



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Reality of Management

What was the happiest moment of your fire service career? Was it the day you got your badge as an entry-level firefighter – or the day you got promoted to captain – or was it the day you got promoted to chief? Each of these days was bathed with the warm glow of achievement.

It's great to be chief, isn't it? Or is it? More than once I have heard a chief officer lament that if he had to do it all over again, he would probably stick to being a "truck captain – at the busiest station in the city."

The reality of fire service management today is that it's not as much fun as it used to be. On the other hand, that bed of roses we remember back in the firehouse is not the same either. That truck captain is performing duties that we as incumbents in that position were never expected to perform. It's not as much fun in the firehouse anymore either.

The ground rules are different. If we accept the ground rules and the fact that management actually is work, being fire chief can become fun again. The ground rules are as follows:

- A. Management is a survival game.
- B. You cannot climb the ladder of success as a group.
- C. Everybody expects more out of you.
- D. None of the real rewards are monetary.
- E. Management's job is to change things.

Let's explore each of these concepts. "Management is a survival game" is not an empty statement. Obsolescence is a reality. Businesses that fail to keep pace with the market soon find themselves replaced by other businesses.

Competition is a reality in both the public and private sectors. For years the fire service has considered itself somewhat of a monopoly, yet the private sector is effectively competing with the United States Postal Service – which was a monopoly for nearly two centuries. There are also programs to put the private sector in charge of jails and private fire protection is a rapidly growing business.

Survival is a necessity of business. When the needs of industry outgrow its key people, key people are simply replaced. Top level management in any industry always focuses on the future and on elimination of the obsolescence in their organizations.

Our second rule relating to climbing the ladder of success has a lot of implications. It is a fact of life that, as an individual moves up in the hierarchy of the fire service, he loses "friends" along the way. For



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

purposes of definition, we should discriminate between friends and acquaintances. Acquaintances are those people we have the ability to recognize because we know their names, perhaps their telephone number and perhaps something about them and their lives.

Friends are those individuals who know everything about us, even disagree with us, but maintain a sense of value about sustaining the relationship.

We often hear the phrase; "It's lonely at the top." That is not necessarily so. People who climb mountains are often asked why they do it. One of the responses is "because the view is so fantastic!" Top-level management in the fire service does not require that a person compromise his relationships with people to function as a leader or manager. You may experience ruptures in relationships with acquaintances, but friends will make the transition, just as you will. There definitely is a transition period between being a part of the laboring force in a firefighting agency and becoming a part of the management. Recognizing that transition will occur is part of the maturation process of becoming a leader and a manager.

Everyone needs to belong to something. Participation in professional organizations such as local, regional, state, or national associations focusing on fire service issues is a fundamental element of support for the fire chief. Without that network it is not only lonely at the top, it is also a somewhat frightening experience. The problems you face often have extremely complicated answers and your own experience may not encompass the numbers you need to solve a specific problem. The network is essential.

Our next rule "Everybody expects more out of you," is extremely important. As one assumes a leadership role, the superior expects things to happen, but so do the subordinates. There is often an inherent conflict between what is expected from one group and that which is expected from another. A classic example a fire chief often finds himself confronted with is the difference between top management wanting the fire chief to "streamline" a firefighting organization and the firefighting organization anticipating that the fire chief is going to obtain for them a better salary, better working conditions, and more manpower.

Remember the comment we used to hear about fire captains – "They are neither fish nor fowl." The implication was that it was difficult to lead and manage personnel if you are "one of the boys." Does one have to abandon his value system as a member of the fire service merely because he assumes the role of fire chief? I think not. Instead the key is the phrase "value statement."

Of all the skills a person can develop in order to prepare for the job of fire chief, conflict resolution is one of the leaders. Simply stated, there is going to be conflict in your job. And developing the ability to



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

go to the heart of the issues, find the facts and deal with the value systems involved is probably more important than being calm, cool, and collected at the scene of a major emergency.

The motivation for becoming a fire chief certainly has nothing to do with money. I would be willing to bet that in almost every firefighting organization in this country, there are at least three individuals in the agency with a higher take-home income than the fire chief. In many cases it is earned from their off-duty employment because of the fire service working environment. In some cases it is because of the combination of a large amount of overtime or tax circumstances. Nobody should ever become a fire chief because they will make more money at it. The rewards one attains from the job have nothing to do with dollars and cents. One should also forget about the proverbial 40-hour workweek – it simply does not exist for a fire chief. One may have office hours from 8 to 5, but the mantle of responsibility that rests on the shoulders of a fire chief does not end at 5 pm.

The rewards for becoming a fire chief are not intrinsic. They have to do with an internalized desire to make a difference.

Let's face it, most people want to become chief because they want to be in charge. There are elements of power, there are elements of ego, there are reasons a person becomes a chief that have absolutely nothing to do with money. Otherwise, how could we possibly explain the actions of individuals who take pay cuts to move from positions of relative security as second and third in command in an organization to become fire chief in a smaller community? Sooner or later the individuals will get back up to their economic level, but why would you have to give it up in the first place? The reason is that management is achievement oriented; those who seek management positions desire to make a mark.

We also stated that management's job is to change things. Forget that, and an individual will not remain part of management for long. With the possible exceptions of shepherders whose job it is to maintain that status quo, there are very few management positions that are valued for keeping things the same.

There are chiefs out there that wish they were back on that truck company. There are chiefs out there who are really enjoying the view. There are also young men and women in the fire service looking up at that position and trying to decide whether they wish to aspire and achieve.

Mel Brooks probably said it best in his comedy classic "The History of World, Part 2." In his comic way, he summarized achievement by stating, "It's great to be king!" However, students of history will recall that the French aristocracy lost their heads as a result of not facing reality.

It is great to be chief, just remember the ground rules.