



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

On the Other Hand

No one likes to lose an argument. It is frustrating. It is irritating. At its worst, it's depressing and demotivating. Welcome to the wonderful world of governmental decision making. You probably already know you are going to win some of the arguments and you are going to lose some. It's part of the process.

But let's get specific. Have you ever made a really good argument about a position you are advocating and then heard an adversary retort by stating "on the other hand"? This usually followed with a series of counter points that contradict every point you just made. Yes, it is enough to make you angry at times.

A recent example of how ludicrous this contradiction can be in the fire service was revealed to me in only one hour. At breakfast I read an editorial in the local newspaper attacking a local fire department for being so cheeky as to suggest a special fee to respond to automobile accidents. The newspaper was taking the perspective that that is what tax dollars are for and there should be no charges assessed for this specific type of emergency. The fire department had recommended this fee based on a budget gap that is likely to exist because of shrinking financial resources. The article should not surprise too many people for it has been recognized ever since Proposition 13 here in California that some services may justify an alternative financial reimbursement scheme. EMS services are also another target for reimbursement.

The very first email I opened on my computer later that morning was an article where a fire chief was being roasted over the coals by an elected government official for his proposing an "out of control" budget. The chief was being attacked in a very public setting for submitting a budget that was not so much out of shape as it was a lot larger than the budget had been ten years earlier. Yes, that is what he was being assaulted over, the difference between a budget of ten years ago and his budget today.

What is wrong with these two pictures? From my perspective politicians cannot have it both ways. And, chiefs neither can you. What I mean by both ways is you cannot run a fire department without money and the money has to come from somewhere. It is the horns of dilemma that are confronting fire departments all over the United States today.

Getting back to the opening of this column, a fire chief has to be able to argue their position in an articulate, comprehensive way. City councils and boards of supervisors have to make decisions on how to spend the public's money. What's it gonna be? Which perspective is going to prevail? Who is the winner and who is the loser? When a fire chief is battered for proposing an alternative funding source



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and a city council is reluctant to take action to provide adequate funding there cannot help but be robust conflict.

I don't know of a single competent and capable fire chief who doesn't want to provide the best level of service they can. As a result, these chiefs normally approach the budget process with as many good ideas they can come up with to make improvements in service delivery. Chiefs are not programmed to dismantle fire departments. They are expected to make recommendations about how to get the job done as effectively and efficiently as possible.

But, on the other hand....who approves the budget to accomplish these improvements? The answer; politicians, elected officials are who are responsible for validating the question of whether or not the community can afford what is being suggested. This raises the question of who is at fault for runaway costs and deficient funds. Is it the fire chief or the elected official?

Does the fire chief deserve criticism for suggesting an alternative funding source? Does the fire chief deserve the blame for a budget that is primarily made up of personnel costs, over which the chief has no control? These two scenarios I described at the beginning of this column cry out for an answer to these questions. On which hand should we reach out to stop the criticism and start focusing on solutions?

Right now it's a game that goes back and forth. Blame the chief. Blame the politician. Blame the department. Blame the labor group. Blame anyone that makes noise about what is being recommended. Blame anyone who increases the budget. Or, blame everyone that oversees budget reductions in tight economic times. These are the two hands that can be argued back and forth.

This leaves us with a curious phenomenon. If both sides have a point; who is right; more importantly, who is wrong? I think this is the wrong question.

The real question is; who is responsible to make recommendations for establishing the level of service in the community and who is responsible for allocating the funds to set the level of service in the community? The answer to question one is the fire chief. The answer to question two is the elected body that is responsible for the jurisdiction being protected. Simple. Straightforward. Lastly, appropriate.

The role of the fire chief is to propose. The role of the elected body is to decide if the community can afford it. Two roles. Two responsibilities. Two perspectives.

The calculus is very simple. Fire stations, fire apparatus, staffing, goals and objectives and programs have to be established and maintained. The fire chief's job is to develop a plan to deliver these elements. And, further recommend the funds to balance the budget. The city council has a dual role in



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that they not only fund the department but they oversee all the human resources decisions that impact the bottom line on providing that protection. They grant the salaries. They provide the benefits. They impose taxes. They determine the fees. They are the stewards of the treasury. Their job is to fund the plan.

Where does this leave us in terms of this discussion? Let's put it into two contexts. If we go back and look at the two scenarios mentioned earlier, there is a great deal of unfairness being perpetrated. In today's economy authorities having jurisdiction have some tough decisions to make. No, let's make that, really tough decisions. Some conditions out there are literally devastating to consider. But, let's look again at roles and expectations. Chief, your job is to have a plan. You must know more about what is at stake than anyone else. You must know the risk and be able to articulate it. You must know all the numbers. Be prepared to be the expert on everything on the table.

Elected official, your job is to make the decisions that the chief will have to implement. Your job is to know the revenue stream. You should know the public's needs. You need to be ready to make the hard decisions and be prepared to set the communities priorities without making the fire chief be the scapegoat.

Both parties really need to own these images. An elected official who has overseen decades of labor negotiations that have resulted in increased personnel costs, who blame the fire chief for the cost of fire protection is being disingenuous to a fault. A fire chief who goes into the budget battle without having all of the facts readily available and doesn't have the ability to get him into the public record is going to continually be taken advantage of.

On the other hand, I might be wrong.