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Ronny J. Coleman

Modern Myths About Leadership

This month's column is going to start off with a test. Tonight, tomorrow or sometime in the near future sit down with a friend or member of your family and ask them some questions: "Name three favorite sports heroes." The next question is similar: "Name three famous aviators." Next ask them to name three famous lawmen. Now for the \$64,000 question - "Name three famous firefighters."

I am specifically talking about them giving you a name that would emerge from their point of view as a person who is an average citizen, not a firefighter. Granted, if the person you picked was somebody who is in the fire profession they might have a few names that would roll right out. They might include Allan Brunacini, Bob Grant, and Keith Klinger. Maybe a few fire historians would recall James Gulick, James Braidwood or Sire Eyre Massey-Shaw. There might even be a smart aleck who will recall Smoky Stover, the cartoon fire chief of the 1950's.

The point here is quite simple. Do we really have any legends in the fire service that are known outside of our profession? In recent discussions about the image of the fire service, I am amazed to note that many fire departments believe that we have an excellent public image, yet most of the role models that are being utilized as examples of the fire service are fabrications of a writer in Hollywood or a cartoonist. For example, I recently engaged in this little discussion with a group of individuals and was amazed to find the leading names that emerged from the discussion were the two firefighters Randy Mantooth and Kevin Tighe who were in the television series, "Emergency." A few old timers were able to recall a movie called "Rescue 8" that was popular in the early 1950's; beyond that, no one name emerged.

Personally, I really don't believe that Wyatt Earp looked like Hugh O'Brien. I doubt very seriously that Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid looked like the two actors who cavorted across our movie screens a few years back. Yet, the images of outlaws and good guys have become legends in the minds of many people. In the context of the fire service, the legends tend to surround the events rather than the persons involved.

If I gave the test that we were using earlier to a group of individuals and said, "Name three big fires," there's a whole bunch of names that would come forth. These might include the great Chicago fire, the Iroquois theater fire, and the Triangle Shirtwaist fire. In most of our own career lifetimes the Interstate Bank building and the Fires of Yellowstone might qualify as legendary fires.

Legends, generally speaking, consist of myths. But, in almost all cases, they are also based on some kernel of truth. A classic example was the unicorn. From contemporary literature we see that the unicorn was suppose to be mystical and had some special attributes. It has been proposed that the unicorn probably came from a sailor's description of the narwhale from the Northern Sea. The



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narwhales spiraling horn, combined with a little bit of fantasy created by a sailor attempting to spin a yarn could have been the start of the myth.

Legends have their place in the imagery of professions. We don't have very many of them in the fire service. We don't have our Marshal Dillons, Jimmy Doolittles, our Dick Tracy, or our Babe Ruth.

However, the fire service does have legacies. Legacies are different than legends. A legacy is what an individual contributes and leaves long after they are gone. Legacies are the foundation of beliefs, traditions and the heritage of organizations. Usually they are founded on some fundamental event or undertaking of an individual that is accepted and becomes part of the tradition of the fire service. Many of you have probably heard the classic statement about the fire service being 200 years of tradition unhampered by progress. How can anyone possibly believe that if they have examined the number of changes that the fire profession has gone through just in the last 50 years? Have we changed a lot in the last 50 years? You bet!

There are actually individuals alive today who can share with us the personal experience of operating steam powered pumping apparatus and having driven horses to the scene of emergencies. The legacy of the fire service is not stilted and structured. Over the years, the fire service has seen numerous changes. In relationship to many aspects of local government, the fire service has gone through more major modifications than many of the other so-called public services. We have gone through numerous eras of change. There was the major transition from totally volunteer to the development of paid fire forces in the late 1880's. There was the transition from the manpowered fire apparatus to the steamer. Then there was the transition from the horse drawn steamer to automotive apparatus. And, probably the most significant change occurred when there was a major transition in code enforcement as fire prevention began to emerge from the catastrophes of the early 1920's.

