



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

STRAW THAT BROKE THE CAMELS BACK

Once upon a time (that's the way most fairy tales start). There was a prodigious camel that the pride of his owner. He could carry any weight and go the farthest of any of the herder's caravan. Then, accidentally, the camel was given such a heavy load that when only one straw was placed on top he collapsed in a heap. The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Sometimes fire chiefs feel that way about problems. They can handle a pretty tough load till finally the last little one seems to be just too much. Have you ever felt that way? Many have, many more will experience it in the future.

The significance of this phenomenon is that it not only affects individuals, it has an effect on organizations also. The organization takes on more and more till one little increment comes along that is toooooo much. And – Crack – the broken back, figuratively.

I was reminded of this phenomenon when talking to a fellow fire chief recently. He started off the conversation by stating that he was doing research of the staffing issues associated with overtime costs. In that discussion he revealed that he was under a lot of pressure to reduce his overtime budget. I asked why and he stated that his workers compensation and the related injury rate had ascended over the top and his sick leave usage was accelerating – and he wasn't going to be able to live within his budget. Furthermore, he was being challenged to reduce overtime as part of his goals and objectives.

Anyone else out there that is facing a similar conundrum?

How this relates to the camel and straw is simple. What happens when we gradually grant benefits that are not funded and they exceed expectations? You're right – something has to give. You have to get more money or rearrange the system.

Have you ever heard the other popular admonition; if it ain't broke, don't fix it? The corollary to that advice is: If it's about to break, start fixing it. One popular management guru has even suggested that if it ain't broke, break it. –

The intent of this column is to do neither. I'm not sure that the system is broke nor that it needs a major fixing. But, I am pretty sure that some preventative maintenance needs to be applied.

What I am referring to specifically is the increasing costs of benefits that are indirect, almost unmanageable and increasingly a subject of scrutiny at least one level of government; the local fire department.



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Now, before anyone goes off prematurely about how important all of our benefits are and we can't touch them, don't worry. That is not my intent. I too, am a benefactor of the benefits we have fought for over the last few decades. I was once badly injured on the job. I have taken my vacation leave after it was granted. I have accepted educational benefit from both tuition reimbursement and the GI Bill. I do not want to be a hypocrite by saying all of that is subject to criticism or reduction in benefits.

What I am going to suggest is that we had better become a lot more sophisticated in planning on how to pay for those benefits or the system will eventually pay a price. We could be facing an implosion of sorts

What kind of price you say! No gloom and doom here. I am just going to state one perspective on consequence and let it go at that. If and when we ever exceed the capacity of the system to fund the benefits we have obtained, the system will change by reducing the value of those benefits.

Can't happen you say! We're government. Anybody read the stories about what happened to the retirement benefits of companies in the private sector that went belly up in the last few years. Whole groups of employees lost everything. I know! Can't happen to us, right?

Don't be so sure. I know most of the people who read this column are too young to remember the depression – but hopefully you have read history books and remember that economic systems can fail. There have been countries that have seen inflating aspects destroy the value of the monetary system.

Ok, I'm not talking Chicken Little here either. The sky is not falling. But, let me raise one more issue of consequence. Continuing to hold the fire chief responsible for cost containment of benefits within a system where there is no provision for containment of the usage is going to make a lot of you out there very uncomfortable. And, it may even cost some of you jobs. Now that's a real consequence.

Going back to the straw analogy for just a second, how many of us have benefited directly from gains obtained by one labor force at the bargaining table? Go ahead, admit it. We all have. If the real truth were known, many of us, including myself were labor leaders early in our career, and once we have become chiefs have secretly, if not openly have supported proposals made by our personnel. What the heck. We go it too.

I can also tell you that I have seen more than one fire chief be torn to pieces because he has taken "management" position that has offended his personnel. Votes of no confidence often follow scenarios where fire chiefs have taken unpopular stances on proposed actions within the negotiations process. Any of you out there that have felt the sting of criticism from your personnel probably believes they have abandoned you because you are not supporting their position on a specific issue.



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In reality fire chiefs probably can't win in this context. If you seem too labor focused the city manager, or other such entity will brand you as unfaithful to your role as a manager. If you are too management focused the labor force will brand you as a person that has forgotten what it was like to be on the line – what a place to be.

I have another suggestion. Keep good records and tell the truth.

There, see that wasn't that hard was it? Here's what I am suggesting, don't take sides; be an umpire or referee, but always play by the rules. If the rules change, help to make sure the rules are the right thing to do.

First off let me characterize why I feel that records are important and why the truth will set you free.

I have to go back to one scenario that is important for this discussion and that is the meet and confer, or negotiation process. One side proposes and the other side disposes. Labor-management relationships are often driven by two factors you have no control over; political and statutes. Neither is in your arena of primary responsibility as part of the management or leadership of an organization. Communities engaging in this process depending upon a host of other variables. This ranges from long time political and legal framework of the agency or entity, all the way up to the current wave of a labor - representative organizations that completely exclude the chief's participation.

