



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Not-So Secret Society

There is a serious problem with most secrets. If more than one person knows about a secret it is likely to become common knowledge faster than the speed of summer lightning. If two people share a secret and have a strong sense of loyalty to one another, then some secrets remain secure for a long time. But, once a third party knows about a secret, the probability of its exposure to others and its reproduction and distribution increases exponentially.

If you happen to be someone that is trying to preserve a secret, it's a pretty good idea to keep it to yourself. If you don't want to be blamed for it being leaked never tell anyone else. Benjamin Franklin once advised that if you wished to keep a secret among three people, two of them should be dead. If you do want to share a secret, be aware that you have now lost control of the situation. You may be the one that suffers the consequence of its revelation to others. You have no control once you tell someone else about it

The significance of this phenomenon is that our current world of communication technology seems to be based on the idea that there are no secrets left in life. No, not at all. I am referring to two specific things. The first is the ubiquitous ability to capture images of events as they occur and the second is the equally pervasive impact of social media to transmit those images to anyone in the world within micro-seconds.

I'm not sure who actually pulled off the very first revelation of a secret that someone would have liked to have kept under wraps. However, I can point to one specific event that serves as a salient event for those in public safety; the Rodney King incident. Is there a single soul in the whole world who has not seen that video tape? At one point you could hardly turn on the TV without being a witness to the tragedy as it was repeated over and over again. It was a form of torment by technology.

More importantly, the possibility that something a person does can be captured and distributed on the internet is no longer a remotely possible event.

There are a couple of reasons why this continuously occurs. The first is the presence of cellular phones that can capture images, including video. The second is the presence of surveillance cameras that are so widely distributed today as to be classified as omnipresent. Then, of course, the whole concept of social media offers a portal to the outside world for any image captured by these devices.

My reason for writing this column is not just based on the existence of this reality. It is an irrefutable fact that this technology exists. What is more important is that there are many people who choose to use them without any sense of the impact of these images on both reputation of our specific profession and the privacy of those we serve in the kind of world we work in.. My reason for highlighting the



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subject is to focus on the need that fire departments have to recognize this situation in two different ways. The first is to pay attention to what you are doing when there are scenarios that play out that could be embarrassing to us. And, I am not just talking about hi-jinks or personal fun that borders on aberrant behavior in the firehouse. I am talking about the fact that a fire department's image can be scrutinized for legal reasons and this technology is part of the brave new world.

I recently reviewed video tape that involved a fire apparatus that ran a red light and caused a collision. The surveillance video provides the lawyer in this case with a great deal of detail that in the past would have to be reconstructed. When images are on video the facts are less ambiguous and certainly subject to measurement and more specific forensic interpretation than what we have seen in the past.

My second reason is based on a scenario that was recently discussed fairly widely on fire service blogs. It involved the distribution of photos taken by an emergency service worker that were embarrassing to the patient and/or victim of the incident and the family of that person. Without elaborating on the legal aspects of these two scenarios, the issue is one that every chief officer should be concerned about as you are setting here in the comfort of reading this monthly column.

I would be willing to bet you that scenarios are actually playing themselves out in the field right now that parallel example #1. Further, I would bet on the fact that someone out there is taking pictures, or texting information that could backfire on the department somewhere tonight.

Both of these can, and likely will continue, to occur. What are you going to do about it?

As stated earlier, this is not a column on legal issues. Therefore, I am not going to suggest that you might want to write up some form of draconian SOP. I will leave the legal briefing to those with a JD after their name.

Instead, I am going to suggest that every organization spend some staff time discussing the following items sometime in the future. They are:

1. Discussion of the exposure of the department to be documented by security cameras that are designed to protect buildings or to control traffic and security issues. You are on candid camera more than you possible know; on fires, on medical aids, even going to the grocery store.
2. Discussion of exposure the department has to documentation by third party observers at the scene of operations, accompanied by discussion of what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior at the scene of emergencies. Those people with those phones may not be calling their mothers and friends.
3. Discussion of protecting privacy of individuals who are under medical control or are being handled by fire suppression personnel.



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One should be recognize that there is a positive side of this story too. Imagine what it could do to enhance a department's reputation to have a dramatic rescue being on tape so that it can be reproduced for training purposes. That has happened already. Catching a department doing what is right certainly could be positive. The essence of this column is that all of these "ataboys" can go south by just a few "aww crapppps." Do what you can to create the former and to minimize the latter.