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The Honeymoon is Over

One thing about the mating ritual is that all parties are usually on their best behavior. With the notable exception of fringe personalities that are in celebrity relationships, the vast majority of people chose to be with their partners as a direct result of being on their best behavior most of the time. It is during the courting state in which most of the strengths of an individual are applied in making sure that the bonding occurs.

One of the experiences in the mating ritual resulting from marriage is the honeymoon. That is when everybody feels the best towards each other that they possibly can. It is a period of relative bliss. However, there is also a phrase that resonates in many marital relationships when the “honeymoon is over”!

The same might be said for an individual who has become the fire chief of an organization and had a relatively good time at the outset. In other writings I have alluded to the fact that the first one hundred days are very important for a fire chief to properly oriented. The honeymoon period is not exactly the same as this one hundred day cycle. I define the honeymoon as being the length of time in which the labor and management relationships in an organization or the relationship between the fire department and the other operating departments is totally conflict free and all the parties seemingly have a good time. Some people have short honeymoons. Others have long ones.

The significance of this phenomenon is that it is at the root of how people feel about their success in of leading and managing fire organizations. During the honeymoon period almost every incremental successes is celebrated. After the honeymoon is over there may be stages of depression and success may fade into disillusionment.

First off, let's explore what the honeymoon period is all about. In the context of matrimony the honeymoon is usually a very short phased event in which there is a desire to engage in a holiday like atmosphere. It is expected that the couple will come back to face reality sooner or later. In the context of organization, the honeymoon period is not a case of going away to some exotic location. It is a case of getting acquainted and liking each other. The honeymoon period is usually alive and well as long as there is an open channel of communication and a high sense of trust and confidence between the respective parties. Depending upon whether you come into an organization from the outside or whether you have grown up in that organization, the honeymoon period takes on the connotation of building internal relationships that will determine how the organization will function in the future.

Generally speaking during a honeymoon period minor events are not easily blown out of proportion. As a matter of fact there is almost a stage of forgiveness for minor infractions. Perceived conflicts can be



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dealt with effectively with an open channel of communications when there is still trust. During the honeymoon period a lot is taken for granted and simultaneously a lot is based on the idea that both parties are looking for a more positive environment in the future.

But, sometimes all of that goes away in the blink of an eye. How does one know that the honeymoon is over? There are symptoms that lead up to the termination of this cycle and there are specific events that can cause it to happen almost overnight.

For purposes of clarification, I am going to talk a little bit about characteristics of these honeymoon periods that lead to future conflict and separately from those with specific events that can actually cause the honeymoon to be terminated over night.

For example, during the honeymoon period it is easy for individuals to make promises. But, if you make promises you cannot keep slowly but surely that will erode the trust and confidence in a relationship. Openness and honesty has to be accompanied by accountability and reliability or the relationship will begin to show signs of friction.

Another sign that the honeymoon is over is the presence of open conflict in the organization. Open conflicts could be among staff members or any of the components of the organization, i.e. the fire department and city hall, the fire department and the building department. Open conflict does not render itself easily to a kiss and make up environment.

Another reason for the honeymoon being closed out is when either of the two parties begins to feel that they are being taken advantage of by the other. In other words, when a chief officer exerts his influence over the organization and distorts some issue for his/her own agendas there can be problems. And, when a labor group makes a move that the chief was not aware of, or was even blind-sided this can easily begin to lead to conflict.

I would characterize almost all of these signs and symptoms as being a gradual erosion of trust and confidence between the leader and the follower in an organization. Regardless of whether the leader disappoints the followers or the followers disappoint the leaders, this erosion will take place over time if you are not paying real close attention to the channel of communication and the consequences of individual and almost insignificant problems. The honeymoon begins to be over when people believe that they will not be told the truth or when they have not been treated fairly. That goes both ways. Chiefs may feel bad about their organization –if the followers have betrayed them. Or, the followers if they have been lead down a “primrose path” by their leader and they feel betrayed too

And there are also specific events that can also result in the door being slammed on the honeymoon period almost overnight. First and foremost is the phenomenon that occurs when a fire chief is



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confronted with making significant budget reductions in the face of economic downturn. Regardless of how credible you are how long you have been on the job, how many good things you have done for your organization, as soon as you are asked to make budget cuts that involve staffing and/or equipment the honeymoon can be over overnight.

This is unfortunate because it is provoked by a third element, i.e. the economy. Neither labor or management controls this influence. Nonetheless, there seems to be a set of circumstances in which labor forces seem to be clearly unforgiving of the chief's decision to live with constraints. An organization might put up with a few behavioral quirks out of an individual but if they do not perceive that he is "not putting up good fight" to stop and for that matter totally eliminate budget reductions, then the honeymoon is over.

One might say this is when the organization turns a cold shoulder towards any and all of the most elaborate leadership schemes that you can conceive of.

Sometimes the honeymoon termination is announced by the pronouncement of a vote of no confidence. It is entirely possible for an individual to go from having a good working relationship in their organization to having a bad one over a specific item such as this that translates into total dissolution of the working relationship.

Another scenario that can wreck havoc on the honeymoon is a major investigation. Regardless of the cause of an investigation anytime there is an inquiry about an outside party about what is going on in the fire department, it is going to be hard for the organization to remain unified under an investigative environment. In many cases, a fire chief must remain as a neutral party in the context of an investigation and therefore consider keeping their working relationships with the rank and file of the organization on a neutral plane. When a department is attacked from the outside, the role of the leader often becomes the lightning rod for the direction that the investigation goes.

Continuing with the metaphor of a marriage, these scenarios all lead to a real fundamental question. Is it possible to end a honeymoon period and still maintain the marriage? Or, in other words, is it possible to "kiss and make-up"?

Well, that depends. And the first thing it depends upon is the strength of the original marriage. When an organization begins to feel that there is an erosion of trust and confidence, the fire chief must be fully prepared to take totally responsibility. Regardless, of where if it is coming from the bottom up or it is coming from the top down, is irrelevant. What is important is that you recognize the the existence of a degradation as quickly as possible and start placing into position tactics and strategy to prevent the erosion going any further than it absolutely has to.



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Believe it or not a lot of this has to do with your personal sense of confidence as well as your attitude about the phenomenon. One might make the argument that if an individual feels that they are 100 percent in the right on a particular issue and it results in the erosion of the honeymoon then that is the way it is. More often than not, over-confidence will allow an individual to take that this path without any regard for its consequences and subsequently experience significant erosion in relationships.

The number one strategy that a survivor will take is to try to do everything you can to learn what the real reasons are behind the deterioration and to realistically and honestly appraise your role in either causing or in remedying the situation. In other words, it begins with a self assessment and critique of how things have gone in terms of your own leadership style rather than trying to blame it on another party.

In summary, the beginning of any strong and positive working relationships follows true that while many people are given the benefit of the doubt for a short period time, it is also true that many are able to sustain a strong working relationship throughout an entire career. Unfortunately, the rest of us fall into a spectrum that is somewhere in between. It is up to your own personal sense of confidence and self-worth that you maintain a strong working relationship for as long as possible and attempt to mitigate any of the erosion of that relationship over the time you are responsible for a department.

To continue with our metaphor of matrimony, one thing that is likely to occur after a honeymoon is over is that you are on a treadmill in divorce court. That leads to another topic. The exit strategy. Are you ready for that?