



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

High Speed Collision on the Learning Curve

Have you ever been driving on a highway at a high rate of speed when you have spotted a yellow sign that says “slow down – curves ahead”? One of the reasons that sign was put out there is that a vehicle moving at a specific rate of speed once it enters into a curve has to respond to centrifugal force and the dynamics of keeping that vehicle aligned on the highway is going to change. If you try and travel around a curve too fast, i.e., at a high rate of speed there is a possibility you will go off of the highway and you and your vehicle will suffer some form of damage.

On the highway of life, we have another curve that we have a need to be paying attention to. It is one that needs to be traversed at the right rate of speed but it's not on the road, it's in our heads. It is the learning curve. Too slow on the curve you're behind the eight-ball. Too fast on the curve you can crash and burn.

The term *learning curve* has become a cliché in the language of today. Usually the inference is that the learning curve is either very steep or very shallow. Nobody is paying attention to the fact that once you have gone into a learning curve, depending upon how much effort and energy you put into it, you will either traverse it successfully or there will be tragedy at the end of the curve.

What this brought to my attention was a recent discussion about issues of succession planning in the fire service. There is a very loud lamentation in our business today regarding the loss of “the experienced generation” and the subsequent replacement by those that some consider to be less qualified or at least less experienced to become the chiefs or leaders in the fire service. But there is little notice of the fact that the training and education delivery systems that got us here bear some of the responsibility for that phenomenon.

I have also heard this discussion when people are talking about brand spanking new firefighters. Those are the individuals who are just now coming on the job. Simultaneously, there is little notice that the educational system that is preparing our future recruits is going through major reform.

With regard to whether or not things are going to work out well for both groups in handling their careers there are some interesting times ahead.

Everybody is on a learning curve. Both generations have a curve. If you have got fifteen minutes left in your career you might still have a learning curve on some topic. I will guarantee you if you have got years, instead of months, left on your calendar before retirement you are going to be traversing one of those curves in the very near future. And, if you are a young officer who is reading this article with several decades ahead of you, my suggestion to you is buckle your seat belt and hang on because



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learning curves are not becoming steeper or flatter, they are becoming more angled and they are banked.

My reason for coming to this conclusion has a little bit to do with the fact that educational technology is continuing to change in a direction that is going to change the way people obtain knowledge over their entire lifetime not just over the time they hold their jobs. There are children going to school today who are exposed to educational delivery methodologies that are literally unknown in the firehouse. That generation, when it arrives in the fire station, is going to experience a different type of learning environment that doesn't mean much to them. I am referring to the fire service's propensity for the "stand-up lecture" format. Maybe they will feel like somebody is stomping on the brakes and they will start to skid out of control when we try to teach them our techniques using techniques started in the 1920's with teaching instructor's in the rookie academies of our larger metro departments, .

Contemporary methods of educating people such as stand up lectures, watching video tapes, and/or participating either in training exercise on the drill ground are all going to be different in the future.

And, there is another interesting phenomenon that I believe is currently unrecognized. That is the relationship between how long a person has to learn something in comparison to when they are going to be exposed to it, in contrast with how much time they are going to spend in their career. I think there is an assumption in the fire service that the same old ways of training people that we are using today are going to last people through their entire careers. But, what has changed in those careers. Among the most significant changes is that very few combat firefighters in suburban America today are given large numbers of major fires to combat. While this is one of the positive aspects of our increased use of built in fire technology and a function of our fire prevention activity, it is also resulting in people going for many years in their lifetime without ever being exposed to a real critical decision making process.

The second component of that is the fact that they don't have as many years to develop experience to back up that education. Retirement benefits like 2% at 50 mean that fire service careers are probably terminating out at 20-25 years for many individuals as opposed to 30-35 years and in some cases 40 year careers that were experienced by many generations will cease to exist.

What this lack of experience points to that we can no longer develop competency on the fire ground by waiting for fires to occur so that we can practice those skills. It places a tremendous emphasis on the idea of virtual reality training. Airline pilots for example might start off learning to fly a Cessna 152 but they are almost all never allowed to get behind the wheel of a Boeing 747 until they have spent time in a simulator. Fighter pilots in the United States military are being trained today for life threatening decision making process while they are sitting in a seat bolted to a concrete floor.



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Yet we in the fire service continue to believe that just a few years on the floor is going to make a combat firefighter out of everybody who graduated the recruit academy. I think that it is short sighted, if not almost totally irresponsible. When I was working on the production of media for the fire service, I once conducted a conversation regarding the rejection of what is called “lazy boy learning”. It is training that has gone on with people lounging in a room with the lights turned down very low with a video or DVD playing on the machine. Lack of interaction and for that matter any physical commitment to the process reduces the power of the material. I am not sure that that kind of exposure is what we can really translate into effectiveness on the fire ground.

Worse yet, our experienced people seem to regard the idea of learning as something they did a long time ago – and now their experience is going to carry them through to retirement. I have asked many senior fire officers the simple question of when was the last time they took a class and have been greeted with some interesting facial expressions. When was the last time you took a course of instruction? Furthermore, have you ever taken a course on-line? Have you “listened” to a textbook on the drive to someplace else? Have you ever tried out the simulator yourself? Or is all that in you background?

The second aspect of the learning curve is that you may not have as much time as you once thought to become competent at anything. I am seeing more and more fire departments revealing the fact that they are promoting individuals to a rank of fire captain with 5 or 6 years in service and with practically no experience whatsoever. An officer today does not have the benefit of observing a lot of other people in the performance of his own duties. In many cases the officers must either adopt their own personal philosophy and creed or become a victim of the apathy of the organization.

One of the things that this points out is that we simply have to completely remove redundancy in the training system. How many times do we have to teach the fire triangle in the colleges and universities, fire departments probationary training programs, and the recruit academy, etc., etc. Just like driving into a curve with a sports car you need to know how to use power to get through the curve. A learning curve cannot be based on any degree of redundancy beyond what is absolutely necessary for retention.

What I am suggesting in this article is that the learning curve is becoming an issue for you and for your department whether you realize it or not. If you are not aware of the impacts of some of these factors, then there is a remote possibility that you are not as adequately prepared for your job as you should be. If you are in a position of being a chief officer and you are looking backwards at your organization and you are not paying attention to this learning curve, you may not be fulfilling your role as a leader either.

What are you going to do about it?



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Early in my life, I had the opportunity to drive some relatively fast sports cars on some very curvy roads. A friend of mine and I used to engage in what we were then called “road rallies” where we tried to drive the curve as fast as we possibly could. The lesson I learned in that life experience was if you were going to drive fast on curves you better be paying attention to your steering, the appropriate use of the brake, the characteristics of the vehicle as to whether it over steered or under steered and where is that fine line in which you could go fast enough to get to where you want to be and not fast enough to crash. Stirling Moss used to call it “driving just shy of crash speed”

My suggestion to anybody who is entering the fire service today is to start their career off with the development of “a life portfolio” that lays out where they are going to go and what steps they need to take to get there. I am strongly suggesting by this recommendation that fire departments develop career development plans and that the concept of task books need to be incorporated by every size of fire department from the smallest to the largest. What keeps a firefighter competent is not limited to continuous repetition, but simultaneously improving the level of ability to use that under stress conditions. That is not unlike riding fast into an oncoming curve and coming out on the other side with the vehicle under control.

What we all want at the end of every trip is to arrive at our journey safe. But, if we are in a race, we want to get the checkered flag. Winners know how to handle the curves as well as the straight-aways.