



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

How to Swim with Sharks and Survive

The movie “Jaws” terrorized us because it appealed to a basic fear – the fear of the unknown. The great white shark is a fascinating animal in its own environment, but when it starts consuming bathers it becomes the subject of abject fear. We have two choices in that instance. One is to not go swimming. Two, is to learn how not to attract sharks.

What does that have to do with being a fire chief? Recently a fire chief related an experience to me of an insignificant incident that occurred in his organization that was blown out of proportion. The incident resulted in a lot of conflict and controversy for him personally and for his department as a whole. He was “bleeding” from a small wound and it attracted the sharks.

How does one survive such attacks? How does one prevent such attacks? It is inevitable in most organizations that sooner or later there will be a controversy that has the potential for being blown out of proportion.

Several hundred years ago an individual named Voltaire Cousteau wrote the treatise *How to Swim With Sharks: A Primer*. Very little is known about the author who apparently died in Paris in 1812. A reprint of his article appeared in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* in the summer of 1973. The essay appears to have been written for sponge divers. In a modern context, however, his rules seem to have broad implications in reference to modern management.

In the foreword of the treatise, it states, “Actually, no one wants to swim with sharks. It is not an acknowledged sport, and is neither enjoyable nor exhilarating. These instructions are written primarily for the benefit of those who, by virtue of their occupation, find they must swim, and find the water is invested with sharks.”

Cousteau’s focus on sponge divers could have just as easily been for top management officials in local, state, and national governments. Headlines at the various levels of government have illustrated that even the most powerful and influential of individuals can be brought down by seemingly unrelated situations.

Sometimes their demise is not so much because the facts were correct. Rather, they were brought down because once they began to react, others joined into the attack and a “feeding frenzy” has occurred at the expense of the accused individual.



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Before anyone interprets this column as meaning that a person should be unaccountable for his actions, this is not true. In fact, individuals should be held accountable. What we are talking about here is what happens when a person has a relatively minor event occur that results in an ever-widening hysteria with a net result that the victim becomes a fatality.

Cousteau's rules were as follows:

1. Assume all unidentified fish are sharks.
2. Do not bleed.
3. Counter any aggression promptly.
4. Get out if someone else is bleeding.
5. Use anticipatory retaliation.
6. Disorganize any other organized attack.

Almost anybody could take these six rules and compare them to the survival game that goes on in public administration and the political arena. For purposes of this column, I would like to characterize each of the six rules as applying to what happens to a fire chief or upper level staff officer when he finds himself in the midst of a fabricated controversy. By fabricated, I mean a relatively minor incident blown out of proportion.

Let's look at rule number one: Assume that all unidentified fish are sharks.

It is very important for us to know who we are dealing with in an arena of controversy. Establishing good strong working relationships with the media, your superiors, and your peer group is an essential element in surviving a shark attack. Knowing who you can trust or who you can't before you have a serious breach of confidentiality, requires some insight and understanding of human behavior. Knowing who our true friends are and having an assessment of what their reactions are going to be when the attack begins is fundamental to survivability.

After interviewing several chief officers who have gone through this experience, it was clear that one of the things that damaged them at the outset of this type of situation was when people they trusted either abandoned them, failed to support them, or, in some cases, betrayed trust. It is critical, for example, when a controversy erupts, to be very sure that those to whom you are revealing your innermost thoughts will retain that confidentiality and not use that information out of context at some point in the future.

How do you go about determining who are your friends and who are not? One cannot tell merely by the social relationship that exists within an organization. It primarily deals with integrity and a shared set of values regarding the corporate culture. Further, it is important to possess the same integrity and sense of values yourself.



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Cousteau's second rule was "Do not bleed." Cousteau states, "Experience shows that bleeding prompts an even more aggressive attack and will often provoke participation of sharks which are uninvolved..." This means that when a person is wounded it is far better not to act like it, nor overly dramatize reactions. Outrageous indignation over being accused is a form of visual bleeding. Sulkiness, withdrawal, hurt feelings, and expressions of disappointment don't mean anything to a circling school of sharks.

Not bleeding literally means not reacting emotionally. Control of your emotions is something we prize very highly on the fireground – but often fail to realize its impact in the fire station or on the front pages of a newspaper. Outrageous indignation can be translated into questions of what is this person trying to cover up? Withdrawal or sulkiness can be construed as unwillingness to be open and honest.

Rule three, "Counter any aggression promptly" carries the idea that you have to fight back. This is different from having an emotional response. Cousteau states that sharks rarely attack a swimmer without warning. The same thing applies regarding potential controversy. Seldom is controversy unheralded – issues take form as a result of rumor or minor incidents.

The fire chief cannot live in an ivory tower of the fire department. Involvement in the community and awareness of potential issues, especially toward the fire department, can easily be detected if you are receptive to that type of information. Countering aggression means dealing with issues as quickly as they take on the color of controversy.

Once a controversy becomes obvious, it should be dealt with. Not ignored, nor avoided, not discounted, but dealt with as aggressively and in as straightforward a manner as possible.

Rule four states, "Get out if someone else is bleeding." This translates to when someone is in deep trouble; one has to be very careful of immersing himself in their problems. Of all of Cousteau's rules, this is the one I like least. It smacks of a certain amount of moral cowardice whenever an individual gets into difficulty. However, its modern counterpart in management survival might be restated, "If someone is in real trouble – make sure you have all your facts straight before you cast your lot with him."

In one incident, a fellow fire chief was under attack for participating in a program that assisted other fire departments. The implication was that there was some financial impropriety in his participation in the program. After a 15-minute conversation and getting all the facts straight regarding what had and had not occurred, his peers joined him in expressing a loud personal and professional support of the individual.



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Rule five states, "Use anticipatory retaliation." Cousteau recommends in dealing with sharks the best way to keep a shark aware of who is boss is to give him a periodic sharp blow to the nose. The purpose is to remind the shark that the individual is both alert and unafraid.

The counterpart is not to retaliate against one's enemies, but to make sure one's enemies know that you are unafraid and prepared to deal with the issue in a straightforward fashion. Cousteau's advice was that swimmers should take care not to injure a shark and draw blood during retaliation because that only forces the sharks who are circling to become more frenzied. Engaging in out-and-out warfare with individuals who are attacking you is absolutely senseless and only causes the polarization of the different individuals involved.

Therefore, the counterpart of this is to go with facts only. Anticipatory retaliation in the context of a fire service controversy means to have all your facts, have them straight, and be able to defend them.

Disorganizing an organized attack is our last rule. Cousteau suggests that we deal with organized attacks by diversion of attention.

The modern counterpart is to move a controversy away from the personal area and into policy or procedure instead of personalities. Regardless of the issue brought into the forefront, one should avoid defending it on a personal basis. "I" is not the best word to begin a sentence with.

Nothing beats documentation as a form of focusing attention on specifics. Granted, many controversies do not have documentation to support them. In that case, one might attempt to reconstruct events that led up to the controversy and attempt to find facts that may not be in evidence to those who are raising the issues.

Diversion in this case, by the way, does not mean diversion away from the main issue. That is counterproductive for the ultimate resolution of the problem. Remember that the objective is to survive the attack, not merely to forestall the inevitable.

In the real world, there have been people who have survived shark attacks. There have been fire chiefs who have been attacked and survived also, but there have been fatalities in the water and at city hall. The suddenness and unpredictability of headlines announcing the shark attack often frighten the uninitiated. The professional who knows he will be swimming with such creatures, goes into the water well prepared.

It is reported that Voltaire Cousteau's descendant may well be the famous Dr. Jacques Cousteau. Jacques swam with sharks and survived because he is a professional. And so can you.