



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Updating Your Bar Code

Have you been shopping recently in the grocery store? When you go to the supermarket these days, it's different than it was back in the good old days. You used to select a product line of the shelf and never worried about when it was manufactured or picked. We never had to worry about expiration dates. That was before preservatives and manufactured obsolescence.

But, today, when people go to the supermarket, one of the things that they look for is, how long is that product going to remain useful before it becomes spoiled. There's a mechanism used on many products these days called bar codes to indicate expiration dates. In the dairy section in a supermarket you can see, on the side of a half of gallon of milk, a bar code there. Further, the label says, "Use before a certain date." The reason that bar code is on there is so that you, as the purchaser, have a reasonably good idea that the product you are getting is fresh. You can count on the product to be the value that you are paying your good money for.

The "sell before" code concept is an interesting idea. It used to be that when a product was put on the shelf, it just set there until somebody purchased it or, somebody would purchase it and go home and find out that it wasn't what they thought it was. If the product was spoiled or it didn't work quite right the customer came back and filed a complaint with the grocery store. The reason the supermarket industry got into creating the "sell before" date idea was to create quality assurance. The customer knows they are getting their monies worth when the bar codes states a sell before date.

How many of us would, for example, on today's date, walk in and take a carton of milk and when the label on it says sell before yesterday. Would you buy a carton of milk with an expired bar code like that? You'd put it right back on the shelf and you'd go through the stock until you found one that says sell before two weeks from now. What you want is to make sure that that product that you get is going to be useful to you.

To a certain degree, we firefighters have all got bar codes on us too. You probably haven't noticed them, because nobody has it tattooed to their skin. Our bar codes are expressed in attitudes.

When we first became a member of the fire service, in one fashion, we all have bar codes imprinted upon our minds. There is a point in time in which we can become obsolete too. Its like human beings have a shelf life. Products have a shelf life, people have a shelf life. But we call it by a different name - burnout. Instead of spoilage we lose our enthusiasm for what we are doing.

The bar code that we see on a product when we go to the store is put on at a point in time close to the date of manufacture. You don't, for example, put bar code on cows, you bar code their milk. The cow keeps producing milk. The thing that we are interested in is; when did the manufacturer put that milk in a container? When did they put it on the shelf?

If a product has a bar code there are three things that happen to them: They are used. Somebody takes that product off the shelf. They take it home and they use it up. They throw the empty container in the



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trashcan. They are not the least bit concerned about what the expiration date was on the bar code, because the product was used up before it got spoiled.

What are the other two fates for a product? Well the second fate is that somebody will eventually come in there and look at that bar code and say, you know that product is just about ready to become obsolete, let's take it off the shelf and let's get rid of it. That's called disposal, and stock rotation. It's also a waste.

There's a third fate of a product. The third fate is the one that I think that it sometimes causes us a certain amount of grief and that is that somebody purchases that product just when it is ready to fail. And they take it home and they open it and they are sadly disappointed to find out that they didn't get what they paid for. It spoiled on them. And what we mean by spoiling is the fact that it doesn't taste right, doesn't look right, and doesn't smell right, whatever the case may be.

There are some corollaries to this, in the sense that we as individuals in the fire service may have an invisible bar code alongside our name. I personally believe that there are three stages in our career in which we are given, or renew our bar code. This belief is based upon the idea in our career development processes, unless we rejuvenate ourselves, there is a possibility our shelf life will terminate.

Let me tell you when the first bar code is attached. The first is the day a person graduates from the recruit academy. They get an invisible bar code put on them. Does anybody doubt that the highest level of enthusiasm that people have for their personal careers in the fire service is the day they graduate from the recruit academy? Isn't that the day when a person is wrapped so tight they feel they are ready to do darn near anything there is, anyplace, anytime, for the fire service. The day that somebody pins a badge on a firefighter for the first time is the date of their original manufacture as a product. The day that person stands up responds to their new oath of office in front their family and friends they are so proud they could burst.

How long does it take for that person, who graduates from recruit academy to become disillusioned, depressed and disappointed with the fire service? That's how long their bar code was good for. How long does it take for them to suddenly say, "This is the most screwed up outfit I've ever been associated with in my entire life." Have we all seen that?

I can remember sitting on oral boards where individuals would come in to ask for a job and you would ask them questions such as, "Why do you want to become a firefighter?" They can give a litany of reasons, mostly very altruistic. "I want to serve humanity, I want to save lives and property, I want to be responsible for the safety of my fellow man, etc."

Talk to those same recruits, say maybe four or five years down the road and you may find out that the entire luster has worn off of their blooms, so to speak. All they're concerned about is the fact that the chief's an idiot, their captain's a boob, and the battalion chief's a bozo. What happened? Well, their bar code ran out.



