



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Who Moved the Finish Line?

A few years ago there was one of those management books published that was based upon a rhetorical question; “Who moved my cheese?”¹ You may have read it as part of your efforts to stay current on management and leadership theory. I know I purchased a copy and spent the time reviewing the theory or concept behind the catchy title. Now it rests on the bookcase along with its brethren. That must have been over twenty years ago now.

What brought it to mind recently was a conversation with a chief officer who was discussing the process of change with me. His direct quote was – “not only had someone moved his cheese, but they have also moved his finish line.” His comment was punctuated by a declaration that the constant pressure of change today has caused him to re-evaluate when he is going to retire. In his case, he had wanted to retire later on but is thinking about pulling the pin now. He wants to end the process right now. For him this act will signify that his race is over. His career is completed. He can walk away.

But do these kinds of problems ever go away? Even if one person withdraws from the race is the race actually over? Not by any way we measure survivability today. Dealing with organizational change is not going to get easier in the immediate future. Granted, we all come and go. But the system keeps evolving with or without our presence. Somebody still has to make the tough decisions. What does change is when experienced personnel retire early because of the stress they are trying to avoid and they leave their fire departments even more vulnerable.

The significance of this phenomenon is that by pretending as if there is a finish line to this process we are engaged in an exercise in futility. It may be the cause of unnecessary stresses on many a person who is currently in a position of authority today. They keep on thinking that it will all be over soon. It won't be.

Keeping a positive perspective on the process of managing change is every bit as important as making the changes themselves. We should never let the current set of circumstances determine our state of mind about our overall achievements over time.

Our individual careers are not like a foot race – a hundred yard dash in some cases, or a mile long or even a 10 K marathon effort. Instead, the fire service is really more likely a relay race that started a long time ago and is not over. Each of us has been given the opportunity to be carrying the baton for awhile,

¹ Johnson, Spencer, Blanchard, Kenneth, *Who Moved My Cheese?: An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life*, G.P Putnam, New York, 1998



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

but sooner or later we need to hand it over to someone else. The finish line is so far in the future we cannot even begin to see it.

The reason there is no finish line is that we are never finished. No matter what each generation does to reduce the risk, there are always new risks. Every new technology that makes it easy to combat emergencies is eventually plagued with a new and emerging problem for which the tool becomes obsolete. Budgets cannot just keep escalating as if there is no tomorrow, because in some tomorrows there are limited funds.

One thing is for sure. We should not despair from this phenomenon. It is what should sustain us. We should be delighted that we were given the chance to carry the baton.

It's a real tragedy to see so many individuals reach the end of their career disappointed, even angry about one or more of the current economic problems facing their profession. If only we could extract a pint of blood from every candidate when they are a recruit academy graduate and infuse it into the blood stream of them as they approach being a retiree, perhaps we could stem the tide of frustration. Everyone who is leaving embittered could possibly restore that sense of meaningfulness that came with choosing the fire service as a career in the first place if we could give them that transfusion.

I'm not writing this column to trivialize the nature of our current problems. To the contrary, it's my belief that we need to pay very close attention to them as we hand the leadership reins to a new generation. But, I say hand off the baton; don't toss it over our proverbial shoulder as if it was something we are disposing of.

What change is even further down the road? Will there be a rehabilitation of our profession from the economic losses we are experiencing right now? Probably. Will the fire service come out of this looking differently than before, possibly?

Who is going to facilitate these changes? Not you or I. Instead it will be our successors who now have been handed the baton. Kudos's for those who have been running the race over the last 20 years. They should be allowed to go to the sidelines and get a breather. But they should not be considered a dropout from the race. Any person who carried the baton successfully should be looked upon an asset to the team and stick around to help be a coach.

As I wrote his column there was a story on national television of a young girl who suffered an injury in a cross-country race and collapsed within yards of the finish line. The rules don't allow anyone to get any help, so the camera focused on her struggles to crawl to the finish line. Agonizing over every tortured movement by the teen aged racer, her coach was seen right along the sidelines encouraging her to finish the race. After she did the announcer made a point tell the onlookers that this was the coaches last race



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

because he is dying of Lou Gehrig 's disease. I ask you to think about this. Who had the most courage; the teenager crawling on the ground or the coach making sure that she knew that someone was there to pick her up after she crossed the finish line?

To paraphrase Robert Frost; we have miles to go before we sleep.