



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Luck Favors the Mind Prepared

What did Dirty Harry and Groucho Marks have in common? If you guessed personality, you are really going down the wrong path. Both were grouchy, but one was humorous and the other violent. If you suggested that they are both movie stars, you are getting close. However, if you picked the idea the both of them provided society with an opportunity to answer a very simple question but did it in two different ways you are on the right track. What am I referring to?

Well, Dirty Harry once offered a criminal a choice. He was asked to do something against his best interest. Dirty Harry pointed a 357 magnum at him and suggesting that if he hadn't counted the number of bullets that had been fired; the criminal's next course of action would have to be based on whether he was really feeling lucky. If you saw that movie, you likely remember that as being one of the most often repeated lines based on Clint Eastwood's movie work. On the other hand, Groucho Marks ran a quiz show called "You Bet Your Life". His threat was not nearly as violent but he would constantly ask people to bet on the outcome of that question.

So, the question that I pose to you is, how lucky are you? Does everything always work out well just because you hope it will. It was once stated that "hope is not a management method". Do you bet your life on chances? A lot of people extol the virtues of luck in terms of success.

Louie Pasteur coined the phrase that "Luck Favors the Mind Prepared" a long time ago. Going back to Dirty Harry, if the crook had been counting bullets he might have found out that Harry Callahan's gun was empty and had been able to win the gun fight if he had at least one round left of his own. And, if someone had a doctor's degree and went on Groucho Marks' You Bet Your Life, their probability of winning might be higher than the person with nothing but a high school education.

I would like to put this entire concept of gambling with your future into the context of achieving success in the fire service. Accustomed as we are to taking risk in the fire service, the concept of taking a risk is almost entirely aimed at emergency operations. Candidly speaking, most people do not like to take risks with their careers, their promotional opportunities or their administrative actions. They don't want to be lucky, they want to be successful. Yet, sometimes we see the outcomes of these kinds of processes and shake our head with dismay because they don't turn out very well. Often this is being characterized as being unlucky.

Is it? In my opinion, luck has nothing to do with it. If you are going to take your money and gamble, you are probably familiar with the fact that the odds are almost always stacked against you. If you visit Las Vegas, Atlantic City or Monaco and place your money down on the table to play a card game, you are



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almost always going to be confronted with the odds being loaded against you against you unless you have a plan.

It has been recognized for millennia that people who bet on things like baseball games, football games or the outcome of sporting events are more often successful and can overcome those odds because they have a technical expertise about the sporting event. This is especially true if they have kept really good statistics. For purposes of this column I would suggest that for every problem that you are confronted with, the better prepared you are, the luckier you are going to be in having a positive outcome.

I am not exactly sure what you may call your most controversial problem. Granted, if it you are at the scene of an emergency there are often factors beyond your control that can turn a bad incident into a tragedy. But I am not talking about those kinds of problems. The ones I am referring to here have to do with making a decision regarding discipline, budgets, political activity, code enforcement activity, and any number of other policy choices that you might find yourself confronted with as being a fire chief.

To quote an old phrase by a singer/gambler, “you have to know when to hold them and know when to fold them, know when to walk away and know when to run”.<sup>1</sup> In essence I am suggesting that preparations get into any risky set of circumstances is also linked to your ability to read the signs and signals as to whether or not you stand a chance of winning or losing and whether you are willing to pay the consequences of being the loser.

The first thing we ought to talk about is preparation as opposed to training. I have talked to an awful lot of fire officers who have enough certificates to wallpaper their house with diplomas but lack a very essential element of surviving a critical and stressful decision making process. They lack preparation for the event. The job description and the badge often are not an adequate explanation of what is going to be expected of you when there is a really catastrophic and stressful problem to solve. As you acquire knowledge on your way up the pecking order in the fire service, you should be obtaining experience at the same time. One of the clichés that is often expressed with regard to this is whether or not a person has gotten one years experience in a row or twenty years experience. But I would like to add an additional word to that concept. That word is wisdom. Wisdom is different than knowledge and experience. Wisdom comes from making judgments in the past from which you have learned something. It is ephemeral as opposed to being very specific. It was once stated that good judgments depend on wisdom. Wisdom depends upon experience. Experience sometimes depends on bad judgment.

