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Ronny J. Coleman

Home Grown or Hybrid

Who is going to replace you? That is a question that many fire chiefs are asking themselves these days. It has even been given somewhat of an official title. One hears a lot these days about “succession planning”. Exactly what is succession planning?

Are you really responsible to assure that somebody comes along behind you to pick up where you left off? That is a very serious question. One of the things that make it serious is the fact that for the most part, you are not the one who gets to pick your successor. Somebody else gets a chance to do that. More often than not it's the head of the agency that you work for. Shouldn't they be the ones worried about succession planning?

This topic came up in a statewide fire chief's roundtable recently. It was wrapped in a series of other concerns such as the fact that there seems to be a decline in the number of people who actually want the top job these days. The idea of succession planning is paralleled by the phenomena that fewer and fewer people seemingly want to take that final step to be the successor. Or, is that part of the mystique of the development of the leadership in the fire service?

As a result of attending that fire chief's roundtable, I had the opportunity to visit numerous fire departments in the same general locale over a period of an extended weekend. I got into some rather interesting side bar discussions with fire chiefs who weren't the least bit worried about their succession planning. They were more concerned about their personal survival. More than one fire chief admitted to me that it was kind of hard to get excited about worrying about his successor when he was actually more worried about how he were going to get things done.

This creates a proverbial horn of a dilemma. Yet, history does not seem to bear out the fact that people are unwilling to take that final job. Can anybody point out to me today a fire department that has gone chief-less for an extended period of time? By that I mean over a year or so. Sooner or later, someone will step up to the plate and raise their right hand to take the oath of office and take over almost every fire chief's job that has ever come open. Granted, sometimes really good people get that job – and other times the individuals who take that top job are doing it for totally inappropriate reasons. Nonetheless, succession occurs whether we plan for it or not.

Therefore I decided that I might write this column, not as a focus of a fire chief type of concern, but rather for those of you who are sitting down at that second or third level of the organization contemplating the possibility that you may someday want to be a fire chief. You are the future. Everybody who has ever sat in the fire chief's chair had a period of time in which they could ramp up to



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that position – and everybody who has ever left a fire chief's chair has had a perspective about what was done by those who came along behind them.

Going back to the opening paragraph of this article, I really think that most fire chiefs are concerned about succession planning because they want to assure that their legacy is sustained. If you work long and hard to make your fire department into what you wanted it to be, you certainly don't want to turn it over to someone else who is going to turn it into something else. Yet, that is exactly what is going to happen anyway. We don't really plan for our succession as much as we hoped that our successor would go along with the way things have always been. You, the person I have aimed this article at are the possible replacement for somebody. The question is, are you going to be homegrown or are you going to have to become a hybrid.

My definition of homegrown is pretty simple. I am referring to the fact that in many firefighting agencies the individual who finally emerges as the top candidate for the fire chief can either grow up within that organization. Or, they can be someone who is transplanted into that organization from outside. That is a hybrid. Both of these are plans for succession. Your fire chief today may hope that you or someone like you gets the job to replace them but they have no guarantee of that. Neither do you. To the contrary, succession planning is much more dependent upon the level of acceptance of the candidate by the authority having jurisdiction than many of us would like to believe.

In order to make sense out of this I thought I would introduce at least two concepts in this column that I think are pertinent. One of these I talked about in a previous column. It is called the one push rule. The one push rule is practiced by individuals who are currently in a position of authority. Simply stated it is when an individual picks a candidate in their organization that they think has a lot of potential. Once they have identified that individual they give them an opportunity to prove themselves by giving them a "push". The one push rule is not the same as favoritism. Favoritism is when you hand pick someone and then treat them somewhat gently to avoid having a difficult time. To the contrary the one push rule means that you take someone with potential and you try to see if they are capable of living up to your expectation. If your Chief has given you the one push, the rest is up to you. If he has to continue to push you, then you probably aren't the person for the job anyway

The second rule is called deep selection. Deep selection means looking down into the organization much further than just the next level. It is not uncommon in many organizations for some of the best candidates to not necessarily be the upper band of the organization. This may run afoul of a lot of number two people's opinion of themselves, but it is true. Cream might rise to the top, but unless it gets skimmed off from time to time it curdles.

Nonetheless, the talent pool in the fire service is not lined up like pearls on string bead. The number two person is not necessarily the best person to replace the number one. And, the fact that a person



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has the potential to be a top candidate does not necessarily mean they are ready for the job when the opportunity occurs.

Now, let's go back to looking at you. I am referring to the whether you, in the back of your mind are seriously considering getting yourself ready to be a fire chief someday. If you have experienced the one push rule and if your department recognizes the phenomenon of deep selection then it is really up to you to decide what you are going to do to get ready. That is right! Motivation is internal. In spite of the fact that many fire chiefs would like to hand pick their replacement, the replacement must pick themselves first.

If you are reading this column and you are a chief, I would like to make this suggestion. You might want to tear this one out and hand it off to somebody who you think is capable of understanding the one push rule and may be in a position of deep selection. If you are a person who is reading this column and you are not the chief you might want to tear this one out and post it inside your wall locker as a reminder of what it takes to really get ready.

From what I am about to say is that succession planning is dependent upon a motivated talent pool. Hopefully that might be you.

