



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Knowing How to Hold Them - Knowing When to Fold Them

Kenny Rogers had a hit song which stated, "You have to know how to hold them, and know when to fold them, know when to walk away, and know when to run." Kenny's song was about gambling, or was it about decision-making?

There are lots of times when a person finds themselves in a position of having to decide whether to forge ahead or give up on something they have started. There are risks associated with both courses of action. If one chooses to follow a course of action with a losing hand, the consequences of failure can be quite high. On the other hand, giving up when you are on the brink of success multiplies the impact of what you are losing.

Personally, I'm not much of a card player. I use to get beat a lot when I was playing old maid as a youngster and I could never figure out what the logic was in losing my money on the turn of a card. In retrospect, I wish I would have studied the art of card playing a little more because I think there are lessons to be learned for people who find themselves in decision-making processes in which risk is involved.

I see at least three lessons that one can take from playing cards. It has to do with real world decision-making. The first of these is you have to know the rules of the game. The second is you have to play with the hand you have been dealt, and the third is you must have an attitude that losing one's hand does not mean you have lost the game.

A card game played without rules is unwinnable. Decisions that are made randomly without being placed in a larger context are almost irrelevant. Generally speaking, when we play a card game we don't make up the rules, we do it according to Hoyle. Hoyle took a great deal of time in examining the implication of all the various possibilities and permutation that can occur in the handling of 52 single cards in a deck. Good decision makers know all the rules. They tend to be individuals who know all the rules that affect all the people.

The best way I have of comparing this to the real world of decision-making in the fire service is to realize that while cards may be the tool of playing the game, there are many different kinds of games that can be played with cards. The same thing might be said about programs and activities of a fire department. The basic tools remain the same. We have manpower, money, machinery, and methods. If we only know how to use them to play one kind of game, i.e., strictly fire suppression, we are vulnerable to the possibilities of someone else playing a different kind of game using the same tools.



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Our analogy of knowing the rules are dependent upon our use of the cards we are dealt. Whenever someone is dealt a hand he/she has to assess it rather quickly to determine whether the cards he holds gives him the possibility of winning in the game that is being played. He has to make a choice of either discarding or retaining certain cards. These could be characterized as being the tools we select or ignore in doing the kinds of things to achieve the objectives of the organization. An improper discard can cost you, and the same thing can be said for getting rid of something before its true value has been measured. Equally as damaging, is a choice of holding onto something long after it has lost its utility and can be beaten by the combination being held by someone else.

The reality check in this is that whenever we ignore new methodologies or state of the art technologies that will allow us to be more successful, in a sense we have discarded them. Moreover, when we retain policies, practices, and procedures that no longer make any sense, we are holding cards in our hands but someone else may have the ability to outmaneuver us in the decision making process. It makes no difference what the value of a single card is in a deck. It is the combination of cards that ultimately results in a winning hand. It is the combination of manpower's, methods, machinery, and money that allows us to having a winning hand in an organizational setting.

Oh yes! There will be times when we lose. That's like playing the individual hand in a poker game. As you make your bets and play your card one has to be careful not to bet too much too soon or too little too late. Effective decision makers are those who are constantly balancing their short-term gains against the potential of long-term losses. One could almost make the case that a person who plays a card game all night long but who ends the game with the same amount of money that they started with is a survivor, but are they winners?

Effective decision makers always come out of the game as having some long-term benefit to what they are doing. Short-term gains are irrelevant. Long-term losses determine your overall success or failure. The opposite is true. Short-term losses that are void by long term gains means you are a winner.

Kenny Rogers went on to say that the way of measuring a gambler's success is that, "the best they could hope for was to die in their sleep." This could easily be translated as saying that the best that all of us can hope for in our decision making processes is to be able to retire from the playing field rather than being rejected from it. We can play the game as long as we wish to. You can stay in a card game as long as you have the wherewithal to compete, but you can never walk away from the decision making process until you are ready to no longer be a participant.

The next time you pick up a deck of cards and shuffle it in your hands, don't think of it as merely pieces of paper with symbols and numbers, but rather as a management training tool for the decision making process.