



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Lightning Rods, Garden Rakes or Doormats

Since the dawn of time, or at least as soon as man was able to put words in use as symbols, he has been comparing himself against other objects and animals in his surroundings. For example, a man who is strong was referred to as “hard as a rock.” Someone who is sly was referred to as “cunning as a fox.” Sometimes that same “cunning” refers to someone being referred to as “sharp as a razor.” The list of analogies can go on and on and on.

Well, we might be able to use that same kind of an analogy when it comes to talking about our fire department organizations. For example, have you ever heard of an organization being referred to as “fat” or “lean”? We all do it and it is kind of fun. Analogies mean that something we are comparing is like something we like or dislike. What about your organization? What is it like? If you were going to compare your fire department to an animal or an inanimate object, what image would you select? Well, of course, most of us would like to select something positive, something that reflects both a good image of ourselves and one that other people would agree with.

Over a period of years, and after looking at large numbers of different firefighting organizations, I have developed three analogies that seem to be relative to the way a fire department is perceived by its community. The three objects that I have selected for symbols are: doormat, the garden rake and lightning rod.

What is a “doormat”? A doormat is an item that is quite necessary in most homes, if one wants to keep the home tidy. It is an object that is placed at the point of entry to the home and is used to make sure that no dirt and debris is inadvertently carried into the living areas. Those who want to protect the sanctity of the home place these doormats out into the weather.

As soon as the doormat has been scuffed, bumped, kicked, abused and otherwise shows signs of deterioration, then the doormat is unceremoniously dumped into the trash can and replaced by some other type of doormat. While the mat is functional and serves a very utilitarian purpose in the home, it is not often shown any respect and generally comes into play only under circumstances where the environment is potentially threatening to the interior of the home. For example, we don't often worry about having doormats during spring and summer. They seem to come into play more often during rainstorms and turbulent times when snow is flying or when mud is being trucked from the garden into the house. It is the same for fire departments that are not treated with any respect, but are expected to react when danger threatens. When the crisis is over, the department fades into the background and receives little or no support.



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What about a “garden rake”? Garden rakes are tools that we use to keep our lawns and gardens in repair. They are relatively inexpensive, and are used to cull and scrape around the landscape in order to keep it looking aesthetically pleasing and pleasant. There are a dozen varieties of rakes. Some are small, some are large, some are cheap and some are expensive.

There is an interesting thing about a garden rake, however. If you inadvertently forget to put it back on the rack or you put it in a place where it is not properly maintained, it is not uncommon for someone walking into the garden to step upon the tines of the rake and have it come swishing up off the ground to crack them right along the side of the nose. When such an event occurs, the stepee forgets about the utilitarian use of his rake. Not infrequently, the rake is thrown vigorously out of sight or is broken across the owner’s knee. No matter how beneficial that rake was in keeping the landscaping clean, when it struck out against its very owner because it reacted to physical leverage, it went from a tool to an enemy in a split second. The second it took that handle to travel from the ground to the bridge of the person’s nose changes the whole relationship.

Sometimes our departments behave like garden rakes when disruptive and negative feelings well up in “doormat” situations. Lack of meaningful dialogue or mutual respect often leads to labor unrest and crisis management. The “garden rake” strikes out and city administration reacts by trying to destroy the tool by removing it or finding a cheaper version - like public safety.

Then there is the “lightning rod.” What are lightning rods? Most people don’t even remember what a lightning rod is like because modern society doesn’t really require them on individual homes. But, on large high-rise buildings, and in some parts of the United States, there is still the necessity for a piece of metal to be placed atop a building to attract electricity in the atmosphere which diverts it before it destroys the structure that it rests upon. Lightning rods stick up higher and are more visible than any other element of the building. They are designed to attract those tremendous discharges of energy that are created in the atmosphere during thunderstorms and other turbulent weather conditions.

The lightning rod sits up there as a beacon and provides safety for the structure that placed it there. It is in the vanguard. It is visible, but it is prepared. It is under attack quite a bit of time. Its greatest strength is in knowing that despite all of the power being generated in the environment, it has been designated to protect the structure that it rests upon and it does so with confidence.

“Lightning rod” fire departments are departments that attract attention. They are “doers.” They are the departments that get stronger and stronger as the environment gets more and more turbulent.

The reason I have selected these three analogies for organizations is that it appears fire departments operate in environments in which they are treated in fashions somewhat like the three appliances just described. Let me give you an example.