Continuing with the gambling metaphor, one of the things that will improve your chances of succeeding in a highly level situation is to know the rules better than anybody else does. Studying the nuances of

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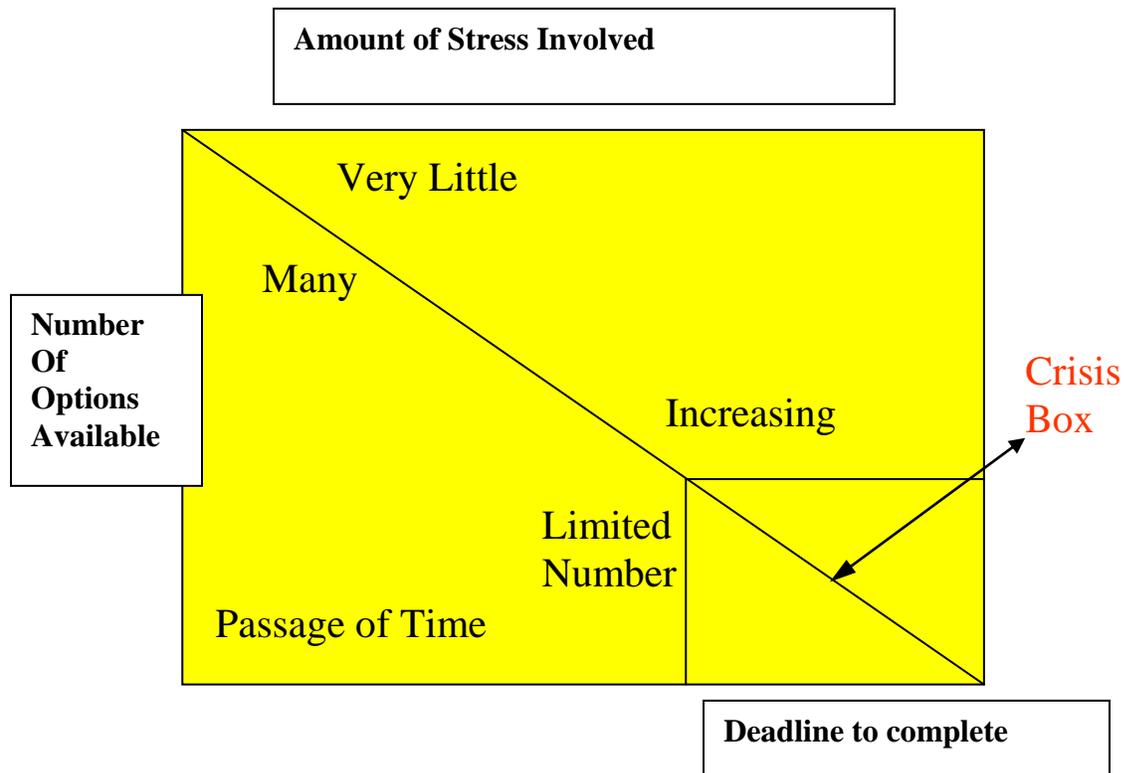
<sup>1</sup> Kenny Rogers, The Gambler



# CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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what your options are before you are asked to exercise them is not an exercise in futility. Instead it improves your odds of being successful. The following model illustrates the manner in which options turn into crisis. If you examine this model you will see that on the left hand side of the model when there is no crisis on the horizon you have got multiple options that are available to you. As you move across the bottom axis which is the passage of time you will see a diagonal line that comes from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner that ultimately means one of those options is going to have to be exercised. You will also see a little box that is described as being the crisis box. That is when a deadline becomes readily apparent.



It is sort of like when you are sitting at the card table and someone has just bet against you and you now have to determine whether you are going to raise the ante. The longer that you stay out of the crisis box, the better off you are. Examining all of your options as part of the preparation phase is a lot more important than having a certificate that you know about the subject.

A good example of this I can point to in many cases if fire chiefs that get themselves in trouble in labor relations and yet simultaneously have not really examined the labor relations laws or the memorandum



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

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of agreement in detail. They make assumptions and they “bluff” in hopes that their bluff will carry them through the bet.

In one sense, this model illustrates the fact that you get luckier the longer you can stay out of the crisis box. But you also need to realize that sooner or later there is going to be an end game. You need to be prepared for that end game by making sure that all of your options have been explored.

My last suggestion in the use of the gambling metaphor is to learn how to be a good loser. Anybody can be a winner if all the cards are stacked in their favor. The character of a person is often demonstrated more about how they handle an unsuccessful attempt. If you go into a crisis situation and you are unprepared and you do lose, then go back a couple of paragraphs and read what I had to say about losing. It does you no good to be angry at the party who did come out ahead, it only means that if you are going to have to gamble again against that same party you better be better prepared next time. Luck favors the mind prepared remember?

Some people might call that a poker face. What I am suggesting is that in your lifetime of making decisions you are going to find some decisions that you almost have to make by the flip of a coin. You have a 50/50 chance of succeeding. There are other decisions you will need to face that you cannot flip a coin because the price that will be paid is significant to someone. It could be just as significant to you. It could be significant to your taxpayers. It could be significant to your labor group. You can't afford to gamble.

When Dirty Harry said, “do you feel lucky?” The operative word was feel. An over competent person might make the wrong judgment at that point in time. A person who has a strong sense of inner confidence that they know what they are doing might make a totally different decision.

So, in the final analysis you don't bet your life, you bet your reputation. Don't be lucky, be better prepared!