



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Where Do Columns Come From?

Shortly after I started producing my columns for Fire Chief Magazine, I would run into people who asked me the simple question: Where do you get the ideas for your columns? The answer is both simple and incredibly complex, but, has never changed practically from the first day of creating the column.

There are four words to capture the essence of the process. They are: inspiration, insight, intuition, and incubation. Other fire chiefs have inspired a significant number of my columns. For example in my years of working with members who are actively involved in leadership roles in the fire service I have witnessed both their successes and their failures. Often in conversation with these same individuals they would reveal to me their inner most thoughts about things that they wished they had done differently. Moreover, those who have been successful in achieving some of their lifelong gains have been more than willing to share with me what they think they did right in order to accomplish their goals and objectives. Not infrequently I was able to take that inspiration to a new level by mulling it over in my own mind. (I will discuss that again in incubation).

Another opportunity for the creation of a column was when I was personally able to observe something that I thought I learned a lesson from. Sometimes these were similar to the conversations stated in the previous paragraph. But more often than not they were my observations of watching other people struggle. I have actually had a couple of my friends lament to me that they have always been concerned that I was absorbing them in an experimental way because they often felt that things they were struggling with ended up as being columns in Fire Chief Magazine. They were partially right.

Intuition has come into the development of some columns merely because it just felt it was something that needed to be said. More often than not the intuitive type of columns came about from an experience that happened to me personally. I like some of the other fire chiefs that I have for inspiration have often had my own share of successes and failures that taught me a lesson or two. My intuition is almost always played about along the lines of hoping that the information that I was able to share in a column would cause somebody to miss having a negative experience.

And last but not least is the concept of incubation. I learned about incubation first from a class I took on creativity. For in the case of writing columns it goes something like this.

Frequently someone would give me an idea or an inspiration or an insight that I was unable to deal with effectively. I would write myself a set of notes about it and then I would through them in a drawer, which I keep in my office. Notably this drawer is still full of ideas that are still in the incubation stage. I have been unable to write about them because I didn't feel that I had grasped something worthwhile to share with others. On the other hand, frequently a period of time was spent contemplating that



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something would result and then be spontaneously taken out of the drawer and turning it into a column.

Another frequently asked question asked was how long does it take for me to write a column? The answer is it doesn't take me anytime to write a column. I dictate them all. Granted I have often spent time writing out a set of notes that I have either taped to the dashboard of my automobile or stuck in a briefcase when I am on a trip. But I seldom write anything down. I find that by talking into a dictation machine it is almost like carrying on a conversation with someone else. I have had many secretaries in my life and they have grown accustomed to listening to me chatter away in the development of a column accompanied by loud noises and abrupt sounds as I travel around the country. These secretaries are the unsung hero's of getting some of my thoughts out of my head and into writing.

Lastly, the editing process. There are actually two levels of which articles have been edited. The first is my own rough cut of what I intend to say in the column. The second one is the editing done by Fire Chief Magazine. My number one desire in editing an article is to make sure that it makes a point that someone can relate to his or her own personal experience. The editors at Fire Chief Magazine have done an outstanding job of keeping me from making of the more egregious grammatical errors.

In the final analysis a finished a column is somewhat like baking a cake. There are numerous ingredients that have been combined, folded into one another, but under the scrutiny of a certain amount of heat and the output have been the columns that appear in the pages of Fire Chief Magazine.