



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Rites of Passage

The Internet provides us with some interesting tips to think about from time to time. Sandwiched in between personal exchange and Spam, there are frequently stories that emerge that are both informational and provocative at the same time. I recently had a chance to review one such scenario involving a set of circumstances that could happen to anyone – and, the results would be as tragic as they were in this case.

No, I am not talking about a line of duty death (LODD). These are tragic, but they are often not as informative as they could be. In this case I am referencing here involves a case of “hazing” that resulted in the termination of several firefighters, created a black mark against the department and resulted in an experience that the surviving employee will carry around as a form of a mental scar for the rest of that person’s career. It could have been worse.

At the same time this fire department hazing event was occurring, a similar event was capturing headlines and airtime on television. That case involved a hazing incident regarding female high school students. That case resulted in expulsion, lawsuits and defamations.

Can it happen in your fire department?

Don’t be too quick to say no. Think about this for a minute or two. Answer the following questions before you finally decide.

1. Does your department have a great deal of pride?
2. Does your department have rituals that mark different aspects of being accepted into the department?
3. Are these rituals conducted in public view, or are they often done “after-hours” and even “off-duty”?
4. Do any of these rituals involve embarrassment and humiliation or physical restraint?
5. Do any of these rituals vary according to the nature of the make-up of the person’s experiencing the ritual?

Five simple questions. The answers you provide to yourself may be quite complex. That’s why it’s not so easy to state that it cannot or would not happen in your department. Let’s take question number one for example. Organizations with a highly developed sense of pride often have a sense that all members have to “pass-the-test” of acceptance. In ancient Indian lore one such test was called “running the gauntlet”. It consisted of two lines of warriors through which a candidate had to swiftly run. Meanwhile, the warriors would flail away at that person trying to get them to fail. The lesson here



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is simple. Organizations with over-developed sense of pride can often create processes of acceptance that are excessively abusive.

My personal belief is that all fire departments have to answer question two with a yes. Otherwise, anyone, anytime, could lay claim to the distinct honor we preserve for being part of our profession. But, the issue is this. In the ritual relevant to qualification for the position, or is it only an experience to be endured?

As I was preparing this article there was a television interview conducted by Dan Rather entitled "Too Close to the Fire". In it, Rather told the audience that the dirty-little secret of many fire agencies is that many firefighters are also arsonists. I couldn't help but wonder how many of these arsonists were considered by their departments to be acceptable members.

With respect to visibility or rituals, here's a thought. What goes on you know nothing about? If you are chief and you are not in the station all of the time you might be surprised as to what goes on after the front door is locked and the lights are turned out in the apparatus room. Moreover, there are some events that you might not even be invited to attend that result in behavior that you might have to pay a price for if they go wrong.

Personally, I have borne witness to many events in which there was embarrassment and humiliation involved. And, oh yeah, it was always explained away as "firehouse humor", or "boys will be boys". Some of the things I saw 40 years ago are fodder for lawsuits today.

The essence of this article is to try and answer question one and two in a fashion that protects our image and position in society without resulting in the answers to question three, four and five bringing scathing criticism down upon an organization. I believe that it is possible to have rite of passage in an organization, but I likewise believe that any ritual that results in unacceptable treatment of individuals threaten the very essence of organizational pride.

The role of the fire chief in all of this is to be the lightning rod of acceptable behavior in what the chief sanctions becomes the norm. And what I mean by sanction is to actually take responsibility for the use of any ritual of acceptance to assure that it is ethically, legally and morally defensible.

I do not mean that sanction stands for standing by and observing until someone crosses the line. I do not mean, as Monty Pythons crew used to imply "wink-wink", "nudge-nudge".

Another recent experience that resulted in my selecting this topic was a story told to me by a neighboring fire chief about a bad experience he had. His department had spent a considerable amount of money recruiting his latest class of entry-level people. In less than 6 months all of the new employees



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had resigned. In the exit interview he was shocked to learn how these people were treated by his supervisor and tenured personnel. He had lost the investment he had made in the new candidates. It was not a pretty picture. But he did learn a lot about how the departments highly developed sense of its own self had resulted in a cultural time bomb.

The chief took action. I won't talk about a lot of the specifics because I believe he may chose to publish his action himself. What I took from his experience is that absolute necessity of the chief taking that action.

Denying that the problem doesn't exist won't make it better. Hoping that it will go away is a high risk, high consequence decision avoiding disaster. But, what is really the worse of scenarios is to know about it and do nothing because you can't see anything wrong with it. Now that is a formula for disaster for you. It could be a career rendering non-decision with severe impact.

To keep all of this in perspective I believe that we need to be very realistic. We should not ever give up on the concept of rites of passage – they belong. We should never condone any rites that are irrelevant and require that candidates be humiliated or treated inhumanly. Simple enough, right?

Well, if it were, these wouldn't be the stories on the Internet, and these wouldn't be film at eleven. People do stupid things and call them rites of passage.

Think about this. What is acceptable to you?

Let me give you a real simple, yet life long memory from my experience. When I went into the Marine Corps in 1960, I attended recruit academy at San Diego. The first day we were on the base we were told that all recruits were to always have the top button on their shirt buttoned. It was to always be buttoned. We observed other Marines wearing that button opened and when we asked why they didn't have to do it, we were told "that's because they are Marines - you are just recruits." The day we graduated we were all told to loosen that button and we all did instantly. That was over 40 years ago and I still feel a sense of pride for that moment. Let's make sure all of our people have only the fondest memories for our rites of passage.