



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

So You Got the Job

This column applies to two different people. The first group is those who have been fire marshals for decades. They have a huge reservoir of information and have a rolodex full of relationships. The second recipient is someone who just got promoted yesterday and has been asked to give up the lifestyle of shift work to now become a fire marshal.

Do they have any differences? Do they have anything in common? If you are one of those two types, what would you be saying to the other one right about now? Well, let's cut to the chase. The one thing the two fire marshals have in common is the same level of responsibility and accountability. What they have that may be drastically different is a tool box for decision making that may be highly variable if not drastically different.

Regardless of how you come upon the position of fire marshal, you were probably selected for some specific reason. Many of the reasons will include all the good things such as the depth and breadth of your knowledge, education and experience. You may have a reputation for your ability to solve complex problems. Or not. Maybe you became fire marshal for a lot of other reasons. Some of which are described as being career planning and others which may be considered organizational needs.

What should the experienced fire marshal be telling the inexperienced one if they have an opportunity to communicate? Platitudes such as "hang in there" do not resonate well, but the reality that you are now going to be responsible for a whole new type of communication with stakeholders does.

This column is a beginning of a series dealing with the roles and responsibilities of a fire marshal. Regardless of how you got the job, the performance expectations are going to be there. Let's start by discussing the general requirements of being a fire marshal in the first place. Believe it or not, there is a set of standards for all fire marshals to aspire. Have you ever read the NFPA Standard on Fire Marshal to see what they cite as being general requirements for the job? You ought to review that standard (NFPA 1037, section 5.1). The next thing you should do it is to lay your department's job description along side of it and compare in contrast the two sets of expectations. If you are like many fire marshal's I know you will find that many of them are similar but you may also find that local conditions often create unusual expectations. I once ran a fire department in which the fire marshal was also designated as the Chief Arson Investigator and had to comply with many requirements of the penal code in order to be armed. In another case, one of my fire marshals had certain hazards materials requirements that were imposed by local statutes.

Why are these requirements important?



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That is because your job description and the standard basically describe the types of services fire marshals are expected to deliver. If you are going to do your homework correctly, both the job description and standard should be looked at as pass/fail criterion.

I am anticipating that a senior fire marshal who has been in the bureau for years might read the list with a little bit of cynicism. What I mean by that, is that sometimes what is written there is not a resemblance to what you do on an average day. On the other hand, the inexperienced fire marshal may start reading these requirements and start wondering where they are going to get the help to accomplish them.

If you take the standard and the job description the two of them describe how the fire marshal fits into the overall organizational goals and objectives of the department. You, as a fire marshal, may not be overly interested in fleet maintenance but your contributions to the strategic plan, master plan and even budgetary considerations are linked back to what you are supposed to be doing. It makes sense then that as the fire marshal you should be the one that is analyzing what goals and objectives need to be set for the bureau. You should be the one setting the priorities of those goals and objectives. In the final analysis, you are the architect of the risk management model for your entire community. What was built in the past, you now have to sustain and what you allow to be built in the future is going to be an asset or liability to fire protection.

Our last concept that is shared by both candidates has a sort of legalistic sound to it; duty to warn and perform. What this means is that if you take everything we described in the first paragraphs of this column, the fire marshal is responsible to make sure that it functions to support a fair and equitable utilization of adopted laws, regulations, and mandated requirements of the state or federal government.

In summary, it really doesn't make any difference how you found yourself sitting in the chair with a desk sign that says "Fire Marshal". The outside world will see you as being equivalent. For you folks that have the benefit of moving up the ladder of success through a bureau, you have an advantage. For those of you that received a battlefield commission to become a fire marshal, you may have more homework. If you are the former, you are well advised to start passing off some of your institutional memory to your subordinates. If you are one of the latter, you should be looking carefully at building a network of guys and gals from the previous group. Our next column is going to focus a little bit on the historic fires that have lead to the creation of building and fire codes. It will focus on the lessons that were learned from each of these that could and should be part of your historical perspective of performing as a fire marshal. Secondly, these historic fires may provide insight on the importance of fire and building codes in creating a safer community.