

[print](#) | [close](#)

Philosopher-chief: Ronny J. Coleman

[Fire Chief](#)

Tim Elliott

Tue, 2000-02-01 12:00

Ronny J. Coleman quotes osha regulations, Alexandre Dumas and 19th-century Italian economists with equal ease. He's a study in contradictions: a teen runaway with a master's degree; a small-town chief who led one of the world's largest firefighting forces; a visionary who cherishes the fire service's traditions.

Coleman sows the seeds of revolutions: He thrust forward residential sprinklers, fire service accreditation and boot camps for new fire chiefs. And he personifies "prolific." Through public speaking, writing (textbooks, manuals and more than 200 columns for Fire Chief), and tv and video projects, he has changed attitudes about the very nature of fire service management.

Time and again, by combining political savvy with indisputable data, Coleman accomplished what others only talked about. Gerard Hoetmer, a former International City/County Managers Association public safety director, cites Coleman's early success with residential sprinklers. "In the early '70s, he was the first to push before his city council home sprinkler systems." Hoetmer heard about the project and invited Coleman to write about it for the icma's journal of innovative programs.

"The idea of residential fire sprinklers had been around since the early 1900s," Coleman says, "but the thing I'm most proud of is I made it work. I actually got them installed."

His peers call Coleman "driven" and "tenacious." One stand-out example: fire agency accreditation. Hoetmer recalls first meeting about the topic with Coleman in January 1986. "Ron in essence was the father of the accreditation program," Hoetmer says. "Ron realized that if there was an accreditation system that both fire chiefs and city managers and mayors could agree on, you wouldn't have this constant, annual struggle of the fire chief trying to explain why he needed additional equipment or staffing."

More than 10 years later, in August 1997, Coleman was on stage to congratulate the first five fire agencies ever accredited. "Hundreds of people contributed to the accreditation program," says Hoetmer, "but Ron was the leader. Without him, it would not have happened."

Coleman's 39-year public fire service career included a term as president of the [iafc](#) and culminated with his position as California's fire marshal and chief deputy director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. Now a force in the private sector, he continues to build both his legend and his legacy in the fire service.

Source URL: http://firechief.com/mag/firefighting_philosopherchief_ronny_coleman