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They have spoiled because from the original date of manufacture they have started to deteriorate. They have failed to renew themselves. All of us can lose the perspectives we had to begin with. Many bar codes expire the day probation ends. It's sort of like a person comes to work on Friday, and they are a particularly happy individual. They are individuals who have their act together. They will do almost anything you ask. The person passes probation, and the next day, you've got to shake them to find out if they are breathing.

What happened? And why does it happen? Well I don't really know all the reasons, but I've made some observations. I'm not sure that everybody agrees with my premise, but I'm going to make some statements anyway. When a person gets their original training in recruit academy, one of the things that we do is we really sell people on the concept of what they're in the fire service for. We almost oversell the profession. You got to be ready to do all of these grand and glorious things, you got to be ready to save lives, you got to be ready to protect property, you got to be ready to do all of these things. Then for the next year and sometime longer they don't get a chance to do it very often.

We oversell the expectation of what it's like to be a firefighter and as a result of that, our personnel start looking around and begin saying, "Well you know, I haven't saved anybody lately and I haven't had the chance to be a hero in last 24 hours." They lose their enthusiasm for the profession because they are unable to get an opportunity to actually implement the very things that we told them was part of the makeup of their career. Whenever we put people in recruit academies, one of things that we have to be very careful to do is to give them a realistic appraisal of what the lifestyle in the fire service is really all about.

How do I know when somebody is starting to lose their enthusiasm as a firefighter? I'd be willing to bet you that some of you have seen some of these symptoms in firefighters, may be even yourself. One of the first symptoms that people's bar codes are beginning to expire is when their focus turns from their career to their off duty time. They are no longer as much concerned about what they are learning and what they are new knowledge they are acquiring or new skills they are developing. They start to shift their focus and start to look to the outside of their careers for fulfillment.

Anytime that begins to happen their bar code is starting to expire. It is starting to reach the point where the person is spoiling on the shelf. If a person is not focused on their career and they have focused entirely upon the external aspects of their life, they are not going to put a 100% into the job any longer.

What's the next corollary that people get, to getting a new bar code? If becoming a recruit firefighter is the height of your enthusiasm for getting into this profession, when will a person invariably get at least one more boost? Most experienced people in the fire service have already experience that boost at least once. It's the day you get promoted. You get a new bar code the day you get promoted. Everything that led up your promotion has been nice to know, it's nice to have, but you're bar code starts all over again the minute you acquire a new rank, a new position, or a new assignment. The old bar code has expired.

What we are doing with people when we promote them is we are doing stock rotation. They are no longer a firefighter; they are now an apparatus operator. They are no longer an apparatus operator; they are now a captain. They are no longer a captain; they are now a battalion chief. That is actually a



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form of stock rotation. The minute a person changes jobs and they take on that new position, some of those things that led to disillusionment and disenchantment at lower levels are no longer valid. It's time to disregard them.

It's time to look again at the fact that they are starting off on a brand new "day one." I've had many opportunities to see what happens with people who get promoted. Earlier I stated that with recruit firefighters, their bar code sometimes expires upon date of probation. When do you think the bar code expires on people who get promoted? For many it is the first day you get in trouble for doing something in the new job that causes you to wonder why they moved up the ladder of success. That's when the glory wears off. This especially happens to those that renew their bar code by becoming Fire Chief.

It's when you suddenly realize that taking a job and loving to come to work does not prevent you from suffering criticism. Once the captain gets on a apparatus operators case and chews them out for the fact that they drove too fast through an intersection or they didn't operate quickly enough on setting up a pumping operation the person often loses sight of the original satisfaction. When a captain looks up and sees the battalion chief coming down the hall saying, "come in the office and close the door," the anxiety begins to well up. It's when the city manager calls the Fire Chief up and asks him to come to city hall right now because the budget has to be cut 5% that the bar code begins to tarnish. When a person gets promoted, and gets a new rank their bar code gets renewed. Each time the duration is different.

Going back to our comparison with a consumer product there's one thing that you've got to take into consideration with anything that is perishable. You have to consider how long it can endure before becoming something else.

What do we call milk when we recycle it? Cottage cheese. When a person gets promoted, they get a new bar code this is because it's a new product, not a spoiled one that needed recycling. They are no longer an extension of the old product. They are now a new product. What this means is that a person cannot repeat or continue to perpetuate all the things that were involved when you were something else. A person must grow into the new job at the same rate that the bar code is being extended.

Some people might say that when it comes to promotion that one of the other things that affects how long a person stays excited about a new job is whether or not they feel that they are stuck in that job permanently, or not. We have many individuals who are very happy, very satisfied at staying at a particular level in the fire service and do not worry about the next level up the ladder. They don't want to become whatever that next rank is. Some people say that when a person makes that decision to no longer aspire, that somehow their bar code is starting to expire, too.

