

Interim chiefs: Babysitters or substitute teachers?



RONNY J. COLEMAN

Ronny J. Coleman has served as fire chief in Fullerton and San Clemente, Calif., and was the fire marshal of the state of California from 1992 to 1999. He is a companion fellow of the IFE and former president of the IAFC.

When you were about 10 or 12 years old, two people likely put you on edge: the babysitter and the substitute teacher. I remember one babysitter we called Mrs. Mean and a substitute teacher nicknamed The Enforcer. These individuals meant a change in oversight — and likely the status quo.

I started thinking about these adolescent terrors while reviewing a number of fire departments with interim or acting fire chiefs. These individuals come into an organization with no possibility of becoming a permanent member but with specific duties to perform. They are in some ways a combine babysitter/substitute teacher, as they perform both oversight and remedial activity in the same breath.

Why do departments hire interim chiefs? Chiefs who seek these opportunities may do so after retiring from one job, but finding that they still want to exercise their skill sets or help bring about change in the fire service. Fire chiefs' brains keep working long after the legs have worn out.

City managers may opt to fill a position on an acting basis because they often can make greater change with an interim chief than they can with a permanent one — and that eventually could alter the fire-chief selection process. An interim chief hired from outside the department often can seek out and solve problems better than an insider, either because new eyes see things differently or because they lack an organizational bias.

Whenever an interim chief is hired, the organization likely will wonder what comes next: A retiring fire chief will wonder if his or her legacy will change. A staff member will wonder what changes the interim chief will make. A neighboring fire chief will wonder how the peer relationship will differ. All are legitimate concerns. What happens is dependent upon the goals and objectives of the hiring party — the authority having jurisdiction.

I've found that the majority of individuals who serve as interim chiefs don't do so to create controver-

sy; rather they serve to stabilize the organization from past controversies. One of my associates has a personal motto derived from the physicians oath of "do no harm" — always leave the place better off than you found it. Another friend who has served in this capacity many times said his goal is to prepare the organization for the next stage of development. A third opined that his role as an interim/acting chief is to separate the problems from the people and look for solutions that can eliminate irrelevant and sometimes unnecessary conflicts for a new permanent chief.

If you are thinking of taking an acting-chief position, you will have to make up your own ground rules. But the following ideas come from individuals with experience in these roles:

- 1] Make sure that you have specific expectations spelled out before you begin the assignment.
- 2] Research the department's issues and problems before you arrive so as not to be blindsided.
- 3] Write down your observations as soon as you make them. Don't wait for weeks or months to create your journal of observations.
- 4] Find every "source" document you can and create a library for the new chief.
- 5] Don't take any one person's word for anything. Cross reference everything you are told.
- 6] Interview as many staff members as you can to get all of the perspectives of the department.
- 7] Listen more than you speak.
- 8] Don't start anything that you cannot finish before you leave.
- 9] Don't make a promise that you can't keep.
- 10] Treat department personnel as if you are going to be there forever.

Substitute teachers and babysitters can seem menacing, but they also can be influential or conversely ambivalent. The fire-service version of that role is the interim chief. If he or she uses the 10 basic rules above, I'd be willing to bet that the organization will end better off than when he or she started. ■

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