



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Votes of No Confidence

Most all of us like to be respected or liked. We are social beings and even when we work in the context of power, authority, and responsibility that is hierarchical in nature, even the boss likes to be looked upon as "one of the gang." The corollary to this basic human need is that most of us have an extremely difficult time dealing with rejection, especially if it is hostile rejection.

But it happens, especially when there is a difference in perspective as to what two groups' expectations are with regard to social relationships. Let me be more specific. What a fire chief wants out of a fire department is often not what everyone else wants out of the department. What the preponderance or the members of a fire department want may not necessarily fit the vision that the fire chief has of that same organization. There is often conflict and that conflict is sometimes expressed in terms of what is called a "vote of no confidence." Notably, fire chiefs can't give votes of no confidence to their own laboring force. They do not have the ability to make much of a case in the public eye about members of their organization. When a vote of no confidence is expressed about a leadership person, however, it can have devastating effects. What is important to know as a chief officer is what a vote of no confidence may or may not be and to be prepared for its eventuality regardless of how well you think you are doing at this time.

It may never happen to you. It could happen to a neighboring fire chief. When it does occur, you must be prepared both emotionally and intellectually or it could prove to be one of the most devastating experiences of your career.

What most votes of no confidence would like to portray is that a person is either incompetent or incapable of providing leadership to an organization. It is based on the simple premise that if a large number of people say that something is wrong outsiders often accept that as prima facie evidence that something is wrong. After all, if so many people think something how can they all be wrong at the same time? Votes of no confidence, though, are not necessarily questions of competency. In some cases, there is an out and out conflict over power, even challenges to one's leadership. The results of counterculture activity, rejection of change, and, in the final analysis, some votes of no confidence are actually based on a person's inability to get the job done.

So what does a fire chief do about the potential? Do we stay awake at night waiting to see if our organization is going to vote to oppose our point of view on things? Chances are most of us don't. What is equally dangerous, however, is to act as if it can never occur and to be blind sighted by one that occurs because an issue is allowed to fester until it erupts.

There are three things a chief officer needs to do in order to be prepared for possible showdown over



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

confidence in the organization. One should be extremely realistic about what is happening in the organization. You should maintain liaison with your superiors. You should also know your own strengths and weaknesses.

Realism in an organization is a combination of two things. The first is what you think is going on and the second is what everyone else thinks is going on. Realism is somewhere in between. In reviewing incidents involving individuals who got themselves into difficulty in organizations one of the most predominant characteristics they exhibited was a tendency to underestimate their adversaries and to make light of circumstances no matter how serious they were. In short, they did not have a realistic appraisal of what was going on. The worst possible thing a person can do in an organization is to know they face conflict and either ignore it or treat it superficially. This is especially true if the conflict is internal to the organization. It is alright for individuals to have disagreements. When the situation becomes disagreeable the chief officer must not retreat from the situation and isolate himself from the problem. It only allows the adversarial relationship to be more highly developed by those individuals who have not chosen that isolation.

Although, it is not quite the same, another characteristic that was exhibited by individuals who found themselves on the outside of a vote of no confidence has been inconsistent leadership. In short, they apply practices and principles under one set of circumstances and relinquish them under another. The organization begins to vacillate and, not unlike a tuning fork that is struck, begins to vibrate from those inconsistencies. In some cases, inconsistency is almost as bad as isolation because individuals within the organization who wish to discredit a chief officer can point to the inconsistencies as evidence of lack of focus. Further, they can actually begin to manipulate situations to cause inconsistencies to occur, thereby mobilizing forces on their side.

Keeping your superior informed has been mentioned in this column before. If someone is experiencing difficulties in the organization the worst thing they can do is attempt to keep that conflict from becoming apparent to a superior individual in the hierarchy. What is doubly dangerous is if you fail to communicate the problem and someone else notifies your superior of the area of difficulty then you have broken the link between two groups, those that disagree with you in a subordinate relationship and those that disagree with you and have the potential of supporting you in a superior relationship.

The primary issue is not to go running to your boss every time there is a conflict with individuals in the organization. What is important is to maintain an open channel of communication so that when you begin to appraise differences of opinion in an organization they become depersonalized and you can address them as issues rather than differences between you and other individuals.

This communication relationship is extremely important after a situation finally comes to a rolling boil and you are faced with a public display of disagreement. If the groundwork is laid properly to justify



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

your position on specific issues and to articulate where the differences lie, it is not uncommon for the "ranks to close" in a solid support for the individual. On the other hand, if a superior officer feels like they have just received a slap in the face, they are liable to take it out on the individual they consider responsible for the phenomena. That could be you.