I don't necessarily agree with that because I think that it's appropriate for certain people in the fire service to remain very happy at particular levels. Often they're an inspiration and their motivation to others. Their attitude is that it is OK being the best there ever was in an existing rank. I personally have had in my career an opportunity to work with people who are call themselves career firefighters. They don't want to be anything but firefighters. And the reason they have not expired is because they are still inspired as firefighters. They take their position extremely seriously. They are constantly rejuvenating their knowledge; they are constantly redefining their skill sets. While the bar code that they got on



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hiring is not a new bar code, they've extended the period of time because they have done so consciously rather than letting it wear out.

My last example in looking at the bar code expiration process is the day that an individual assumes the rank of chief officer in an organization. I draw a real line of distinction between the promotional process and firefighter apparatus operator, up to company officer and even to battalion chief, because there a support mechanism in the firehouse that allows us all to kind of feed off of one another. But, the day a person becomes a Fire Chief, in my opinion, they get a brand spanking new bar code that's got a very definite limitation to it. Let me tell you what the limitation is. The limitation on the bar code for a fire chief is the day their enemies exceed their friends. Think about it.

A chief's bar code expires the day they have actually got more people opposing what they are doing than they've got people who are supporting what they are trying to do. I've been a chief officer in several fire agencies. I've had the opportunity to talk to a lot of chief officers in other departments. I've heard that term used that referred to earlier. It's called burnout. When people say, I'm burned out. I'm out of here, I want to quit, I want to leave this job, or whatever the case may be. I don't think that burnout is the appropriate term. I think the term is expired.

That's what really happens when people get to a certain level of being totally frustrated with their job and their responsibility, they expire. They're not burned out; they just decided they're not going to do what it takes to be what they need to be anymore. They don't want to do that anymore, and as a result, their shelf life starts getting more restrictive.

Now, when we look at all these elements, how do we know that any person, at any rank is starting to the end of their shelf life? There are some symptoms that start to occur. No matter whether a person is a firefighter, a company officer, a command officer, or the chief of a department these symptoms can be observed by others.

Symptom number one is when a person begins to criticize the organization more than they praise it. When they spend more time saying what's wrong with an organization than they do saying what's right with an organization. That's when their bar code is starting to expire. It's when an individual starts looking around and instead of saying "what can I do to make the organization better," their concept is to discuss what is wrong with this organization and yet they cannot provide a solution. No matter what their rank they are losing it. Now that can apply this concept to an entire engine company. The symptoms can apply to a platoon, it can apply to a battalion, and it can even apply to a whole fire department.

The minute an individual focuses more of their attention on criticism than they do on support for the organization, the individual is starting to expire.

Another symptom of a person's bar code starting to expire is when they become indifferent to learning. That doesn't mean that they don't experience training. They just don't get anything from it. Many training officers have conducted classes in which individuals sitting in the classroom look like they are a



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test example for a laboratory study on how to sleep standing up. The minute people start losing their enthusiasm for the learning experience; their bar code is starting to expire.

One of my exposures in the fire service was to a gentleman who recently passed away. His name was Ray Gallagher and he was a Captain on the Costa Mesa Fire Department. When I was a young, fired-up, enthusiastic firefighter Ray Gallagher was one of the old guys. Theoretically, he should have been burned out. Theoretically, his bar code should have expired a long time before mine. But Ray Gallagher was the kind of Captain who would be sitting at a fire station at seven o'clock at night and he'd look at his watch and he'd say, "Well, let's go out and do a hose lay drill." "What?" we sometimes said, "Are you out of your mind?" But, we went and did the hose lay drill. We sometimes had a great time, because he always managed to make them a little humorous or make them a little fun. He was still inspired in his job to learn. One of the clues to a person who is starting to run out of enthusiasm is when they say, no I don't want to take that training, no I don't want to learn anything from this, they go brain dead when new information is being given to them.

Another of the clues for obsolescence is when people spend more time talking about the past than they do the future. The syndrome of talking about what we usually call the good ol' days. When a person starts talking about something by stating, "Well we didn't do it that way in the good ol' days." If you ask them, "When were the good ol' days?" They reply, "Well that was back when we did" You fill in the blank.

I would guess there are not many people in the fire service today who remember the good of days when we used to have to buy our own protective clothing when we were first hired as firefighters. Very few people today remember the good of days when a person was considered a wimp if they put on a breathing apparatus. Even fewer remember the good ol' days when firefighters worked like a 96-hour workweek. Those weren't good ol' days. When a person is more focused on the past more than they are focused on the future they are beginning to deteriorate.

