



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Mantra

The term mantra may not be part of your day-to-day vocabulary. In fact the concept of a mantra may be entirely boring to you. If your image of a mantra conjures up oriental monks wearing saffron robes repeating in very monotonous tones a series of words, I can understand why it doesn't mean much to you. The concept of a mantra could be interpreted to also cover a particular behavior of football fans. What I am referring to is the semi-hysterical pattern of behavior demonstrated by fans of specific sport events in which they feel compelled to stand up and shout at the top of their lungs physically gesturing to the sky "we are number 1".

For you see a mantra is a belief. It is manifested best in a set of circumstances that is spoken aloud and affirmed by the behavior of the person expressing it.

So let's give credit where credit is due. There is a mantra that is beginning to be repeated all over the fire service. It begins "everybody goes home". It is the battle cry of firefighter safety. It is a mantra because if you truly believe in it you will behave in a specific way to assure that everybody does go home. If an organization repeats the mantra over and over and engages in counterproductive personal behaviors then the mantra becomes empty and irrelevant.

As supporter of Ron Siarnicki's efforts to reduce the number of deaths on the fire ground I believe the mantra needs to be supported by a few additional expressions of personal belief on the part of fire officers. In other articles I have eluded to the fact that I frequently read military literature to obtain insights as to how officers in the military are successful in leading people in very stressful circumstances. Let's face it, a young second lieutenant who is getting ready to take his squad into combat in Iraq today wants to come home too. What is it about belief that allows a person to be a survivor under highly stressful sets of circumstances?

I found a clue in one of the articles. Actually I have since lost track of exactly who made this quote but I have seen it repeated on bulletin boards and in literature involving the United States Marine Core. It is a simple statement. It goes like this; every Marine that is going into combat deserves to be; properly equipped, properly trained, and properly lead.

What a concept. Every Marine, not just the lucky ones, not just the brave ones, they all have the right to have the right kind of equipment to know how to use it correctly and have somebody who is accountable and responsible for supervising their activities.



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Could that same set of statements apply to us in the fire service? I believe so. If every fire company in this country was properly equipped, properly trained and properly lead, what do you think that would do to the overall probability of a firefighter failing to go home?

Put yourself in the right seat of a piece of a fire apparatus and ask yourself this question. When the overhead door rattles to a stop and the driver operator puts the vehicle into gear to begin the response to the scene of an emergency are they always properly equipped, properly trained and properly lead? Anything less than a yes answer in that trifecta is not adequate. And of course this is where some of the debate may soon rage. What do we mean by being properly equipped? I can simplify it pretty straightforward. Having the right tool for doing the right job. This is a manifestation of a need of a fire department to have proper tools; proper equipment that is based upon the probability that that tool will be used in the context of that firefighting agency. Not having the proper tools is a severe limitation. Having some tools but having them be antiquated and/or not properly maintained is a liability. Having the equipment and having not met the expectations of the job results in firefighters often trying to do too much with too little and subsequently finding themselves under very unsafe fire conditions.

That leads to my second statement. Just exactly what does it mean to be adequately trained? Is it actually possible to train every firefighter on everything every firefighter needs to know? After being in this business for as long as I have I don't think that is even remotely possible. However, fire departments that do not invest in their training programs have no reasonable expectation that their firefighters are going to know about anything about they are expected to do. And I am not just talking about rooky training where we spend hundreds of hours teaching people how to roll hose and raise a 24-foot ladder. In our business, training is a lifetime activity. If someone were due to retire a year from today in your organization they still have training needs. In fact I would go so far as to say anybody that has got a 24-hour shift left in their fire career before retirement still had some degree of training need.

There are symptoms of organizations that are properly trained. One of the first clues to me that an organization is adequately trained is that people use their tools appropriately, safely and effectively under those highly stressful set of circumstances. Adequately trained individuals do not engage in redundant behavior. Adequately trained individuals do not engage in unsafe behavior. Adequately trained individuals express a unique balance between being open in communications with their fellow team members so that everybody knows what is going on but aggressive enough to keep moving forward in the completion of a task without waiting around to be told what to do.

