



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Horatio Alger; Rookie Firefighter

Horatio Alger stories are not all that visible these days. Back at the turn of the century, this author popularized the concept that became labeled as the American success story. Alger, an American author who wrote approximately 135 dime novels, developed a theme that could be best referred to as the rags to riches story. Alger's stories always centered on some young man coming in from the country and being confronted with city life that was difficult. There were challenges and opportunities which were responded to with courage, conviction and capability. Inevitably, Alger's hero's emerged victorious.

When you read those novels today they sound incredibly naïve if not outright simplistic. Yet, most every young person who enters some form of career orientation hopes to become a success sooner or later in life. In the case of the firefighter, it almost always begins with getting through probation. Young people entering the fire service must prove to us that they have the right stuff or we won't even allow them to go to the second step. There is no question in my mind that if Horatio Alger was participating in a recruit academy today he would probably have approached his meeting our standard with the same degree of focus on values and personal qualities that he wrote about in his books.

My reason for raising this question is to examine a characteristic of our selection process. Someone once told me that we were hiring every firefighter to ultimately be the chief. I wonder if that is truly correct today. The next time you are at a recruit academy graduation, look up and down the line and ask yourself the question of how many of these individuals will still be as highly motivated and as committed to their profession as they are the day they graduate from the recruit academy?

If you came back on the Monday morning following the recruit academy having a weekend and asked each individual how inspired they were. Chances are you would receive the same enthusiasm you had seen the previous Friday.

But what happens when you come back five years later? What happens when you come back fifteen years later? Alger's sense that people will remain courageous and convicted throughout their entire lifetime suffers a little bit in the translation when it comes to people's attitudes towards their lives and their profession in general.

Does the young person who emerges as the "chief" of your rookie academy have a high degree of possibility that they will also emerge as the chief of the department sooner or later? These questions are problematic in the sense that most of the time when we hire firefighters we are not thinking of them in terms of their achievement in their lifetime. We are interested in whether they can graduate and be able to perform the job in the firehouse the day they go to work.



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In the past, we have more or less allowed the group to sort themselves out. I think we are still doing that today. There is no assessment of the long term promotability of individuals when we hire them, other than to take into consideration what their individual strengths and weaknesses are as they go through entry level training. There is a concept that there is some consideration that is not as frequently utilized. It is called "deep selection".

Deep selection means looking at candidates with regard to their promotability as opposed to their current level of responsibility. Almost immediately some people will react negatively to the concept of deep selection because it smacks of favoritism. However, that is not what I am attempting to describe in the context of this column. Deep selection doesn't mean going down and picking someone and giving them special favors. What it means is to go down and take a look at an individual's potential and then evaluate how well that potential is brought to the forefront as they continue to move up through their ranks. The process of deep selection places an emphasis on almost a constant assessment on how well a person is maintaining themselves and improving over time.

The next question is, who does this deep selection? The higher up in the organization that it is attempted, the more likely it is going to take on the connotation of favoritism. I like to think of it as being a function of a first level supervisor. The reason I picked that level is my personal experience of dealing with fire officers who worked very hard to keep me motivated and keep me focused on elements of my career.

The best people to help identify future officers are our competent officers of today. If an organization uses the deep selection process they should starting to look at recruit firefighters as soon as they come out of the academy and find ways of keeping that positive attitude and development of their skill sets on the front burner.

Believe it or not, the one technique that works best with deep selection is not favoritism but rather strong use of performance review processes. Those individuals that have potential are expected to live up to a high standard. Those individuals that have potential and refuse to live up to it may eventually be able to survive and have a lifelong and meaningful career but may never amount to a significant contributor to the organization.

In examining characteristics we are looking for here, we shouldn't be spending too much time on just reviewing their firefighting skills alone. Instead we should take a clue of Alger's novels and start looking for sturdier character traits that have nothing to do with the profession but an awful lot to with who a person is as a human being. Traits such as honesty, courage, commitment to closure, integrity, willingness to take responsibility, etc. are all important in assessing the long term potential of a human being.



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The second lesson we can take from Alger's stories was that adversity was a means of strengthening all of these traits. Having it easy is not a sign that a person will succeed. To the contrary, a little bit of adversity is an important part of bringing out someone's best personality traits.

Going back to the role of the company officer, the first two years a person is on the job may have more determination of their long term success than any other stage of their career. After two years, well most people realize that most individuals will remain on their best behavior during their probationary period just to pass the magic mark that allows the person permanent status. The next year it is much more critical. This is when we get an opportunity to observe the real person. I am not suggesting that most people necessarily withhold their true character and try to deceive the fire service, but you cannot tell me that there isn't a little bit of behavior control until probation is over. I have seen way to many cases of it in my own career to deny its existence.

When a company officer has that person for the second year, they have the opportunity to really find out what their character is all about. It is not just a case of giving them more work to do. It is not just a case of hoping that you will get a lot of calls to go on so you can test them under stress. It is more a case of the officers working to keep that person focused on the development of their own capacity to perform at the next higher level.

In Alger's stories the hero always overcame everything. Hundreds of times he told the same story over and over again with very subtle if not parallel outcomes of each of his stories. In a sense we have a similar need in the fire service. We don't need just one success story; we need thousands of success stories. We need to involve a sufficient number of leaders in the fire service to keep our profession moving forward as part of the succession planning process. In an individual organization there might be numerous individuals who are deep selected at any one point in time.

If someone happened to focus on you and help you prepare for the opportunities that have benefited you and your family, then you should repeat it for the benefit of the next generation. If it didn't happen to you, let your observations now be among the first in building a new generation of fire officers that are stronger than we have had in the past. Look hard – they are out there.