Generally you are not at the table at all but, and I mean BUT, you had better be ready to provide records and analysis when asked. Why? Because without analysis the process can result in you being asked to manage things that you cannot possibly be ready to contain.

A case in point, every time a benefit is granted at the table that provides employees more time away from the workplace there is a staffing or overtime implication. In the case of shift workers, and specifically these possess a specialty rank or other pay provision, there is a cost. Compare for example what granting one more week of vacation does if it is given to a fire inspector versus granting 3 more shifts a year to a firefighter on an engine company. One has the cost of of time away from workload the other creates a cost of replacement.

Again, don't get upset at this, but if you are the manager and cannot project the impact or project the costs in advance of the recipient exercises that benefit than you are not really managing the department, the MOU is. The fire chief should be the resident expert on exactly what every element of the department is doing and how much it costs to do it.

But, like they say on TV, there's more! Who is really at fault if an unfunded liability is given to you to manage? The answer is really simple. It's the AHJ or in some cases the arbitrator who grants a benefit



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based upon evidence or lack of it. Everybody who sits at the table that is doing the proposing and disposing is responsible in one way or another for unintended consequences of any agreed upon action.

This creates a relatively interesting dilemma for all of us. If we ask for something and get it, there is no one to blame for the unintended consequence except the parties that agreed.

So the role of the fire chief is to be able to fairly and objectively assess consequences. I am not advocating for or against the need to have the agreement. Just be fair. Tell the truth.

I recall one process I was part of where an assistant city manager was prepared to grant a particular benefit that had about a \$225,000 budget impact on the department. He came to me and asked if I had any input. He wanted to know if I was for or against the proposal. I stated that his estimate was off the mark by about \$100,000 and produced documentation to prove it. Because of my interest in interest based negotiations I asked if he knew what the labor force interests were with respect to the requested action. He stated he did not know.

Upon returning to the bargaining table the issue was revisited in terms of what the group was trying to accomplish. Several other options were suggested and one selected that was far less expensive. Sometimes that works. Other times it won't.

The fire chief's role is to lead and manage. Sometimes this has been interrupted to mean control. It doesn't mean that literally. Being accurate in your data may allow you to provide guidance, not domination when issues are raised in the context of labor relations. It is therefore not too prudent to try and control anyone's opinion of what they want. That means both ways; subordinates, peers and superiors. A manager's job is to do things right and a leaders job is to do the right thing.

Remember my two-step process. Keep good records and tell the truth. These behaviors are consistent with the last sentence of the last paragraph. But, what if you are not allowed to be that magnanimous. What if your boss wants you to oppose some proposal? What if your labor group wants you to come out against the meet and confer process?

Well, that's what sweat glands are for. You are going to feel the heat. And, it can get very hot, especially, if either side wants to fight the issue out in a public forum.

If it happened to you right now, what would you do? Not unlike a scenario where a fireground operation can go bad in a hurry, you may not have a long time to mull this over in your mind. Many career-threatening events such as this have occurred when the gauntlet has been thrown down.

My answer is Plan B. Know what your own set of principles will lead you to think and do. Use them.



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One of my wife's favorite expressions is "that's to die for". I don't think she really means it, but you know, there are things you must be prepared to stand up for and the best time to contemplate them is now. And you had better be prepared to justify your position with the two tools of truth and proof.

Sometimes when I write these columns I use observed experiences. Other times I use personal ones. In this case I want to use an example of my own experience, but I do not want to be real specific because many of the players are still in the service. I hope this works.

What happened was I was told that city management was going to take a course of action that had a draconian effect on the department? When advised of the action I carefully prepared a report outlining my concerns and the anticipated consequences. I was told it was going to happen anyway. I then took the decision to the department and advised the labor group. They were outraged. I explained the process as well as I could. The president of the association asked me to publicly oppose the decision. I explained all of the facts that were available to me and answered every question of the labor group.

I returned to my boss with an explanation of each implication of the decision and requested re-consideration. It was not granted.

Shortly thereafter the firefighter took the issue public and created a groundswell of opposition to its decision. The decision was reversed at a council meeting.

What is the lesson here? The strategy I believe for surviving this kind of scenario is also two-fold. Maintaining confidentiality and sticking to principles instead of personalities. My conversations with my boss were always kept confidential – as were my conversations with the labor leader. I explained each other's position to the others in terms of principles to be considered.

You might see this as a form of shuttle diplomacy. But, more importantly it is a process that continues interpreting and breeds relationship building as opposed to creating conflict

In summary, we are all afloat on the sea of discord when it comes to managing the consequences of unfunded or controversial labor-management situations. When sailing on unchartered waters you need to have a plan. My suggestion is always know more about the consequences of any decision than anyone else. Tell the truth, even if it hurts. Treat your role as the chief as the strongest link in the communication chain. And, last but not least always place principle at the center of the discussion, not personality.

I'm enough of a pragmatist to realize that there are situations that will press the envelope in using their techniques. There may be a time when you have to take a position and defend it till one side wins over the other. But, let's plan those to be rarified occasions.



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