a rationale.

Sometimes I think that we have our own version of the Hatfield and McCoy's going on right in the fire service. I have seen it go one between the fire prevention and suppression. I have seen it go on between operations and training. Moreover, I have seen it occur between fire stations on a department or even platoons within the same fire department. I have seen feuds start between the fire prevention bureau and city hall, i.e. the building department or the planning department. And, Oh yes, we have it occur between the fire service and the very public we serve. How can that happen?

First we need to recognize that we live in a society in which debate is encouraged. Our political process as a matter of fact is based on differences of opinion. All you have to do is take a look at the manner in which we approach the establishment of national policies, state policies, and even local policy based on different perspectives to see that open and public debate is a natural phenomenon of our political process.

The feuds that can erupt over differences of opinion, however, are something all together different. Feuds are not based on reason. They are based on emotion. When they occur it is when one side decides the other side has done them some form of harm and the participant's energy is mostly focused on retribution instead of reason. It is not about accomplishing things it is about getting even. Why would I put this kind of topic in the midst of a column for the authority having jurisdiction?

Well that is pretty simple. I have seen some of these feuds escalate to the point where individuals have lost their jobs and/or fire department organizations have become increasingly dysfunctional because of a feuding atmosphere as opposed to a facilitation atmosphere. And, this column is entirely aimed at people whose job it is to get things done, i.e. chiefs, fire marshals, and other key policy leaders in an organization. Therefore, it might be appropriate for us to talk about how to evaluate this feuding complex and do something about it in the future.

First off we might define exactly what the difference is between a feud and a debate. A debate is the exchange of information between two or more parties in which the facts and the merits of those facts result in the decision making process that is ultimately acceptable two all sides in the discussion. Feuds



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are essentially an exchange of a sense of wrongs and rights in which one side feels that they have been denied their right and therefore seek to take out revenge on the other side. Debates are open. Feuds are often closed, stealthy and in many cases go on long after the original set of facts has been modified by reality.

The role of a consensus builder in the fire service is to make sure that feuding conditions are not allowed to exist. There are several techniques that one might utilize to assure that the feuding process does not get utilized in an organizational setting. Among these is the very simple and straightforward idea that debate should always be open and verifiable. I have a ground rule in my departmental discussions that anytime we in the fire department disagree with another party we have that disagreement at the very outset of the discussion rather than talking about it after that party has left. One might think that this would actually encourage conflict. But it has been my experience that when people tell each other the truth at the beginning of an exchange of different perspectives it is more reasonable then when that exchange goes on behind closed doors later on.

You might recall a TV series that was on one time called "Family Feud". In that television program, families were allowed to disagree amongst each other but then they also remained in competition with other parties to try to win a prize. It is really important in the fire service that we look at ourselves as being an internal family, and while it is ok to have family disagreements we must maintain an outside perspective that were trying to achieve the goals and objectives of a fire department. Therefore, feuding should not go on external to the fire service.

Let me use an example of how this can be counterproductive. I have seen operations divisions that have a great deal of disdain for the fire prevention bureau. I have also seen fire prevention bureaus that don't have much respect for what goes on in operations. There is often an exchange of unpleasant albeit semi-humorous dialogue about the lack of value of one party over the other. However, in reality, operations divisions exist because of the failures of fire prevention bureaus in stopping all fires and fire prevention bureaus exist to do everything they can to create an environment in which the combat firefighter is likely to finish their shift and go home safe.

A good example of how there could be a difference of opinion between these two is that I have actually seen situations where a fire prevention bureau has attempted to condition buildings or tracts of homes in which combat firefighters from neighboring agencies have testified for the opposition at public hearings. Specifically this can occur when there are "feuds" between neighboring jurisdictions. The fire service has many cases in which the actions by one fire department has resulted in conflict with a neighboring fire department. What kind of techniques can we employ to make sure that feuds don't go one in or between our departments?



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First and foremost, individuals in a leadership role should never allow themselves to be a party to the development of a feud by choosing up one side of an argument over another to the degree that they lose their objectivity. It is OK to interact with dialogue and to provide input to a process, but once it is clear that there are going to be a certain degree of hostility associated with that debate, you as a leader of the organization should detach yourself slightly and start attempting to hear out of both ears simultaneously. Jumping in and choosing up sides of your department over the developer or fire prevention over training, or operations over A shift over B shift, you immediately render yourself valueless as a person who can actually bring about the resolution of the conflict.

The second technique that is very valuable in achieving consensus when there is conflict is to constantly raise the question of what is the question. If there is any one technique that will prevent misunderstanding, it is to always be checking assumptions before you move onto conclusions. Evaluating assumptions cannot be taken for granted. Questioning them is fundamental to the development of whether a person feels that they are being wronged or not. And being wronged is what causes the discussion to go from debate to feud.

The third technique that is useful in feud reduction is to never allow a feud to languish for an extended period of time. It must be dealt with once it was recognized. Bringing parties together and addressing basic issues as early on as possible are absolutely essential in preventing a long-term exchange of unpleasanties.

During this article I sighted a couple of examples of where I have seen it occur in the fire service. Hopefully some of you have gone through your career at this point without ever seeing it. However, I would be willing to bet you that many of you have seen feuds go on in the firehouse whether it is internal or external and if one of you can demonstrate to me that there is something positive that comes out of that kind of a process, I would greatly appreciate the feedback. My experience is just the opposite. Feuds are often used to devalue the fire service.

There are no winners and losers in feuds. There are only losers. I am sure that many of you are familiar with the concept of compromise that is called the win, win scenario. This is not about compromise. This is about conflict avoidance. Granted there are many techniques that you might have to develop as a knowledge and skill to be able to come to some conclusion, but feuding is not about compromise. It is about consequence.

What provoked this particular column was my witnessing of a feud that was going on between a fire department and a developer that had turned into a great deal of animosity. Unfortunately, in a mud throwing contest it is often hard to tell assailant from victim because they are often vice versa. Recognizing the elements of a feud early on is the hallmark of a person who can facilitate an effective



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organization. Allowing feuds to go on so long they begin to become irrational is just as much of an organizational failure as starting one in the first place.