What are some of the things you can do to make sure that you're bar code gets renewed? What are some of the symptoms of a person who is successful in renewing their bar code?

The number one symptom is when a person concentrates their energy on improving the organization in spite of all the obstacles that it faces. Their bar code cannot expire. If a person is focusing on improving, no matter what is put in their way, no matter what the chief may have said, no matter what the city council could have said, no matter what the city manager reportedly has said, no matter what the captain on B shift could have said, they improve. A person who is focused on how they can improve their organization, then they are renewing their bar code almost every day. All of us are capable of doing that. When a person adds value to their organization, they are adding to themselves. They are extending their own careers.

The number two way of renewing oneself is to engage in learning experiences at every opportunity. What's a learning experience? It's not necessarily training, it's not necessarily a formal classroom, it's the moment that an individual realizes that they are being exposed to information that is not part of their current knowledge, skills or abilities and they want to add something new to their inventory. If a



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person becomes an information sponge it s hard to become obsolete. When a person starts absorbing new things they grow. This is true now matter what rank they are at. It makes no difference how much time you have in grade. An individual at the lowest position in the department has just as much right to understand what management theories are being used to operate a fire department. All ranks need to know what the budget processes are. They might not get a chance to practice any of this for a while, but they can understand it and be improved as a member of the organization.

Number three is similar in nature to the first two, but it's an extension of both, and that is developing the perspective that taking on new challenges is a noble purpose. Any time that a person takes on a new process, a new project, a new event, their bar code gets updated. I'm not just talking about talking about being involved in mundane projects, I'm talking about doing things that require a person to stretch their competency, cause them to stretch their vocabulary, cause them to stretch their knowledge base. Because the moment a person does that they have moved your expiration date a couple of days further down the line.

To understand this concept, you need to personalize it. Everybody in the fire service has a bar code on them that was affected by one of those three things that I stated earlier. If you're a firefighter and your bar code was put on you in 1973 or 1974, or you're a captain and you got your bar code renewed in 1985 or 1991 or whatever the case may be or you've just been a recently appointed chief and that your bar code might be only three years ago, but your career goes back 35 years.

Experience doesn't count when it comes to shelf life, demonstrated competencies does. A person remains fresh by displaying the fact that they have maintained skills for today, not yesterday. It not what you did in the past, it's not what you say you are going to do in the future that determines your bar code. It is what you do with what you've got today. Demonstration of competency and demonstration of enthusiasm and how you respond to situations is more a display of your bar code then the date that it was given to you.

Once again, I will reflect back on some of the people I've experienced in my career, I remember one individual who will remain nameless, for obvious reasons, that the day I went to work in the fire station with him, he set me down and started telling me everything wrong with the organization. Why I wasn't going to like it working at that station, why I wasn't going to like working on that shift, why I probably should apply for a position in a neighboring fire department, etc., etc. That particular individual remained in his career within the context of that particular department for almost 30 years and the day he left, he was as bitter about his job as the day he was when I worked in that firehouse.

What a disappointment. What a way to end your career. I contrast that with an individual that with Captain Gallagher, who was as enthusiastic for his career the day he walked off the job, as he was the day he got the job. That particular individual had a career. The other guy had a job.

What you've got to ask yourself is how I am doing on my personal bar code. Take a look at the bar codes of your subordinates, your superiors. Ask yourself, what can I do to encourage people to renew themselves? What can I do to re-motivate them?



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Those little black lines on the bar code are also used for another purpose. When you get up to the counter, they use the bar code to determine the price of the object. A little number appears on the screen and the computer indicates that jar of mayonnaise costs this amount or that gallon of milk is worth that.

Here is the last point to be made. Is if a person purchases a fresh product and they get their monies worth, there is value to that. What we are trying to bring to our careers, is value to our department, our community and our profession. If you keep renewing your bar code, sometimes the value of that bar code continues to migrate upward. If an individual becomes a spoiled product, then society may do what the supermarkets do? They discount. Day old bread is sold at a lower price.

What we should be doing is renewing our bar codes and those of every one that we have responsibility for because it increases our value and as it increases the value, then our profession collectively benefits. Personally I don't get a chance to do that much shopping in my household. My wife takes care of most of it, so I have to readily admit that when I started using the bar code analogy and I was discussing this speech with my wife, she said, "You don't have any idea of the price of groceries anyway...how would you know if you were getting a bargain."

Well, I think I do have somewhat of a concept of the price of the fire service, the services that we have and the value we bring to the table. The level of support that we gain out of our communities is related to their perceptions of our contributions to their safety.

I can guarantee that if we renew our bar codes frequently enough, there will be people who come to the hypothetical supermarket of city services, and without any hesitation whatsoever, reach on the shelf that is called fire service and continue to pay for a product that they think they are getting.