



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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The King is Dead; Long Live the King

In royal families when the king expires, there is very little hesitation about appointing his heir. The expression, the king is dead; long live the king, sort of transitions the process. What this phrase is saying is that the minute you are no longer at the top of the world, there is a process for you to be replaced by someone else. But what if we replace it with a new phrase, the fire marshal is gone; long live the fire marshal!

Are you ready for that inevitability? Just as sure as you are carrying a badge around today that says fire marshal, there is going to be some point in time when you are no longer going to be there. Have you given any consideration as to what is going to happen to your department and more importantly your programs and your legacy when that event occurs?

Some people label this as succession planning. But I am going to make it a little more personal than that. Had you given any thought whatsoever as to who may be your replacement in the fire prevention bureau if you retired today?

If you haven't, then you are probably right there among the 90 percent of fire officials in this country that don't think about succession planning until that event is on their immediate horizon. But I am suggesting that you would be a lot smarter and rest a lot easier if you started thinking about it right now. In other words, start looking to hand pick your successor. Is that even possible?

Well, I will be the first to admit that you may not have a 100 percent control over what your chief is going to do if you find yourself closer to retirement. There are all sorts of obvious political reasons why the rank of fire marshal might be held up for scrutiny. Not the least of these reasons may be your track record as an individual. What may be happening to you may be sending messages out into the fire suppression forces of either being good or bad. The working relationship that you have established with your community may be sending messages to the business community that may be either good or bad. In short, what I am about to suggest is that not only are you not responsible for picking your own successor, but you may certainly be in a position of helping to cultivate the environment in which a new fire marshal is going to be inserted.

The first thing we need to talk about is for you to make sure your job description remains current, accurate and is as comprehensive as possible. What is often looked at as a human resources function, the preparation of job descriptions, often languishes on the back burner until such time as the incumbent leaves and then all of a sudden a whole bunch of new requirements start showing up on the new job description that weren't there before. In fact, many of these functions were there before but they were never acknowledged nor were they ever reinforced as part of your current job. The number



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one need of your successor is that they need to be made aware of all of the expectations not just the generic ones.

There are several suggestions for you to share your experiences with your peers on your own department in as positive a fashion as you can. Granted, there are some days that are better than others, and there are some days that you may not wish to talk about at all. But if you want to start planning for your succession, take a look down in your organization and see if there is anybody whose temperament, intellect and personality tend to make them a good candidate for being the fire marshal and then you engage them. We are not talking brain washing here. What we are talking about is making sure that they see that you actually do have a profound impact on the community. This is the time to make the case with your peers about how important the role of the fire marshal is in actually creating the community's fire problem. Many people simply do not have the sense of respect for the fire marshals job because all they ever heard are the negative aspects. It is time to be as positive as possible.

Also, network with people outside of your organization to look for viable candidates that have an interest in both your community and your way of doing things. I am not talking about you doing recruiting, what I am talking about is you doing marketing. What you have to say about your department when you are in the confines of social settings and other professional arenas away from the office may have more of an effect on who chooses to replace you than any other single factor. This is where the term reputation sometimes comes in.

Create a learning culture in your fire prevention staff. Now this may seem obvious, but it certainly isn't too many fire marshals. Opening up the channels of communication so that learning is an ongoing instead of a singular event is an important part of succession planning. It strengthens the capacity of those working within your organization but it also makes a much firmer platform for a new fire marshal to come in and take over. The main idea regarding continuous learning is to practice it on yourself.

Never allow yourself to believe that you know all the answers. Always be asking the questions yourself. This may seem like a strange idea for succession planning but you should compete in any open fire marshal exams that are in comparable communities like your own. Not unlike the need to sharpen the knife that is being used every day in the kitchen, competition brings out a new edge. Don't be afraid to test yourself against the promotional process. It will tell you a lot about what your successor will face when they test for your job.

In summary, one of the best ways you can influence your successor is to raise the bar on the job to the point that whoever is going to want the job, has a sense of competition that you put into it yourself. You may not get to sit on the oral board nor write the questions for the final exam but once you create



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the aura of your leadership role in the fire prevention bureau the organization in order to survive has to look for someone with those same qualities. And, imitation they say is the sincerest form of flattery.