My visual image of what an adequately trained fire company looks like is very similar to what a NASCAR pit crew looks like when a highly celebrated vehicle wheels off at a high rate of speed and comes to a screeching halt in the pits. Everybody that has a job goes to work on it and within seconds that same vehicle now is heading back out on the track going hundreds of miles an hour safely.



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The third component being properly led is somewhat more ambiguous but it rests on the shoulders of every fire officer in this country. I can't remember the number of times I have had conversations with people about the lack of leadership skills in some of their company officers. I think that is highly argumentative. Here is my reason. I have seen absolutely outstanding fire ground officers and I have seen those that are downright dangerous. Sometimes they are even within the same firefighting agency. Sometimes they are in the same fire station but on different shifts. Being well lead is not something that you can impose on an organization. It is something that is created by the collective moral compass of those individuals who have voluntarily allowed them to be promoted into the role of a fire officer.

Recently in working on a project associated with evaluating fire ground operations, I had a chance to witness a very wide number of fire officers all performing exactly the same skill. What I was taken aback by was the fact that a good officer and a bad officer was not a function of experience. What it was a function of was willingness to take accountability for what was happening on the fire ground. Good officers get it. Bad officers don't. Mediocre officers are making it up as they go along. In the context of this discussion being well lead is not based upon the presence of an officer but rather by the performance of that officer.

Again, putting yourself in the role of an individual responsible for what happens on the fire ground can you honestly say that your people are properly equipped, properly trained and properly lead? If the answer is yes, I would hope that you would be able to support that by talking about specifics. Is your equipment not just available but well maintained? Is your equipment not just available but appropriate for the task at hand. Is your equipment not just available but as close to "state of the art" as you can possibly get? Is your equipment properly being interfaced with the training program?

And so forth – as we ask the question of how well trained our people are, can we honestly say everybody knows their job and moreover does everybody know enough about everybody else's job so that the team looks like the NASCAR pit crew. The hardest one of these three is this concept of whether or not your people are being properly led.

Returning to the military metaphor, I have read a lot of work by Colonel David Hackworth who was one of the most highly decorated heroes of the Vietnam War. His contention was that he wanted to make sure his troops were so well trained that they performed in combat exactly as they were lead to believe that they should perform in the training environment. His mantra was, "don't practice to make perfect, practice to make permanent".

However, I am enough of a realist to realize that the fire service and its capacity to perform are on a bell curve like everything else. If we took the total number of fire companies in the United States of America and placed them on a bell curve of being properly equipped we would find some really state of the art



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fire departments and some that are living in the dark ages. If we attempted to distribute information on how well trained fire departments are we would see a similar bell curve. Trying to determine whether a department is well lead to place them on a curve might be really argumentative but the reality is that it is probably there nonetheless. There are fire departments that are well lead and there are ones that are not.

If you look at this concept in the context of a standard distribution curve, what it really says is we should be concerned about is exactly what is the middle ground. How well equipped, how well trained and how well lead is the average fire department going on the average emergency on the average day?

One of the first observations that I drew by looking at the IAFC's recently published information on near misses was the fact that one of the most significant contributing factor to a near miss were decisions made by individuals. Well – duh! I wonder how long it is going to take for us to figure out that what makes for unsafe conditions are people doing really unsafe things thinking they are going to get away with it.

The context for all this discussion I would like to link back to the goals of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. We do want everybody to go home. We want everybody who enters this business to retire from it. We don't need to go to any more funerals. We don't need to lament the fact that we have lost ""another one of our own". I have no doubt that we will continue to lose people. I would submit to you that in those fire departments that have a high degree of confidence that they are properly equipped, properly trained, properly lead, the probability of that happening is going to be very remote.

You know who you are!