



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

THE 100-DAY WAR

So, you got the job. You took the tests, survived the interview, and now you've accepted the position of fire chief. Now what? Be chief, right?

Well, it's not always that simple. Sometimes the real test begins after you've accepted the position. The term *trial by fire* has a certain significance after you pin on the badge.

The real test is not a paper-and-pencil examination, but rather a test of credibility. The organization is wondering. Are you the right person for the job? Will you be accepted by the corporate structure?

A lot of clichés come to mind during the first few weeks of a fire chief's tenure. For instance, "It's better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than open it and remove all doubt" has some merit. The first two to three months on the job are fraught with a number of booby traps.

A friend of mine, who became a new chief about the same time I took over a new department, coined a term for it. He called this period the *100-day war*. He didn't mean warfare in the sense of going into battle with the troops, but rather as a period when you make or break your image in the organization.

This 100-day war is a cold war, a war of wits, negotiation, and diplomacy. It is a critical period in the development of new relationships as fire chief.

While every new chief's experiences are unique, they do seem to follow a general pattern, whether the chief is brought in from outside the organization or is promoted from within. The only difference is that the booby traps are better hidden from the outsider.

For example, early on you can expect to be presented for resolution a list of all the perceived inequities committed by the previous administration. The more pent up the perceived inequity, the more rapidly you will be expected to provide a "reasonable and expeditious" solution. You may be tempted to provide that answer – it can ingratiate you with the grievants. It can also earn you a few pluses as a decision maker ... maybe.

But remember this admonition: Behind every complex problem there is a simple answer, and it's probably wrong.

The next booby trap is the department confidante. When you are the new kid on the block, there is always someone in the organization who wants to serve as your confidante and the organization's version of the "pipeline." They will provide you with inside information and they expect you to reciprocate. In exchange for the local gossip, they want to know what you really intend to do.

Another admonition: He who comes claiming to be your best friend today won't be when the going gets rough.



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The third booby trap is one you may unwittingly set for yourself. As you look over the new organization, you immediately recognize ways of doing things that are different from where you came from. Beware of the temptation to engage in what I call “yustas.” This is the practice of telling your new staff how things “yusta be done” back in Kokomo or Timbuktu, or wherever you came from. Just remember, the way things are done anywhere is based on what works there.

This brings to mind another cliché, a variation on the square-peg-in-round-hole theme: Pounding square pegs in round holes wrecks both the peg and the hole. Applying brute force to make something fit is traumatic for both objects. The same with organizations. What worked where you came from may work in the new place, but only after it has been properly evaluated in the new context.

As a young boy, I worked with my grandfather in setting up some beehives. He showed me the technique for introducing a new queen bee into an existing hive. If the new queen was unceremoniously dumped on the bees in the hive, they would get angry and kill her, he explained. So he put the queen bee in a wax shell and placed it on the entrance to the hive. The bees began busily to eat their way through the wax. However, this took time. During the process of removing the wax from the entrance, the workers became accustomed to the new queen’s presence. When they were finally able to enter the chamber, they had accepted her.

Now I am not suggesting that fire chiefs are like queen bees. My reason for telling this story is to stress the importance of an adjustment period. The reason the bees accepted the new order was because they had time to adjust. During the interval the workers were chewing through the wax shell, the queen was undoubtedly communicating with them. The encounter then became less threatening.

But enough of the beehive. Back to the fire station. If you are fortunate enough to be named a new chief, you will be well advised to consider a similar process of adjustment. The ground rules are relatively simple. They are as follows:

- Issue a directive immediately upon appointment that assures all members of the department that all practices and procedures already in place will continue to remain so until you advise further.
- Start a notebook of observations of what you see, hear, and read that is pertinent to your understanding of how the organization currently functions. This is a form of “honeymoon” diary.
- Conduct interviews of the organizational staff from the top down. Be especially careful to interview those who perceive to be troublemakers in the organization as well as those you think will be supportive of your administration. Listen twice as much as you talk. Look for trends and patterns.
- Remember the old adage, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Don’t change anything that you don’t absolutely have to. More often than not, the things that can be changed quickly often come back as more complex problems later. Make sure you thoroughly analyze and justify every change you introduce.
- Introduce concepts to your staff as ideas and practices you truly believe in rather than as



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policies and procedures brought along from previous employment. Help them access your network and the information sources that led you to embrace and use these concepts in previous assignments.

Of course, there is a corollary to these recommendations. Mao Tse Tung had a saying that is the exact opposite of my suggestions. He said, "If you must do evil, do it all at once." A new fire chief could take this to mean, if you must make changes, make them all at once and get it over with; start your administration by cleaning house. Chances are, however, the results will be more warlike than you anticipated.

As a new chief, you are building something, not tearing it down. The process suggested in this column will not assure you success in your regime as chief. All it will do is give you a reasonable amount of time to prepare a game plan. It will be a difficult time, no matter what.

There will be those who will be disappointed because you are not rectifying old ills. Others will be disappointed because you are not meeting their expectations as a bringer of change.

The payoff begins when you are able to bring about changes that will last and are meaningful to the organization. Removing the causes of grievances takes more time than merely adjudicating them. The 100-day war is a guerrilla action, not trench warfare. It is a period for gathering combat intelligence, not body counts.

If, during those crucial first three months, you use the time to implement the above suggestions, the chances of your having a solid footing in the organization will increase. After all, you have nothing to lose but the war.

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