



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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New Kid on the Block

If you were born and raised in your own neighborhood, you are lucky. You probably had an opportunity to gain friends at an early age and go through many of life's trials and tribulations together. On the other hand, if you ever had to move from one neighborhood or city to another you probably experienced the trauma of having to make new friends and establish new relationships. In retrospect, as adults there are many things we would have probably done differently if we would have just had the insight and maturity at a young age.

The counterpart to this experience in this day and age is entering a fire organization as the new fire chief. Specifically, this column describes a fire chief who moved from one organization to another without having had the opportunity to experience the maturation process inside of a fire department. Granted there is still a transition for a fire chief who has been promoted from within the ranks, but the pathway to establishing relationships in a new department has different obstacles.

One of the first things a new chief officer has to recognize is every organization has its own corporate culture. The Hartford Business Review recently published an article exploring a corporate culture. All organizations have them. And, regardless of the technical expertise, political savvy or personality traits of the individual fire chief, one has to deal with the corporate culture. It cannot be ignored. It cannot change overnight. And it will not go away merely because of a change in top-level administration.

Ordinarily this column deals with positive aspects of the fire chief's role. This column will depart slightly from that point of view, focusing on some "don'ts" that a fire chief should avoid in integrating him or herself within the new corporate culture. Obviously there are some corollaries to these don'ts, but I believe it's useful to look at them in a negative fashion because they have negative implications if violated.

The ground rules of integration into a corporate culture are:

- Don't make assumptions
- Don't make promises
- Don't make threats
- Don't respond to rumors
- Don't speak about the natives until you know the taboos

Assumptions can get you into deep trouble very quickly in a corporate culture. Assuming you know why things are the way they are or assuming you know how things got to be that way, are often superficial, inadequate ways to prepare you for establishing strong relationships in an organization. Many a chief officer has been derailed in his first couple of months in an organization by assuming the fire



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department was incompetent prior to his arrival. Or maybe all the fire department was looking for was a firm hand to lead them out of the wilderness. In most cases fire organizations have both strengths and weaknesses. The corporate culture that exists is based on the perceptions that grow out of those strengths and weaknesses.

It is OK to draw conclusions about what you believe is going on in the organization from observation. However, you can get into difficulty if you base decisions on your own assessment of the situation. It's a good idea – especially if the organization has long-tenured employees – to spend a considerable amount of time getting the historical perspective on the organization. This does not mean you have to accept things the way they are. You may still have strong value judgments regarding specific activity in an organization.

I recall one incident when a fire chief was attempting to evaluate his new department's incident command system (ICS). The lack of an adequate system in the organization had gotten his immediate attention. His assumption was that the department was ill informed and not prepared to use ICS. Without discussing it with the staff, he issued a new operating procedure to the organization that was merely a photocopy of the operational procedure from his previous fire department.

Unknown to the chief, there were several highly qualified individuals within the department who served as instructors in incident command. For years they had been lobbying the previous administration to adopt the ICS and had been systematically prevented from doing so. In several cases the officers were using a mini-version of ICS in the handling of their own emergencies, but the chief had never listened to the radio traffic nor had he been involved in fireground operations.

One might assume issuing the standard operating procedure that embraced ICS would be greeted with enthusiasm in the organization. On the contrary, individuals who had the expertise had learned a specific type of command system which was based on their department's needs and was simplified. The agency was smaller than the one the chief had transferred from and had fewer demands for sophisticated elements of the ICS. The new standard procedure had a negative, not positive effect. Resistance was rampant, even among the individuals who supported the concept of ICS. The reason: it was force-fed instead of cultivated into the organization.

The second area of derailing a chief executive is in the field of making promises. When one enters a new organization, it is often a time for employees to purge themselves of frustrations, anxieties, ill feeling toward previous administrations or an opportunity to get even with one of their peers or subordinates. The new chief officer has to be extremely careful to not make promises during the initial phases of transition. There are several reasons why this is a liability.



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First, you may promise something you can't deliver. Second, you may promise to deliver something that runs contradictory to the interest of other people in the organization and in the process, polarize the department. Even the most meaningless or trivial of promises can have tremendous effects if unfulfilled in the minds of the corporate mentality.

