



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

A Symbol is a Promise

Is nothing sacred anymore? Almost every direction we turn today, there is a criticism or comment leveled at fire protection. It often seems that everything is in a state of flux. Fire trucks aren't red anymore! Women in the fire service! Fire hose keeps getting larger in diameter and fire trucks are getting more and more expensive.

Almost every time a group of firemen get together to discuss this phenomenon, someone will raise the issue "They are destroying all of the traditions of the fire service". Are they really? What are the true traditions of the fire service?

Tradition was once defined as anything that we continue to do after we have lost the original reason for its purpose. In that context, one might say that we have a lot of "traditions" in the fire service manifested in our way of doing business. Years of repetition often build up layers of insulation against logic. So it is true that we are a traditional organization.

Perhaps it is time for us to sit back and take a look at what we mean when we talk about tradition. Let me use, for example, the engine company. In your fire station you have a huge diesel gulping, chrome clad, electronically voiced, extremely expensive piece of firefighting equipment. It is about as far removed from the hose cart that was in existence at the turn of the century as the Voyager Rocket sent to Saturn was from Kit Carson.

Yet, when someone decides to build a piece of fire apparatus that is radically different from the ones that are being advocated by apparatus manufacturers, they are attacked for being "non-traditional". Take attack pumpers for instance. Those communities that have not opted to use them roundly criticize their lack of effectiveness and challenge their right to be used as part of a firefighting arsenal. Yet attack pumpers put out hundreds of thousands of fires across the nation on a daily basis.

We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that there is a difference between a symbol and a tradition. A symbol is a promise to deliver. The American flag is the symbol of freedom. That piece of brightly colored cloth has never, ever won a battle, conquered a territory, repelled an enemy, or passed a law. Yet the American flag is symbolic of our way of life. When we see that flag flying in front of our schools and public buildings on a daily basis, it means that we promise as a nation to do our very best to provide for the freedom of the individual living under that flag.

So it is with the symbols of the fire service. Take a look down at your chest someday and look at that piece of metal called a badge. Badges don't enforce fire codes. Badges don't risk their lives. Badges are merely pieces of metal, but they are symbolic. What does your badge stand for?



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All professions use symbols in the execution of their professional demeanor. If you don't think so, the next time you go to court you will notice that lawyers who become judges wear black robes. Pilots who make \$100,000 a year wear wings on their chest. Generals still wear stars on their shoulders.

It might be time to ask this question: "What are the true symbols of the professional fire service?"
"What do those symbols promise to deliver?"

I happen to believe, myself that we have made an error in the erosion of our symbolism in the fire service in an attempt to slow down the onslaught of change in the fire service. Let me be more specific. There are a lot of fire chiefs today who, since they have assumed the mantle of responsibility, have never worn the uniform of their department. Someone, some-where told them that they are now a "businessman" or that they are an "executive" and it is unseemly to wear the uniform, badges, and gold braid that accompanies the position of responsibility that they have achieved.

Subsequently, in many communities, the fire chief has become an obscure bureaucrat not much different than the rest of those associated with City Hall.

This practice, in many communities, is filtered down to the other chief officers in the organization and, in many cases, clear on down to the fire inspector in the Prevention Bureau. Is it any wonder that tailboard firemen really question whether or not they should have uniform standards when the hierarchy of the department sets no example.

It is the same with automobiles. Many fire chiefs have opted to drive an automobile that is completely unmarked. While this might provide a certain degree of anonymity while driving around the community, it does not contribute to the visibility or credibility of the organization either.

OK! By this time you are probably saying to yourself, this guy is crazy. But I would like to ask you to continue reading this article and participate, if you will, in a little soul searching right now.

Let me start off by asking you a very straightforward question. What do you stand for? Do you have a philosophy of fire protection that guides your every decision? Could a total stranger upon meeting you be able to determine what it is that you are practicing as a profession?

If someone were going to try to characterize your performance by placing a symbol on it, what would they choose? Just like football teams are named after objects, would you be characterized as a tiger or a pussycat? Are you a rock or quicksand?

What do you do that epitomizes your profession as a fire officer? Are you proud of your role in society?



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Do you deliver to your constituency what you are capable of delivering or do you deliver only what they ask?

Heavy stuff, right? Quite frankly, most of us receive our fire chief's badge without any set of operating instructions whatsoever. We spend the better part of our first four or five years trying to determine what it is that we were supposed to be accomplishing once we have assumed the role and responsibility of leader and manager in a fire protection agency.

A friend of mine once suggested that every person who is appointed as a fire chief in the U.S. should be issued a reproduction of the type of fire helmets that were in existence in 1776 when this country was first formed. The helmet which could serve as a "symbol" of service should be issued to the new fire chief and hung in his office to constantly remind him of his responsibility for providing an increasing level of protection of his community against fire and other calamity.

It is not important that he wear a helmet that was designed in the 1760's, but he should have it there as a reminder of the lineage of fire protection philosophy that has been in existence in this country. The white helmet, while serving as a symbol, serves as a constant reminder to the officer and everyone that comes into his office that he has been charged with an awesome amount of responsibility.

Silly, you say? Did you ever notice that doctors are still using a symbol to represent the medical profession that has been in existence thousands of years from ancient Greece? They wear with pride that little symbol on their automobile and in other ways display the staff to tell the world that they are an M.D. That doesn't seem to keep doctors from performing operations with laser beams, creating mechanical hearts to keep patients alive and embracing a continuum of sophisticated technology that is designed to keep us alive longer and longer.

If we have any traditions in the fire service, they should be traditions that formulate a philosophy. It should be traditional that we have courage, be dedicated to our jobs, possess sincerity, integrity and all of those other attributes that make up Saturday morning cartoon heroes.

It should not be traditional the tools that we use to fight fire, but rather it should be traditional that we fight fire in a certain way. It should be the role of the fire officer to question whether his tools are doing an adequate job rather than defend the tool on the basis of its existence.

In the strongest sense of the word, it should be us that are forcing changes upon the fire service rather than other individuals feeling the necessity to try to force us to change. By looking backwards into our own past, we, if anyone, should recognize the necessity for research and development to improve the tools of our trade.



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Once again relating to our ancestors, we can look to people like Sir Massey Shaw of the London Fire Brigade who literally forced the fire service into some of the first training programs. How about James Goolick? In our past we have had a lot of passionate and involved leadership that has brought the fire service forward by leaps and bounds in the protection of life and property. Currently we face some of the most explosive changes that the fire service has ever had to cope with. We are entering the computer age. It is going to take some dynamic leadership in order to bring the fire service into this new age with a minimum of impact on its symbolic role in society.

There is nothing wrong with us changing the ways we do business as long as we stay in the same business. As a modern fire officer it is up to you to accept the responsibility for our future. The shape of a fireman's helmet or the color of fire trucks or the use of the firefighter's axe must be placed in their proper context as being symbolic and not as being traditional. The trappings of our profession should not limit the acceptance of change. Just like the trumpets which adorn a company officer's lapel, these "traditions" stand for something far greater than they themselves are. They are symbols. They should be viewed as promises to deliver to the people of our communities - the greatest degree of protection of life and property that is technologically possible. These symbols can be embraced in the emblems and heraldry of the fire service.

In that context, they should be treated with respect and worn with pride.

Remember, the Greek God Prometheus who gave man fire was condemned to an eternal punishment because he had given us a tool that would forever more change our relationship with the world. If the ancient Greek Gods saw fit to punish Prometheus for giving man fire, imagine how much respect they must have for those of us who have been given the responsibility of protecting society against its misuse and destructive capability.