



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Rising to the Occasion

The job of being fire chief is getting tougher and tougher. As a matter of fact, a curious phenomenon is beginning to set in. Sometimes we are put to the ultimate test of survival before we have a chance to be taught all of the lessons. In recent months, I have had lots of conversations with fellow fire chiefs about situations they have faced, such as forced retirements, their own abrupt termination, votes of no confidence and conflict with superiors, peers, and subordinates. To re-coin an old Marine Corps slogan, "Nobody ever promised us a rose garden," but does it have to be so darned difficult?

I'm not really sure. But, I do know that many of the problems that a fire chief faces are predictable. I think that we are beginning to face a managerial phenomenon in the fire service, at the chief officer level, that is not unlike what has gone on in the private sector over the last couple of decades: The issue of Executive vulnerability.

Terms such as downsizing, executive mobility, hostile takeover, etc. have been part of the vocabulary of the business world for a long time. They come wrapped with different implications when they are applied to public sector services such as the fire service. Downsizing means reduction in force. Hostile takeover means consolidation. Executive mobility means that a person can be fired or asked to leave and have to find another job of comparable worth in order to remain in the profession.

One of the consequences we face is that the price we pay for failure to understand the potential for such events is paid for personally. Many of the job security factors that exist for our personnel at the lower levels simply don't exist for fire chiefs. We operate in a different atmosphere. Although we usually are rewarded for our performance, we are also vulnerable because of our failures. Before an individual aspires to the position of fire chief they need to recognize that their expectations of the job are not necessarily commensurate with the realities of the job.

More importantly, we all need to recognize that aspiration of being a fire chief is not the same as the capability of performing as one. There are a lot of individuals who are very dedicated to their job but for a variety of reasons derail. Some of the potential for failures on the job that are introduced by either political or technical processes were not part of the training and education curriculum from which a person in the fire service prepares to compete for the job.

Frequently a fire chief is expected to make major changes. These changes may be with respect to performance of a person or a program or they may be in the individuals in an organization with respect to productivity. Or, they can be with respect to the community regarding new responsibilities or expanded programs for the entire fire agency.



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If we accept the fact that the primary role of the fire service is preparation, then the fire chief has to expect that their own preparation should be their number one priority. The role of any individual fire officer is to provide for their own constant improvement in order to face the adversities that can emerge from a changing environment.

I mentioned earlier that sometimes the test is given before the lesson is learned. If, in our day-to-day operations, we fail to look to the future with respect to obstacles and problems, there is a possibility that we will face a test for which we have no resources to cope. The fire ground provides ample evidence of this phenomenon. In an earlier article on "Resuscitating the Community I used the incident of Roseburg, Oregon with a dynamite explosion that devastated the town on August 7th, 1959 (a special thanks to Lt. Sam Phillips of the Roseburg Fire Department, who recently shared a tabloid with me that resurrected the memory of this tragic event). There have been many others; Kingman, Arizona in which the word BLEVE was introduced to the lexicon of the fire service; Waverly Tennessee with its devastation.

What is not as well advertised, and in many cases not as well documented, are the tests that are given to the fire chief as they sit behind their desk. I am talking about dealing with ethical considerations in code enforcement, serving in an advocacy role when proposing a controversial ordinance, dealing with a personnel problem in which personal conflict and political forces are brought to bear. In the aftermath of a mass disaster or major operations determining liability and fault finding seems to be more important in the final analysis than the actual command decisions that were made under stress to save the rest of the community.

The ultimate test of anyone in a position of leadership is survival. The adaptation process that we utilize to survive can consist of the use of power and dominance. Or, it can consist of maneuverability and intelligence. The degree to which all four of these are utilized in an organization harkens back to a model we have referred to in previous columns on winning and losing. Power and authority is used almost exclusively in circumstances in which winning and losing is critical. The concept of cooperation and intelligence gathering results in solutions that are nonthreatening. This tactic often produces cases where there are two sets of winners.

The ultimate price that almost any fire chief will pay for his or her own lack of preparation is vulnerability to attack. Whether an attack comes from external to the fire department, such as from a citizens groups or an irate individual, or from an internal source within the municipal government structure, or whether it comes from within the ranks of the personnel of fire department is irrelevant. If a person doesn't survive, the cause is not as important as the effect.

The defense we are suggesting for all these areas is essentially the same. Education and training are far better weapons than relying on experience to prepare for unexpected obstacles and confrontations.



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The best insurance policy we can have for competency is a combination of practice and knowledge. There is a big difference in the survival rate of individuals who have prepared themselves when contrasted with those who merely wait until an opportunity presents itself to demonstrate their courage, integrity or dedication.

The term defense has a negative connotation. However, what we are talking about in the context of this column is being asked to rise to a specific occasion. In order to survive a crisis an officer must come off as the individual who is still in command and control of their organization in spite of the attack.

So, it is not so much a defense as it is a combination of offense and defense. The best way of finding out what your personal perspective on this issue is to ask yourself this question every morning. As you get up and look at yourself in the mirror prior to putting on your suit or uniform or whatever attire is appropriate for going to work, you need to ask yourself: Am I better, in some way, than I was the previous day? Is there something that you still have to put into your repertoire of knowledge and skills that will allow you to provide the leadership to your organization in spite of adversity and complexity?

If the answer to that is yes and you are not relying strictly upon a self-fulfilling prophecy that centers around the power of your position, then possibly you are developing the ability to rise to any occasion. If the answer is no and basically you are still participating in your vocation utilizing knowledge, skills and abilities that were successful in getting you the job but have not been changed in some period of time then you had best make sure that when you do go to work you are ready to pay the consequences of failure.

Why risk it? Prepare for the worst of times and the chances are you will survive them.