



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## **Unintended Consequences of Well Intended Acts**

Doing the right thing is important for many of us. Doing things right is also very important for many of us. Reality is that you can often do what you think is right and do it the wrong way resulting in an unintended consequence. While this sounds like a circuitous argument, it is actually a fundamental question we have to ask ourselves when we are making decisions that have long term impact. These two questions are; is it the right thing to do and is it the right way to do it? If the answer to both of these is yes, you can proceed. However, you cannot proceed recklessly. If the answer to one of them is a no, it is time to slow down and rethink the discussion.

This discussion came to mind recently in discussing a process that is currently being discussed amongst one of our major organizations. The gist of the proposal is to allow every member to have access to an electronic voting system so that everyone can vote on any item by remaining home instead of attending the meetings where votes have historically been taken to move proposals forward. The debate on whether this is the right thing to do has its roots in our ongoing rush to use electronics to substitute for personal commitment. The argument is that people can no longer afford to go to meetings. So we have to find some way to let everybody participate without going to those meetings.

Admittedly, we now live in a world of Linked In, Facebook, and Twitter. I have no idea what the latest social network is, but I am sure one is being developed as we speak. It now seems that everybody can communicate with everybody about everything. Unfortunately, while this may be a capacity that we have developed in society, it may or may not be the right thing to do when it comes to effective communications. Just this morning, I read an article about the fact that we have an entire generation going through a process today where they do not know how to carry on a personal conversation. They are sending emails back and forth with contractions, graphics and other forms of visual representations that supposedly stand for communications, but in many ways are creating isolated human beings.

If you marry that trend with this entire idea of “participative management”, it begins to create an image of isolation that may have severe consequences at some point in the future. If people don't have to communicate they won't. If you try to communicate with everyone, you will fail. Participative management as a concept was not based on that form of isolation. It was originally created as a way of getting more input between labor and management in improving relationships.

Over my 50 years in the fire service, I have developed a rather comprehensive social network of my own. My contacts are in the form of business cards and I will admit that they are stored in an electronic filing system. But behind every one of those business cards are faces and opinions that I respect. When I wish to communicate with them, I seek them out. Likewise, when they wish to communicate with me, they seek me out. I would submit that many of you reading this article may well be benefiting in social networking at that level.



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Going back to the discussion of is it a good idea to allow every single member of an organization to vote on every single issue while sitting at their office at home because they cannot afford to be at the meeting has some unintended consequences.

Before I even begin on that discussion, I would ask you a question. Would you want our Federal Senators and Congressman and our State Senators and Assemblymen sitting at home at a computer terminal when it comes time to vote on major policy issues at our state or national capitol? I don't believe that we would support that idea because we want our legislators to be participants in the process and to be accountable for what they do. I won't argue whether our current crop of legislators is doing that job satisfactorily. I will state that I believe that representative government is not the same as mass media. Furthermore, I feel that we need to have our policy makers participate in a process that is somewhat formalized in order to keep it from becoming something that can be co-opted with no consideration of impact overall.

I recently read a column by Keith Ferrazi where he discussed how social networks are now leading to social revolutions. He was using as his example how the increased access to social media has generated social revolutions that have impacted entire countries. This story is more or less torn from the headlines of countries that are suffering political turmoil. He quotes the following five reasons why social networks lead to social revolutions:

1. It is easy to find similarly minded people (on the internet)
2. It is simple to plan and organize
3. It cuts across social boundaries
4. It encourages freedom of expression
5. It is accessible from anywhere

Therefore, it is my concern that allowing every single member of an organization to vote on core processes with no commitment to the actual process, will result in unintended consequences that no one has accurately assessed. I will be the first to admit that being at these hearings is an expensive process. I will also admit that sometimes you don't always get what you want even when you participate in the face to face discussions. But, it is real and can be accurately assessed much better than allowing electronic democracy to run amuck. I believe the unintended consequences do not justify making that change.

There will be resistance to this point of view, I can be assured. Our society seems to be almost perfectly split right down the middle today. Many of our major policy issues are now being determined by votes that are measured in decimal points. If we put five people in a room to discuss something, the vote will sometimes come out 2.6 to 2.4, with someone in the middle thinking this is compromise. But it isn't. Instead, this polarity is rendering us almost indecisive on major policy issues.



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From my perspective in the organizational process, the way we have done things in the past has demanded a lot from the participants. You have to be there to see what I mean. One could almost visualize that if we revert to electronic technology, it may totally eliminate the motivation of anyone to go to the meetings and engage in the dynamic that exists there. While we may be technically capable of letting everybody participate by pushing a button, the consequences may be much more far reaching than a physical act.

I am not suggesting that we totally eliminate the concept of encouraging participation. I am just suggesting that we need to make sure that we don't generate social revolution when we are dealing with the fire services processes. In fact, there may be room to use this process to generate ideas and to raise the level of participation. Those of you, who read Malcolm Gladwell, John Hagel, John Seely Brown, or Tahl Raz, may already be familiar with this concept and may well have shaped your own opinions.

In summary, do we have the capability of providing electronic voting? The answer is yes. Is it the right thing to do? From my point of view, the answer is a very, very confused maybe. I don't believe that it is a good idea to move forward with that degree of ambiguity about consequence. Sooner or later this will be decided by large groups of people doing something to either vote the concept up or down. I can only hope that common sense will prevail and we will continue to use electronics for communications but use participation as the benchmark for making the final decisions.