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Is it not true that in many of our communities, the fire department is considered to be someone that does the dirty work? They light them, we fight them. We are the doormats for the community. We are supposed to do all the dirty work to make sure that the safety and security of the community is assured even if it means that the lives and safety of our firefighters be sacrificed.

Is it not true, for example, that many people in political life and in local government are convinced that the professional firefighter is an evil necessity? Witness, if you will the tremendous increase and recurring emphasis on the development of “public safety officers.” There is a philosophy in some parts of our society that firefighting is nothing more than a janitorial service. We sweep up after some sort of tragedy has occurred. We are doormats that are there to protect the sanitary aspects of a community and if the doormat gets kind of scruffy around the edges, it can be overhauled or thrown away, if the seasons of the year change.

Fire departments that are organized, managed and maintained strictly for major catastrophes soon find out that they need catastrophes to stay in business, if we stay in the spring and summer of fire losses. If no lives are lost or no property destroyed, then the doormat gets swept off periodically and then eventually taken out of service and placed somewhere else.

Unfortunately, if a doormat is removed and placed in the garage, down in the basement, or stuck away in some sort of closet, and a spring storm or a violent winter weather condition occurs, it is too late.

It is too late to find it. It's too late to go buy a new one at the store. Mud and water gets tromped into the home. Catastrophe can disable and demoralize a community if the fire department serves only as a “doormat.”

Then there are the “garden rake” departments. Neat, clean, sanitary, organized, but they only work when someone else tells them what their jobs are. Instead of creating problems and Instead of becoming advocates for their activities, they only come off the rack long enough to perform the task of their masters.

If, for some unusual reason, they are left unattended for an extended period of time, they begin to represent a threat to anyone who attempts to change them.

Examples of “garden rake” organizations are ones that fail to take a leadership role in managing the change in their profession and instead strike back against anyone attempting to change their “way of doing business.”



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Look around you and I am sure you can find examples of “garden rake” organizational response. Crucial labor relations events have led to departments not only losing credibility in the community, but in many cases forcing political figures and city managers to start probing around for ways of replacing them with some other new type of “rake.”

Sooner or later, someone comes up with a “mechanized” or “automated” rake or someone comes up with a “joint use rake” and the garden rake finds itself not only exiled from its former use, but obsolete. Peter Drucker has already said that we are going to be managing in turbulent times. “Lightning rod” fire departments are ones right up there in the midst of all the turbulence. They are ones that are attracting a lot of the energy and attracting a lot of the attention that is going on in government because they are descriptive with regard to the community’s fire problem. Anyone who has been in the Midwest or has ever lived in the area of thunderstorms knows that lightning, while it is a discharge of electrical energy, is also followed by horrendous claps of thunder.

“Lightning rod” fire departments are chaos surrounded by a cacophony of sound, and they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. They are protecting the infrastructure of the community.

What’s a “lightning rod” fire department? For example, it is one that is promoting new programs and change that is designed to achieve the basic objective of protecting life and property. It’s a fire department that is promoting instead of defending. It is a fire department that is innovating instead of institutionalizing.

You may be saying to yourself that these analogies that have just been drawn could just as easily be related to individuals. You are right. They can be. As a matter of fact, it can almost be said that the organizational analogy is probably a good reflection of the combined leadership styles of all of the individuals who have the responsibility for managing the organization.

What kind of an individual are you? What kind of an organization is your fire department? Perhaps you can come up with some other kind of analogy that will be more comfortable for you and reflect more favorably on what you believe is your role in life. I am sure we have got some bulldozers out there. We have probably got a few life preserver organizations and there has got to be a couple of you out there that could only be classified as “dynamite.”

In the final analysis, however, it is really not important what we think we are, it is what other people think we are. How do you believe you would be referred to by other elements in your community? What we are all striving for and what we should all be attempting to achieve is to receive a favorable comparison and contrast in our communities. This can be reflected by one of two things.



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It can be reflected by the degree of community support that we receive for our programs or it can be reflected by the confidence reflected in our department by those in political and administrative authority over the delivery of fire protection services.

We cannot afford to have a negative analogy applied to us. The fire service has an awesome responsibility. Make sure that we are using the right tools to do the job and our communities will be safer, our jobs will be more secure, and our communities will be stronger. It's far better to be a "lightning rod" than a "doormat" - don't you think?