



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Substitute Teachers and Babysitters

When you were about 10 or 12 years old there could have been two sets of circumstances that could have, maybe, put you on edge. The first was when your parents announced that they were going out and you were not old enough to stay alone. They announced that they were going to have a babysitter. The second is when you walked into your fifth grade class and there was a name on the board, followed by the words substitute teacher. No matter what happened before, things were going to be different when either one of these individuals began to perform oversight on your world. Admittedly, there might be a few of these types of people who went along with your behavior and were therefore okay with the status quo.

Unfortunately I never had the opportunity to witness either. I just remember one babysitter who called Mrs. Mean and a substitute teacher that was nicknamed The Enforcer.

What got me started on this topic was reviewing the track record of the number of fire departments who have recently hired an interim, or acting Fire Chief. These are individuals that are coming into an organization with no possibility of becoming a permanent member but with specific duties to perform.

So, in a way I started thinking of them as being like a combination of a babysitter and a substitute teacher. This is because inherent in the people performing in this capacity is to perform both oversight and remedial activity in the same breath.

I don't know if there is any organization actually keeping track of the number interim Fire Chief's, but it sure seems like it is happening much more often than it has in the past. Personally I have done it myself numerous times. I have witnessed many others who are engaged in today.

Why is this phenomenon occurring? One reason for the practice might be as simple as there is a lot of Chiefs out there that have retired from one job, but they're still open to an opportunity to continue to exercise their skill set. They are still looking for an opportunity to bring about change or progress in the fire service. One thing about a fire chief's job is that the brain keeps on working long after the legs have worn out.

A couple of other reasons than these that may be more subtle are part of this discussion. I also believe the practices could alter the fire chief selection process eventually. What I am referring to is the idea that a city manager can often make more change with an interim chief and he/she can with a permanent one.

Another potential reason is that an interim Fire Chief can often seek out and solve problems better than



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an insider can. It is the cliché of the "old new tool cuts clean", or new eyes see things differently and the problem-solving approach. An interim chief may also be lacking an organizational bias or, or prejudicial consideration and may see a problem that is hiding in plain sight.

In either case, bringing in an interim, or as they are sometimes called - acting fire chief, the organization is likely to wonder what is going to happen. What do you think the answer is going to be? If you are a retiring fire chief, you might be wondering if your legacy is about to be revised. If you are a staff member you might be wondering what the interim is going to do with the organization. If you are a neighboring fire chief you might be wondering what is going to happen to the peer relationships in the area. All are legitimate concerns. What actually happens is dependent upon the goals and objectives of the hiring party: the AHJ.

In my observation, the majority of the individuals that want to serve as interim chief are not doing it to create a controversy, but rather to stabilize the organization from controversies it has already experienced. One of my associates has the motto that is derived from the physician's oath of "Do No Harm. Always leave the place better off than you found it. Another friend of my mine who has served in this capacity many times states that his goal is to prepare the organization for the next stage of development. A third opined that his role as an interim/acting chief is to separate the problems from the people and look for solutions that can eliminate the new chief from having to deal with irrelevant and sometimes unnecessary conflicts.

I guess if you are one of those chiefs out there that may be thinking of being an acting chief you are going to make up your own ground rules anyway. The following ideas have come to me after talking to many individuals who have performed in this capacity. You might want to consider them if you are in the same scenario some day. The suggestions are:

1. Make sure that you have specific expectations spelled out before you begin the assignment.
2. Research the department's issues and problems to avoid being blind-sided after you arrive. Know the issues before you arrive.
3. Write down your observations as soon as you make them. Don't wait for weeks or months to create your journal of observations.
4. Find every "source" document you can and create a library for the new chief. Source documents are the fundamental documents that are used in guidance for the department.
5. Don't take any one persons word for anything. Always cross reference everything you are told.
6. Interview as many of the staff as you can to get all of the perspectives of the department



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7. Listen more than you talk.
 8. Don't start anything that you cannot finish before you leave.
 9. Don't make a promise that you cannot guarantee.
 10. Treat the department personnel as if you were going to be there forever.

Summary

Digressing back to the substitute teacher and the babysitter, they could be menacing, but they can also be influential or they could be ambivalent. As I was wrapping up this column I was reminded that Mary Poppins is a classical example of the type of person we would like to have influence over our lives when we kids. The modern day version of that is now the interim chief. If the person that is working in that slot utilizes the 10 basic ground rules as listed, I cannot guarantee tremendous success, but I can bet that the organization will be better off than it was when the chief arrived.