The following are ground rules for preparing yourself for upward mobility:

1. Don't worry about the destination, focus upon the journey. You are not going to be the one who decides whether you are going to be a fire chief or not. Someone else is going to look at you and determine whether or not you have what it takes. Therefore you need to focus internally on what you have got and what you can contribute rather than worry about whether or not you have politically positioned yourself for the job or not.
2. It is not up to the department to prepare you – it is up to you to prepare yourself. You can't wait around for someone to tell you to take a class, read a book or obtain an experience. You need to be asking yourself what is it that I need to do to make myself a more viable candidate. This would include some of the following. You might consider putting a check box alongside each of these as you develop them.
 - ❑ 1. Accept job responsibilities that are at least one rank above your current position.
 - ❑ 2. Take every opportunity you can to learn how to put your thoughts into writing.
 - ❑ 3. Improve upon your mathematical and reasoning skills every chance you get.
 - ❑ 4. Never underestimate the possibility of learning by doing. Seek out experience rather than having experience merely happen to you.



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- ❑ 5. Engage in every public speaking opportunity that you can acquire. Learn how to prepare speeches, learn how to speak in an improvised situation. Never allow yourself to be caught unaware with respect to representing what you know about the fire service.
 - ❑ 6. Get outside of your own organization. Learn as much as you possibly can about the people at City Hall. Learn about other governmental functions other than the fire department. Avoid being myopic.
 - ❑ 7. Get connected in the community. Learn why the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations exist. Find out what it is like to volunteer your time, energy and efforts with something other than your own self-improvement.
 - ❑ 8. Study the behaviors of people that you respect. Prepare a means of acquiring them as a mentor and go ahead and do it. Don't wait for your mentor to find you, go find your mentor and ask them for help. Not only that, get multiple mentors. There is no rule that you have to be guided by one person. A football team has one head coach, but there are also the specialists that can help you.
 - ❑ 9. Develop a perspective on what you want to see happen in your lifetime. I am talking about developing a point of view, not just an attitude. I am talking about developing a perspective. I am not talking necessarily about becoming rigidly blocked in on a set of preconceived notions but rather developing a set of principles that you can base your life on.

Well, that is a list that is relatively short, but very broad in its intent. You may not actually want to do all of that. And if you chose to not do any of it, don't expect a gold five trumpet badge

While I empathize with fire chiefs who are concerned about succession planning in their organization I am more concerned about making sure that their efforts are not blunted by the fact that there is a talent pool out there that is apathetic, indifferent and under stimulated. Imagine what would happen in an organizational setting if both the fire chief and the talent pool were both energized to realize that sooner or later one generation is going to be replaced by another and we have the opportunity to build a better and better profession.

In the context of discussing this phenomenon I have been told by many fire chiefs that they believe that the next generation of fire officers has become self centered and are not interested in the developmental process. Some of you have gone so far as to suggest that there is a self limiting factor of many individuals who have now chosen the fire service as "just a job" and that they only provide their time, attention and energy to the profession directly linked to the number of shifts they worked in a



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month. This concern goes so far as to state that they may be the next generation that does not even deserve to have the opportunity to take over the top job.

After spending 44 years in this business I have had the opportunity to see several generations go through the process of introduction, adaptation, maturation, and retirement in the fire service. Quite a lot of people will not believe this; I can honestly say that I think that the fire officers of today are every bit as competent, capable and compassionate, as the ones were when I first entered the fire service in 1960. There have always been people that didn't deserve to move up. There have always been people who have really wanted the top job. There will always be candidates for the fire chief's job but there may be less than less visible in an increasingly broad based profession, which has had to expand to meet the needs of our community's.

I don't have the actual numbers to support this argument but I suspect if you went back to 1960 and measure the number of full time firefighters in the United States and then leaped forward to the year 2005 and did a comparison that the number could be anywhere from six to ten times greater. There were people who entered the fire service in 1960 that were just looking for a job. There were people who entered it in the 1970's who were just looking for a job. You may be working with someone who was just hired last week, just looking for a job. The comparison I have often drawn to this is the fact that eagles are not like pigeons or sparrows. You don't find them in flocks. The individual who self selects themselves to become upward mobile in the fire service is not necessarily like everyone else.

And, moreover you as a member of the fire service sitting right alongside of another individual may or may not be able to determine whether they have the potential of rising into the fire service either. I used a statement at the onset of this that future fire chiefs of almost every fire department can either be home grown or can be a hybrid.

Hybrids already know what I am talking about. They are the men and women that are working for another organization, maybe a neighboring department – or clear across the country from you that could and may be selected to be brought into you organization to head it up. They are the transplants. They are the best of the breed. When that happens there is sometimes joy in the firehouse. Sometimes there is depression, but whose fault is that a hybrid replaced a homegrown.

You could blame it on the chief, but whenever you point that finger remember that four other fingers almost always point back to you. Those departments that are providing opportunities for their individuals to self select themselves, to acquire knowledge and experience and principles in order to move up internal to an organization future fire chiefs will produce home grown fire chiefs To the degree that organizations retard the development of their people or that individuals chose not to select themselves for experiences then it may be that those departments will eventually relinquish their



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leadership roles to a hybrid. Someone who has come in from the outside. Someone who learned their lesson in another area and is transplanted into the organization.

Which of these two scenarios is the most desirable for your fire department? I would submit that they both are. In those organizations that breed individuals capable of migrating up on the ladder of success that increases the competitiveness for the top job.

But, need I remind you that only one person at a time can sit in the fire chief's chair? Hybrid or homegrown! Time will tell.

If you are a chief of a department and are reading this column I hope that you are looking backwards in your career and down in your organization to determine whether or not you are creating a cultural environment in which individuals will self select themselves. If you are a young officer who is looking up and counting the days until you will have a chance to compete for the top job then I would hope that you are availing yourself of some of some of those experiences we mentioned earlier in this column.

In the case of the former, don't forget the one push rule. In the case of the latter, don't forget that deep selection begins with you.