



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Squeeze Play

In baseball there is an exciting play called the “squeeze play”. It consists of having a runner on third base and a batter at the plate who are so in tune with each other that the batter can bunt the ball. That is merely tap the ball to dribble out on the playing field, creating confusion on the part of the opposing team so that the runner from third base can score quickly. Sometimes on a squeeze play both individuals are safe – or on the other hand both of them get put out. However, one of the other aspects of the squeeze play that gets real exciting is when the batter misses the ball and the runner is almost home. The catcher then puts the runner into another type of squeeze play. It consists of tossing the ball back and forth between the catcher and third baseman until the runner is either out or outwits one of the two to get back to a safe place.

We have our own version of a squeeze play in the fire service. It is usually manifested when there is a scenario in which the chief is caught between city management and labor. It is a phenomenon that happens more often than we would like. And it is one that we ought to put on the table for discussion.

It starts with a really simple question. Where do your loyalties lie as Fire Chief? There is no doubt in anybody’s mind that members of labor organizations fully expect their Fire Chief to be 100% of the time in their camp – or they are going to aggressively resist a lot of things that chief officer does. There is also probably no doubt in most Fire Chief’s minds that city management and the political leadership of the organization expect them to be firmly planted in the management family. Failure to do so can often result in career rendering situations.

It should also be noted that a fire officer in order to get their job done must have credibility. Credibility is different than loyalty. As a matter of fact that concept of credibility is such that it often determines an individual’s success more than their loyalty.

Let me see if I can explain that. I believe that it is very important for chief officers to have credibility with their organization. It comes with a couple of specific behaviors that are not all that hard to manifest and yet people periodically trip and fall over them. Credibility comes with walking your talk. Tell people what you are going to do and then do exactly what you told them you are going to do. Credibility comes with a very large burden of responsibility. That responsibility centers on the utilization of facts rather than fiction. The emphasis on personal behavior is on integrity and trustworthiness. So let’s see if we can get this straight. In order for a chief officer to have credibility with labor they have to tell them the truth. Then in order for that same person to have credibility with management they have to tell them the truth. Ah hah, I see that you probably figured out one of the dilemmas already. What is truth to one person may or may not be held in the same regard by the other.

I developed a model that might match these two phenomenon’s fairly well. It consists of four boxes.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

They are based upon the fact that the left hand axis has to do with the degree of loyalty that a person shows towards a single entity. The axis across the bottom has to do with credibility. It ranges all the way from zero credibility to a credibility of 100% of the people you are interacting with.

High Loyalty	3. Choosing up sides	4. Principled Advocate
Low Loyalty	1. No Confidence Box	2. Walking the Tightrope
	Low Credibility	High Credibility

As it is with all “box models” the comparison in contrast of these two attributes results in essentially four arenas. Let’s look at the lower left hand one initially, which is no loyalty, no credibility. An individual who functions in this particular arena probably doesn’t have an awfully lot of fun at work. Because their loyalty level is fairly low or at least not necessarily easy to ascertain and because their credibility level is less than 50% they might find themselves battered about quite frequently as a result of individuals questioning what they are doing and why they are doing it. The type of behavior I visualize and have observed in this arena is individuals who have a very limited set of operating principles that people agree with and they lack a great deal of information in order to be able to answer questions truthfully and in a timely fashion. This arena might well be called the no-confidence box. Frequently the individual who is performing in the leadership role has no confidence in himself or herself and the organization has no confidence in return. There is a reciprocity that with lowered loyalty and with lowered credibility there is not really much value.

The quadrant in the lower right hand corner is a person who has 100% credibility but plays both sides of the street. In actuality there are a lot of people that function in this fashion and if you are a good tight ropewalker it is not a bad place to be. But it does have its down side. Being 100% right but being supported 50% of the time is a difficult position for anybody in a leadership role. The kinds of behaviors that would be manifested by a person operating in this arena are a lot different than the previous paragraph. An individual who hasn’t had credibility but whose loyalties waiver back and forth may be looked upon as untrustworthy by one side or the other eventually.

The upper left hand quadrant is a person who is 100% loyal but who lacks a lot of credibility. As I mentioned it doesn’t make any difference where that loyalty is focused. It could be with a labor group or it could be with management. This person operates from a “side”. But if the individual lacks credibility then their primary course of operation is to pursue and agenda that is based on special interests rather than principle. Frankly a lot of people will argue with that statement. Some people feel that by being loyal to an organization that requires you to stick to certain principles. While we are in the



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

context of the fire service, principle does not mean loyalty to an agency but rather loyalty to a cause, i.e. the protection of life and property to the highest degree possible. The primary behavior that is exhibited in this area centers on protecting the organization instead of attacking problems.

