



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Officer Development

There are two types of officers in the fire service, the “yes” types and the “know” types. Fire chiefs have to do everything in their power to avoid promoting the former to a key position in the organization. A “yes” type will allow a fire department to drift as far off course as crisis management will allow. To the contrary, fire chiefs need to surround themselves with as many “know” types as can be found.

There are numerous problems in finding “know” types to serve as officers. Unfortunately, the fire service’s testing and promotional procedures really do not evaluate a person’s potential to contribute something new to a position after a promotion. This is especially true as officers move up in the hierarchy. The closer they come to the chief officer’s position, the more they are depended upon for their creativity and imagination in guiding the organization. Technical skills become less important than people skills. Yet the tests and measurements the fire service uses for promoting people usually only measure technical skill.

Appointing officers to key staff positions, such as fire marshal, operations officer or deputy chief, is more important to the destiny of the organization than it is to the destiny of the individuals. The individuals might get the new rank, better status or better pay. However, the department might or might not get the leadership it needs.

This problem sometimes is manifested in a behavioral pattern called the IGM Syndrome. IGM stands for “I Got Mine!” This syndrome often occurs when people get promotions and once in the higher positions, start building up defense mechanisms to assure that the positions remain secure and unchanged. This can lead officers into trying to please their superiors so much that they become “yes” types. That can lead to alienation between the officers and their subordinates. Both problems are undesirable for the fire service.

Now, why belabor this point? The answer is both simple and complex. The simple reason is that the fire service is in trouble now because of a lack of creative and imaginative leadership. If we do not “get our act together” quickly, there is a possibility that the changes confronting the fire service in the next decade will destroy the fire service as we know it. There are those who do not believe that statement, but it can be substantiated by a review of current events. Witness the effects of Proposition 13 on fire department funding in California, the revival studies of police-fire consolidation, and the continued erosion of the fire service’s image and credibility. The fire service of today is different from the fire service of 25 years ago. The fire service 25 years in the future also will be different. How different it will be depends upon the caliber and the roles assumed by today’s crop of middle-and upper-level managers.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

For years, the fire service has been doing research and development on fires and firefighting. A brief review of research bibliographies will demonstrate quickly that we are learning more and more about the country's fire problems. However, we know less than we should about the people charged with the responsibility to resolve the problem. Very few scientifically valid studies or projects have been funded to evaluate, measure and quantify the leadership qualities needed in key staff officers. This field of research is almost unexplored.

That is not to say that there is no training available. The last few years have seen the initiation of numerous courses on leadership management and administration. However, there is still a dearth of information on the people who are using these techniques. Officers can be trained and can function as good managers, but still be poor leaders. Officers can be introduced to all of the elements of leadership and still not be able to exercise them because they lack the skills of good management. It is actually very rare to find someone who is both a good manager and a good leader.

The bottom line is this: we need to know more about what qualities make an individual a successful officer, a successful leader, a successful manager, and we need to use that data to formulate organizations that are more aware, more aggressive and more alert to the opportunities to enhance the progression of fire protection in the community. Right now, most of the training and educational opportunities for fire officers are directed at combat roles or emphasize the manipulation of resources, the "how to's" instead of the "why's" and "why not's." We tend to emphasize technical skills that are external to the person's sense of ethics and personal philosophies. We actually know very little about measuring the motives and internal feeling of our officers.

This problem can be seen in at least one perspective when one evaluates the presence, in the fire service, of two desirable qualities of leaders in changing environments. Probably these are two of the most important qualities of leaders in business and industry. They are self-awareness (having an inventory of one's own personal strengths and weaknesses) and professional curiosity (the creation or synthesis of new approaches to old problems). In the fire service, these skills are somewhat neglected, if not actually discriminated against, at upper levels.

There are several new approaches now being made available to help fire officers discover more about themselves in both of these areas. While each of these approaches also has its strengths and weaknesses, they share a focus on people and their motives, rather than on the exercise of technical skills.

For example, a few months ago a new fire officer course, called the STAFF-P, was formulated. This acronym stands for "Staff Technology and the Formulation of Fire Protection." This course is different from most because it focuses upon individual and group behavior while resolving problems or



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

participating in-group decision-making. During this course, several instruments are used to evaluate the students' personal traits such as leadership style, coping mechanisms, attitudes, ethics, and philosophy.

These instruments were used to raise the students' levels of awareness about themselves and about their perceptions and prejudices toward those they worked with or for. Recognizing that there are differences in individual approaches to the job of functioning as a staff officer, the STAFF-P course emphasizes the need for people with different approaches to work on personal communications skills, not just on the development of a formalized organizational hierarchy.

The instruments used in STAFF-P are the following: LIFO ("Life Orientations"), FIRO-B (an instrument used originally to evaluate the compatibility of submarine crew candidates) and COPE (an instrument designed to measure a person's mechanism for coping with problems in failure). Lastly, a set of exercises entitled "Code of Conduct" and "Profiles for Performance" is used. The LIFO and LIFO-AP instruments are used to help candidates evaluate basic orientation and goals in life. The instrument was developed by Stuart Atkins, Incorporated, of Los Angeles. Several similar instruments are available from other sources. Essentially, these instruments help candidates to categorize their leadership styles in two different contexts. The first is how they function under normal conditions; the second, how they function under stress.

The LIFO system has four basic styles. They are the Supporting-Giving, Conserving-Holding, Control Taking and Adaptive Dealing styles. Actually, all of us have elements of all four styles. The instrument is used to evaluate the different levels and times we use these styles. LIFO training focuses on the individual and on how he or she interacts as part of the team.

In the STAFF-P course these instruments are used to develop a data bank for the various levels of these styles as they are present in the officer ranks going to the school.

The second instrument used in the STAFF-P is called FIRO-B. This instrument originally was developed to measure three different "dimensions" of affection, control and inclusion. These dimensions were measured on two levels: the expressed level, or how a person outwardly exhibits or demonstrates these dimensions and the wished for level, or how a person inwardly feels a need for these dimensions. FIRO-B tests were used to compare and contrast the officer's feeling in these areas. The data, once again, is being collected to establish some comparative data about fire officer leadership styles.

In actuality, one could say STAFF-P is just another approach to training fire officers in performing technical skills as a staff officer. The primary distinction in this course is that it is developing information on the motivation and personal characteristics of successful fire officers. Hopefully, this data will be useful at a later date in helping identify those individuals more qualified to assume leadership roles in the fire service.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The function of our profession will be dependent upon the strengths of our next generation of fire chiefs. It certainly will not be a job for the faint-hearted or those who lack conviction. It will be an arena for those who thrive on challenge and who look forward to helping shape the environment in which the fire service exists. As mentioned earlier, the fire service needs more “know” types. In order to find them, the fire service needs to know more about its personnel, what makes them tick and what makes them good at what they do. Hopefully, there will be more research in this area in the coming years.