Another example of this was a chief officer who, during the selection process, visited the fire station and told the firefighters that if he were selected chief he would resolve many of their personnel issues. In an attempt to gain favor of the labor group, the new chief failed to realize their memory was far longer than the coffee break. Shortly after his appointment, he was approached by the president of the firefighter association and asked when he would deliver the promised benefits. In an attempt to forestall the inevitable he deferred and asked for time to do his homework. When the time had elapsed, a return visit of the president of the association was turned away by the chief's admission that he had not succeeded in acquiring these benefits and it was now the fault of his superior.

It doesn't take long for someone to figure out that this person is soon going to have difficulties with both his subordinates and his superior. Promises are a form of verbal contract that builds expectations in individuals and in organizations. When entering a new corporate culture one has to be concerned about the conditions in that organization, but to make an open statement about the immediate resolution of any specific circumstance is almost suicidal.

The third issue is one of making threats. One might think a threat is exactly the opposite of a promise. A promise is a contract to deliver. A threat is an action to prevent. This is especially dangerous to the new chief officer if the organization has any degree of polarity. Choosing sides from the outset of appointment can drive an irretrievable wedge in the organization. There is a fine line between choosing a direction for an organization and threatening the safety and security of individuals within it.

Any student of Maslow's hierarchy of needs realizes most organizations tend to function at the social level and the number of individuals within that organization gain tenure. The new chief officer who makes a statement regarding the elimination of specific practices, changing the direction of major programs or introducing restructuring of the social fabric of an organization threatens the very livelihoods and pecking order of the corporate culture.

Therefore, once threats have been introduced into an organization, the individuals would drop to the next level in Maslow's hierarchy – the safety and security level. Instead of making the resolution of issues easier it actually coalesces the organization and its members into pockets of resistance.

Rumor mongering is usually rampant when a new administrator comes in from the outside. If you review the previous three abominations of assumption, promise and threat, it leads almost naturally to the recommendation to avoid reacting to rumors. For in many cases rumors are nothing more than the



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organization's manifestation of certain individuals' assumptions, promises and threats regarding you. Attempting to dispel those rumors – especially on an individual basis – creates the perception of protesting too much. Instead of removing the rumor it often lends credibility to them for the amount of time and attention they attract on your part.

In my own case, I have moved in the command structure of three separate fire departments. In providing administration direction to one department, I was involved in the development of certain programs and activities that fit the needs of that organization but were not necessarily appropriate for my next assignment. Nonetheless, upon assuming the new command I was greeted by numerous rumors about change to be introduced into the new department that was carry-overs from the old.

Obviously most of us carry with us the wisdom of our experience in our previous jobs and in many cases would like to bring along practices, policies and procedures. To protest too loudly regarding the fact that you are going to not do something diminishes your ability to use that organization transfer may be appropriate. If you attempt to dispel the rumor by saying that you won't be doing something and then shortly thereafter introduce some practice that has been transferred from your previous organization, it only lends fuel to the fire. "See, I told you things were going to be that way!"

The last rule of don'ts centers on faux pas. When you enter a new organization you have no idea who has a relationship with whom. The typical stranger walking down the street may well be the sister or brother of a superior or subordinate. Therefore, you're well advised to not make any statement openly about the attitude, behavior, activities or personalities of anybody until you determine the background of the person to which you are talking.

One of the classic examples in my memory is a chief officer who had decided to attend several council meetings prior to accepting an appointment as a fire chief. During the council meeting one particular council member made several statements offensive to the fire chief. He turned to the individual sitting next to him and made several very critical remarks about the councilman's attitude.

Several weeks after he received his appointment, he was invited to participate in a chamber of commerce mixer. Imagine his chagrin to discover the lady who had been sitting in front of him during the council meeting was the wife of the councilman in question. Stories of this type are common. By allowing yourself to become entangled in critical dialogues at the outset, you may burn some bridges before you ever get the chance to cross them.

All of the rules mentioned above have some potential in each new chief officer's transition. The degree to which you avoid the pitfalls often depends on your awareness of their existence. The process of being acclimatized into an organization is one similar to getting into a hot bathtub. It is far best to put your toe in the water and test the temperature before leaping bodily into what may be "hot water."



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The process of acclimatization works. Mankind has found ways of surviving the depths of the Antarctic and the scorched deserts of the Sahara. Fire chiefs can learn how to survive organizations reluctant to accept them, as well as organizations that receive them with open arms.