Our last issue is identifying your own strengths and weaknesses. When an individual faces difficulties in an organization the worst thing they can do is double their efforts on whatever it is they are good at. The classic example might be a person who considers himself to be a strong command officer. In the event they are facing difficulties in the organization they double the intensity of their decisiveness thereby cutting off participation and channels of communication. In effect, by overusing the strength or excessive use of any particular behavior they may find themselves being manipulated by those who wish to bring about the most discomfort. The same thing applies to weakness. Whenever a person faces a conflict that is based on one of their own weaknesses, one of the worst behaviors would be to attempt to justify your weakness and/or gloss over its significance in the discussion.

More importantly, you should find ways of taking your strength and reinforcing other people as opposed to reinforcing yourself. And, in the event you do have a particular weakness you should be willing to listen to the advice of those you respect regarding how to mitigate it or at least reduce its impact on a set of circumstances. Taking counsel of other individuals is not a display of weakness. The best of generals have asked for advice from their subordinate officers in military invasions. Some of the best coaches in the world of sports have listened to a quarterback who is out there on the playing field.

It is usually unlikely in any organizational setting that everyone will be totally disappointed or disenchanted with your performance. In the event there is conflict, one should be willing to sit down with their enemies to discuss how they perceive various strengths and weaknesses.

Granted, this is certainly not an easy task to perform. What we are talking about here is survival. In a day in which the world super powers can tear down concrete walls and rip up barbed wire that has divided an entire globe, there is absolutely no reason why a fire chief can't sit down with his/her enemy and discuss the differences of opinion.

If you followed all three of these tenets and have a realistic appraisal, keep your boss informed, and know what you are and what you are capable of you may still face a set of circumstances where someone on the other side feels it is in their best interests to try to bring you down. The vote may be cast. The vote can possibly be against you. That doesn't necessarily mean you lose. How an individual behaves after a vote of no confidence is equally important as his previous actions.

Once again, there are at least three behaviors you can display to increase your survivability: Take responsibility for your actions; do not go into isolation; and do not focus on causes but focus on results.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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With reference to taking responsibility for your actions, if you followed through with the previous three suggestions a person should not have to make any apology for their position on an issue that may cause an organization to go into this kind of behavior. You should have all your facts. You should have done your homework. You should know what your limits and levels of authority are in dealing with issues that led up to the difference of opinion.

This does not necessarily mean that you should discontinue receiving facts and input that may modify your decision to change a particular decision. But you should not display any sense of apology or reticence to support your own actions.

The classic old response to criticism of "no comment" simply does not work very well in this day and age. Now it is time to work with your superior to prepare a joint statement or to put yourself into a setting where you control the press conference or whatever form you choose to take your case to the public. Withdrawing and refusing to deal with either the media or those in which you are in conflict only creates the perception of fear. If someone wishes to display they have no confidence in you the worst thing you can possibly do is to have no confidence in yourself.

Focusing on outcomes instead of causes simply means you should avoid, at all costs, trying to find who the "ring leaders" are of the opposition. Even if you know who they are, it will do you absolutely no good to point a finger at them. Trying to polarize forces to resist your resistors only causes the camp to be further divided. When this occurs it is time to focus on what everybody wants out of the situation. In other words, if someone says they have no confidence, the next question is what is it that would give you confidence?

In reviewing numerous votes of no confidence it is my personal observation that, in most cases, there are no winners, just a series of losers. Even the individuals who are expressing dissatisfaction with the leadership in their organization often end up losing because the organization is diminished in credibility in the community as a result of the internal bickering. It is not uncommon for the results of such an event to have an impact on the interpersonal relationships on an organization for over a decade. Once something like this happens, it is important that you depersonalize it if you wish to see the outcome depersonalized.

Candidly, most people advocate votes of no confidence to get their superiors terminated. But that is not necessarily an outcome. An outcome may be retention of an individual in a hostile work place that only makes life miserable for everyone.

In the final analysis, you also have to realize that you have rights too. One can attempt to assassinate your character but you have a right to fight back. No unlike the line by Sean Connery in the movie "The



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Untouchables", do not show up at a gunfight carrying a knife. You need to be prepared for this eventuality by preparing yourself internally.

We should all remember that at one point in time one of the greatest leaders that have ever lived on this planet was turned out by a political body because they lost confidence in him. Then, after he had retreated back to his home, reinforced his own personal philosophy, and made sure that he had confidence in himself, he was restored to a position of power and, as most of us will recall, Winston Churchill led his nation to victory at the end of World War II. To paraphrase one of his quotes, "You have nothing to lose but losing itself."