



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

*Ronny J. Coleman*

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## **Principles of Stewardship**

What are ground rules for being a fire officer? I have often said one of the greatest deficiencies of being promoted to fire officer is there are no operating instructions on the back of the badge.

To complicate things, a fire officer is accountable for a tremendous amount of technical information. An officer also must deal with the personnel's human nature, which can cause additional problems.

How can we control our behavior and receive guidance to rise above these complications? Over the last few decades, I have had an opportunity to discuss principles, policies and practices with many officers. I have seen a great deal more similarities among effective officers than dissimilarities. Additionally, the similarities have nothing to do with the scope of their practice, but rather the perspective they bring to their job.

Recently in a conversation with a fellow chief officer, we realized the more complicated things become, the more we have to simplify our steering mechanisms. The basic principles of stewardship can solve this problem. In most cases, these principles have been extracted from experiences of trying to get a handle on complicated sets of circumstances.

### **Ten Principles of Stewardship**

1. Don't try to know everything, but ensure you know why you are doing anything. Common sense is not a common virtue.
2. Value your personnel as resources and actively seek their input in your decision-making process. Value their perspectives, opinion and observations; do not make critical decisions until you have all the facts.
3. Never focus on winning or losing battles but on the overall needs of the organization; survival of the principles of good fire protection overrides individual setbacks.
4. Never fear failure; be concerned about the consequences of failure to try. Seize every opportunity to expand the role of fire protection in the context of your authority.
5. Never promise anything you cannot deliver. Never threaten to do something you are unwilling to ultimately fulfill. Be true to your word and make your words reflect your behavior and your behavior reflect your words.
6. Never lie to your boss, your staff or to your subordinates. Keep your integrity, even if it costs you a temporary setback. Your integrity is worth more than any decision.
7. Keep the communication between you and your superiors totally confidential. Unless you are directed or authorized to discuss them with others, never violate another officer's trust.



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8. Always be fair but firmly committed to act on behalf of the organization instead of on behalf of individual interests. You are ultimately responsible for everyone in the organization. Voting as a decision-making process compromises your ability to take responsibility for the final decision.
  9. Always keep your focus on the future rather than on the present or past. Take action today to create your future instead of merely waiting for events to occur.
  10. Be realistic, but optimistic. Be committed to succeeding at whatever you want to do with the organization.

These principles supply a template to apply to your overall behavior and functioning as a chief who is temporarily in charge of an organization. You must accept the fact that you are not the department; you are merely its caretaker.

I have witnessed several examples that support these principles. They are not necessarily in sequence, but a few anecdotes might be useful in demonstrating why these principles can sometimes rise above specifics.

For example, we live in a complicated society. Principle one states the fire officer cannot know everything about everything that he or she is responsible for. I frequently have witnessed individuals who get themselves into trouble because they are so confident they are correct on a technical issue. When, in fact, the technical answer has changed many times over the last few years and a once-valid solution is now obsolete. It is acceptable to not know everything and still be the officer. It is unacceptable to insist on using old solutions for new problems.

The fire officer's role should be to ensure we know why we are doing things and rely on our staffs to know how to get them done. One example I have witnessed in this area involves fire codes and changing a fire department's specifications. A particular fire chief believed since he once served as a fire marshal, he knew everything the present fire marshal knew.

When a set of code revisions was introduced at the state level relating to plan check processes, the fire chief chose to move forward with code adoption at the local level before the codes were adopted by the state agency.

In this case, the fire marshal recommended against the amendments because there were secondary effects that were counterproductive in the community. Overriding the fire marshal's concerns, the chief pursued the code amendments and found himself in a compromising situation.

When the state amendments failed to pass, the chief was in the middle of his local adoption process. The question that should have been addressed by the chief was not when will the amendments be



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passed, but why are they being adopted. Did they solve his community's problems? Were they absolutely essential to maintain the integrity of a plan checking process?

A study of good leaders will illustrate most of them were successful in galvanizing the efforts of large numbers of people besides themselves.

Principle two values all team members, not just the stars. The only way you can gain value from people is to place equal value on all of them.

They tell a story at Notre Dame University about the so-called "four horsemen." They began to believe they were the entire football team. Coach Knute Rockne sent the team on the field one day with the instructions that every time the ball was snapped, the offensive line was to lie down and not block the defense. The highly regarded backfield suddenly started getting clobbered. In play after play, the four horsemen were losing ground.

Calling a time out, Coach Rockne brought them to the sidelines and pointed out to the four people whose job it was to carry the ball that they were absolutely useless on a football field unless everyone else was blocking. In the next couple of plays, the defensive line, highly motivated to prove their net worth, forged ahead and took the four horsemen across the goal line.

The worst thing we can do as chiefs is to regard individuals as anonymous contributors to the organization. We should not use preferential treatment with individuals. Instead, this principle says we should value everyone in our organization.

They will not all be equal in their contributions, nor will they all appreciate the respect that is given to them. On the other hand, there is quite a bit of evidence to support the fact that the more successful individuals are ones who surround themselves with successful people.

I once had a student in a pesticide fire and spill control class as part of a state fire training program. One of the things we taught was the use of pesticide identification numbers that are registered with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This person dutifully took notes. A couple of weeks later, he responded to a warehouse incident as a driver's aide. His battalion chief, a seasoned veteran, had found many fires in his career, but pesticide fires were not one of them. Several firefighters got sick.

This problem had a high potential of going from bad to worse. However, the student firefighter remembered the EPA registration number and its relationship to diagnosis, antidote and medical treatment. He told the battalion chief he had information that might help the sick firefighters. It was a critical point when he finished his conversation. The chief could have valued what he said or he could have discounted it. He chose to listen carefully.



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The firefighters being rushed to the hospital were given the additional information, and the event resulted with a minimum impact on those who suffered the exposure. The battalion chief was quickly given the recognition for effective fire scene management, and the student firefighter eventually assumed a higher level of command.

I was once at a museum looking at a collection of exotic carpets. The hand-made carpets were colorful, with complicated patterns and symbols. While reviewing the museum literature, I was intrigued that the entire explanation for these complicated textile patterns was based on an explanation of warp and weave (the longitudinal and latitudinal alignment of thread patterns) as the background for these tapestries.

If we create a warp and weave to our way of thinking and our approach to the tasks of managing and leading organizations, then it is possible to develop some complicated patterns of organizational behavior. The structure of the foundation will develop consistency and commitment to action. The individual patterns used to fill the blank spots give it texture and value.

If someone asks you what it is you believe in, can you answer that question in ten statements or less?

Pick some principles and make them your own. Live by that set of principles and base your career upon them.