Then of course we have our last square. The proverbial utopia. I call this the Principled Advocate. Frankly I don't know if anybody really actually lives in this box for very long. This is primarily because there is a constant tug of war that goes on over this issue of loyalty. But for theoretical purposes we might as well examine this box just as we did the previous three. A person who operates in this box must be able to demonstrate that they have the highest amount of credibility on issues, i.e. they are trustworthy and honest and at the same time be able to balance the needs of loyalty of labor and management.

Well, where is everybody on this chart. If you are like most all of us you have probably have dawned yourself saying things like saying "under some circumstances I am here – under other circumstances I might be there". I wouldn't argue with that. But I would draw the conclusion that moving in and out of these four respective arenas is one of the reasons why people periodically find themselves challenged with respect to their leadership role as a chief officer.

My personal belief is that you must actually be as well balanced as you can be between labor and management loyalty and extremely credible with both parties at the same time. If that sounds like a difficult position to be in, it is.

Nowhere is this more manifest than when it comes to picking a new fire chief. It is not uncommon for the authority having jurisdiction to put out a flyer for the chief officer asking them to have all sorts of skills and attributes. I have referenced this in a previous column entitled "They wanted Superman, but...!" and more and more I am seeing enlightened city managers and boards of directors place labor representation on the selection process to hire the new chief. But that doesn't necessarily resolve the ability of conflict.

One of the things that often occur when labor is being allowed to sit on the selection process is that they feel that they must pick a candidate that "is one of them". And of course, the city manager or appointing authority is looking for someone who can become part of the overall community or city management team. Is it even possible to find the right kind of person to do that?

Used in the model that I stated previously labor should realize that having a chief officer that is entirely loyal to them doesn't necessarily win them anything.

To the contrary a chief officer who has seemed to be to labor oriented often loses very important battles in competition with limited resources. And city managers need to understand that forcing a fire



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

chief to have a wide gap between themselves and their labor force is counterproductive also. Putting the fire chief into scenarios where they have to choose between their people and other people is a sure fire way to raise another gap between labor and management.

What a strong union really should want is a strong fire chief. They should want someone who has the ability to be credible enough to take basic issues to closure at the policy level so that the best interest of the fire service are being looked after. It is not even necessary that a labor group agree entirely with the decisions made by the fire chief. But it is important that they display a certain amount of respect and maintain a high level of professional relationship with that person instead of using the old song "The chief doesn't understand us". One of my best working relationships with the members of labor was with an individual who looked me right in the eye and say I don't agree with you on this particular issue but I understand where you are coming from. This particular individual I frequently had to disagree with but I never disrespected him.

If one looks deeply enough into the concept of loyalty it also takes into consideration the fact that if you are loyal to someone you have compassion and you care about them. A modern fire chief has more reasons to care about their firefighters today than at any time in the history of the fire service. We not only have the enemy of fire but we now have enemies that don't even respect our profession. Therefore, in the development of a working relationship between fire chiefs and labor leaders disagreement should not descend into dissention when all can agree upon the facts.

It follows then if strong unions need strong chiefs the reverse is also true. A strong labor leader is not one who necessarily is noisy, controversial, disagreeable or spiteful. The strength I am referring to is the strength of integrity. It is the strength of knowledge. It is the strength that comes from the head and not the heart.

As chief officers when in an organization we should be interested in our reputation to respect to the two dimensions in this article. Who are you perceived to be? Does management see you as being driven by your labor force? Does your labor force see you being driven by management? What is your level of credibility with both parties? If you tell the truth to both parties it is pretty hard to be held to blame for the consequence.

I am hoping as you read this article that you certainly do not classify yourself as a lower left quadrant because that would be a shame. However, if you have classified yourself as a principle advocate all of the time I might be concerned that you are not looking in the mirror or making that assessment on wishful thinking. All of us, including myself should visualize the model as having a moveable framework within the model itself. For example we can go back and rely on the concept of the Johari window. In the Johari window there were things that were known to you and known to others there were also things that were kept secret, etc. This model implies that if you try to exercise the concept of walking



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

your talk as much as you possibly can and are respectful of the rights and responsibilities of your superiors and your subordinates that you can create an organizational environment that is a good place for you and everybody else to be.