Granted, there are some problems with each of these eras. In almost all cases, they take between 20 and 30 years to occur. Most of us have a fire service career that ranges between 25 and 35 years. This means that unlike many other aspects of our society, most of us only have the ability to take a snapshot of our profession as we proceed along our career path.

Doctors, for example, are using some of the most intense technology available to the human race today. Yet, they all start off their medical career by repeating a Hippocratic Oath. This is a fundamental belief that goes back several thousands of years. Yet, repeating this ancient oath doesn't prevent a doctor from using the most modern and up-to-date technology that is available. Their roots are far, far in the past but they live in the present. Yet, the fire service sometimes accepts the idea that the past as begins the day they go to work and that the future is the day that they retire.



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Specific Legacies are actually left as a direct result of the activities of various individuals who pursue things along those career paths. For example, there are names that emerge from the history of the fire service that are quite important. Daniel Hayes is credited with being the individual who invented the first aerial apparatus. Benjamin Franklin was supposedly the first American fire chief. The concept of consolidated fire protection was the legacy of Chief Keith Klinger of Los Angeles County.

As we were talking earlier about the concept of legends, there is one thing that is pertinent to the development of a legend. It must be something that begins to take on a proportion larger than life. Legacies left by individuals have the potential of becoming legends. Some of you who read this column have an opportunity to become that in your own environment.

A truism, however, are those legends do not exist in vacuums. One must exercise leadership and possess a certain degree of visibility or nothing will ever change. This is where the role of an individual comes in. This is where the future of the fire service is assured; when an individual decides to take action and to pursue a position that, once it is achieved, will live on long after their careers are terminated. This aspect of leadership has 3 distinctively different dimensions. The first of these is style, second is vision, and the third is commitment to action. In other words, leadership abhors mediocrity. The only way that an individual makes a contribution is if they are pursuing something that is different than everyone else. Style means that a person has a way of communicating, motivating or building a consensus among a fellowship to achieve a specific objective.

Vision, the dimension of leadership that is most often misunderstood, is based on goals. In actuality, there are two kinds of visions that leaders often devise. The first of these is a positive image such as changing the world for a better place to live. The second is the vision to drive people to pursue an individual agenda. The restriction or inhibition of things in our lives, such as the force that can drive military dictators to power, is an example of negative vision.

Most importantly, vision is a function of principles. The vast majority of individuals who have emerged in leadership roles in most organizations have done so based on a desire to accomplish something that is ethically and morally correct. Granted, there are leaders who do arrive at a leadership position using the antithesis of these values. Yet, most of them tend to be swept aside by the currents of history.

The last aspect is commitment to action. There is an old saying about this - "Something terrible happens without commitment; nothing." The commitment to action basically means that an individual has the energy, the strength, and the drive to make their dreams come true. For example, very few leaders are really captives of the 40-hour workweek. Most individuals who aspire to accomplish something of significance are not clock-watchers. That doesn't mean they are total workaholics; instead it means that they are on 24 hours a day with regard to what it is they are trying to accomplish.



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If we really believe that we are here to make a difference then we must apply ourselves at all times in the three areas of developing our style, having a vision, and taking action upon it. Because without that type of activity, we, in fact, will leave no legacy. And, most individuals have a very strong desire to have something left as a reminder to society or to their profession that they were there. I once discussed this with a person in the fire service who has now passed on and I asked him why he felt so strongly about certain issues; specifically, why he spent so much time writing on those specific issues. His answer was relatively straightforward; "I want it to be that in the future every time this particular issue is discussed my name will be associated with it."

There is no guarantee that because a person exercises leadership and makes a contribution that they will become legends in their own time. Sometimes, because of the emphasis that is placed upon the authority and power that generates around a person in a leadership role, the whole concept of becoming a legend becomes the goal itself. As one of my friends has quoted to me, another individual was "a legend in his own mind."

While none of us are absolutely guaranteed we will have our name inscribed on monuments or become a household word, most of us would like to feel that when we leave our profession we have left something too. It's a form of payback. A form of returning something to an industry that has given you so much.

What that contribution may be or can be is entirely up to you.