



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Passing the Baton

When I was in junior high school, I had participated as a member of a 440 yard relay team. If you are a follower of track that probably doesn't need much more of an explanation. If you are not a follower of track and field, it might require a little bit of clarification. A relay team consists of four individuals each of whom runs approximately 25 percent of the lap. There is a person who starts. There are two people in the middle and there is a person who has the final lap. As teams are lined up at the starting line, each team has a baton. The baton must be handed off to the next person in order for that second person to begin their lane. The third follows similar fashion and of course the last person in line must have that baton in their clutches as they cross the finish line.

To cover any given distance, a relay team usually does it pretty quickly because everybody only has to give their burst of energy for the first 125 – 130 yards or so. That is opposed to one person running the same thing. The advantage of a relay team is that you can build on the strengths of the group by how you position the runners. If you want to take an early lead, you put your fastest guy first. If you want to put a lot of kick into the final stretch, you put your fastest runner fourth.

A picture came into my mind recently as we were discussing various aspects of succession planning. One individual in a conversation said "one of the problems that I am facing is that nobody wants to take over after I am gone".

In other words, he has the baton but has no one to hand it to. Does he really keep on running or does he toss the baton on the desktop, walk out the door, close it and not worry about the organization after he has left?

This is a serious discussion in many fire organizations today. There are more and more fire departments having to face up to the fact that nobody has been adequately prepared to take over when the incumbent walks away. Is this a new phenomenon or is it merely a more highly focused one in today's society because of other issues?

I raise that question because I can recall many years ago, individuals openly stating that they were never going to be a fire chief because they were perfectly happy staying where they were. I can remember hearing comments like that from firefighters who were career firefighters. But they never rose above that rank and didn't want to. They weren't interested in taking anybody's baton. There were others who chose to stay satisfied with apparatus operator, others felt comfortable with the company officer level and a more limited number feel comfortable at the chief officer level but don't want the final obligation.



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As I was discussing this metaphor, I recalled the fact that in order for the baton to be passed fairly successfully, the person that was running the leg could not just run up the person who was going to be on the next leg, they had to be running too. In other words, the hand off was not a case of one person starting and stopping, it was a case of one person moving and then sharing time and space for a few seconds in which the transfer was made and then the other person moving on. I have conceptually accepted the idea that if we want to be planning for future fire chiefs, we have got to give them an opportunity to play fire chief.

They have to be running with us, not behind us. This is the best case I have ever made for delegation of authority. In other organizations we have lots of people who have the potential of aspiration and in many cases have chosen to opt out merely because they are watching us. They don't want to have the same experience. They don't want to be angry. They don't want to be disrespected. They don't want to be tired. And, they feel that if the person who has that baton today is liable to drop it before they pass it on then they will be unlikely to want to participate.

The case I would like to make with this column is if you are interested in succession planning, one of the things that you should be encouraging is a more transparent insight into the fire chief's job. In other words, getting people more involved with what you are doing.

Okay! I can almost hear everybody say how in the world do you do that? I am not suggesting this is easy but I am telling you that it is a type of skill that we ought to be further developing right now if we are going to attempt to pass the baton successfully. We have got to get more and more people on the track with us and support their development. Right now is a very important time for us to bring people with potential into our organizational structure and ask them for their input on what could or should be done to make the organization continue to function. On the one hand, I call this delegation but on another hand, I think you need to call it more than that. This is more a form of coaching than it is mere delegation. Using another athletic metaphor, it is more along the lines of being a playing coach instead of one who sits on the sidelines and sends the plays in.

The story I have woven here about using a relay team in one sense is misleading. Most relay teams run a very limited distance. It could be 440 yards or 880 yards. But the process I am talking about in fire department succession planning is a relay team that can go on immemorial. In other words, the tenure of a chief coupled with the tenure of his successor takes the organization in a specific direction. You do that two or three times in a row, the organization tends to develop a culture based upon that direction.

So, how do you see yourself in the relay race today? Are you kicking it off and have an opportunity to project ahead for future generations? Or, are you a finisher who is about ready to turn the organization over to some other organizational structure, such as consolidation or regionalization? The answer to



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that question may determine an awful lot about how many other people are willing to run the race with you.

Running the race as an individual may give you a certain degree of satisfaction. But, running the race as part of the team it overwhelms obstacles and succeeds because the collective strengths have an extra edge of satisfaction to them.

Be a winner!