



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Is Your Plate Too Full?

A few days ago I was having a conversation with a young firefighter about changing culture in the firehouse. His chief had just expressed to me the fact that he was concerned that the culture in the fire house is changing very rapidly due to the lack of interaction among the crew after the regular work day is over.

This young man who wasn't really a center of the conversation spoke up very quickly – "you know, I think that all of society began to change, especially the family when they created central heating and air. From that day forward nobody had to stay in the same room and put up with each other."

And, you know I think that he is right. If we harken back to the old days of our ancestors one of the reasons why the family was a close knit entity was that they all had to huddle together for meals and warmth.

And you know I am not so sure that is exactly how we got started in the firehouse with the concept of the tradition of the firehouse ritual – the dinner table. Prior to the 1850's there were no real formal fire department organizations. When the fire service was first created the atmosphere and mood was very much like a military organization because it was predominately masculine and it had a lot of connotations of being in the military. One fact, being in a British fire service in the London Fire Brigade in the 1860's, one of the prerequisites is that the fire chief had been looking for naval veterans to put into the fire service because they were "useful in working aloft and had grown accustomed to living for long periods of time in isolation.

This got me to thinking about the whole concept of the lifestyle that is changing in the firehouses. And, maybe it hasn't changed in yours. There are still many fire agencies out there that have not gone into dormitories and/or created separate facilities on a basis of gender. And, there are a lot that already have. I do not wish to be prejudicial and single out either of them as being either right or wrong. But I think it is time that we take a look at some of the changes that are going on in our society that may have an impact on the management of the firehouse sooner or later.

Not unlike many traditions in the fire service the idea of the lifestyle in the firehouse came about in such a fashion that people have forgotten some of the original rationale. Did you know for example that originally paid firefighters worked seven days a week, 24-hours a day? As it went in those days if you were a firefighter you worked on duty constantly except for short periods of time in which you were granted time off to go have meals with your family and the reason that that was such a functional thing was that most of the families lived within a block or so of the fire station. Commuting was not a way of life in those days.



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And neither were communal meals for the most part. I have a logbook from the 1870's from the Brooklyn Fire Department in which each individual was logged out of the morning, noon and afternoon to go home and share meals with their families.

So this begs the initial question. How did the firehouse culture that we know of today get started? As stated earlier it was pretty clear that most fire stations when they were first created were almost totally dominated by the male sense of propriety. This was also hold over from the days of the volunteers. Many fire departments were sinners of the social interaction and even political intrigue.

Dormitories were a natural extension of the paramilitary application of bugging a bunch of soldiers in the same area. However it is also true that fire stations were places where people just sort of hung out.

What began to alter that was the creation of the Kelly Day. The concept of the Kelly Day is taken for granted today but was a major revolution of its time. It was merely the allowing of each individual firefighter to have at least one day off a week. In other words in a one platoon system everybody works 120 hours per week. The one-day off was provided as a brief respite for the individual but in the process of doing that many fire departments started eliminating meal times. After all if a guy had a whole day off to himself why did he have to go home for dinner every night?

If you have a dormitory and you have a kitchen in the same place it didn't take long for the fire service to figure out that eating a hale and hearty meal was one way of making the day go by. Therefore, the communal meal came into existence.

Two things begin to occur in the fire station that changed the roles and relationships of staffing and meals. The first of these is a continued reduction in the workweek. The second is that firefighter's move further and further away from the very fire stations in which they served. There are many individuals today who can recall when there used to be a requirement that you had to physically live within a certain driving distance of your fire station. That began to erode also. The reason for that was that many firefighters could not afford or did not wish to live in the same locale as their fire station resided.

The introduction of individual rooms in the fire stations did not occur overnight. It too was a function of a series of decisions rather than a singular event. In many cases it came about as a direct result of gender issues associated with departments. There was however fire departments that chose to put the dormitory in for another reason. Among the first departments that I witnessed doing that were ones that wished to separate ALS paramedic personnel from firefighting personnel. The simple reason was that the guys and gals who were medics kept getting woken up in the middle of the night because



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everybody else wished to sleep through the shift if they could. Therefore, the concept of separate bedding facilities began to emerge.

Today if you look at the construction of most modern fire departments you will see that this has continued to evolve. Yet, I do not know of any fire department that has completely eliminated the common kitchen and the use of other common facilities where people are accustomed to congregate.

So what has really changed? What the chief was referring to which I have had similar experiences is that some of the things that we used to take for granted around the dining room table now don't happen unless somebody actually works hard at it. I am in reference to people sitting around the table at the beginning, middle or the end of a shift for purposes of coordinating and communicating the spirit and intent of what is going on at that fire company.

Has the spirit gone out of the fire station? Well I think that depends an awful lot on how the culture of the organization evolves at the same time that the architecture has evolved. In the event that you wish to find people going their separate ways it is relatively easy to allow that to occur by merely taking no action at all. After all if everybody has their own television set back in their room and/or their own reading materials and/or their own computer terminal why not allow them to retire to that facility for their own convenience.

I believe that there are at least three techniques available for a fire officer to assure that that doesn't materialize on their watch. They consist of:

- a. Daily Briefings
- b. Setting Company Expectations
- c. Daily De-Briefing

The first of these is pretty simple. It consists of doing nothing more than making sure that everybody sits down at the same coffee table for about 15 minutes every morning and engaging in a brief discussion about what has gone on. They could include information about what happened on the previous shift, things that must go on in the upcoming day and or just exchange of information in general. The key here is the formalizing of the process rather than just allowing it to happen by accident.

The second part of this process is a little subtler. It consists of the officer going out of their way to bring people together for any reason whatsoever and assure that there is an expectation that people participate. At the risk of using another one of those "warm and fuzzy" words – inclusiveness. The expectation that is set by a company officer of participation in company activities goes along way when it is reinforced daily.



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Then of course the end of shift briefing is just exactly that. It consists of nothing more than bringing everybody back to the table and having a review of how things have gone. It can be as simple as a brief conversation or it can be as complicated as sitting down and going over specific details. The real essence of it however, is the event not the specific. Conducting an end of the shift debriefing is a natural alleviant to go into the meal time period and/or the remainder of the standby activities of that shift.

What I hear from a lot of officers is that people are so busy these days that these three items are overlooked in anticipation of trying to meet deadlines of other priorities. I have witnessed it myself. The frenetic activity that can get going in a fire company sometimes can be very counterproductive and reduce the level of dealing for participation. That is all the more reason why officers should be paying attention to this phenomenon by doing what they can to prevent it from occurring in their own fire companies.

Ritualized behavior that encourages people to feel like they are more part of a team is an acquired taste. In all candors some people do not care to take on the connotation of being a "cheer leader" for each and everything that goes on. And that is not what I am referring to here. If it is a ritualized behavior when it comes to participation make sure that people know that they do have a place at the table and that their input is recognized as being both valuable and appreciated.