



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

Don't say Ghost Busters! While that song was very popular in the period of time in which the film was popular, that is not what I am referring to. In the context of this discussion, my question is more specific. Who are you going to call when something is happening in the legislative arena that will have an effect on your fire agency? There are many levels in which the communications process begins with the simple fact that you must be able to contact someone to express your concerns, or, to put your issue on the table. So, who are you going to call?

Let's start by saying that there are three levels in which you should have individual names in your rolodex readily available to call if you are being affected by something that is going on at any one of those three levels. They are local, state, and federal legislators and regulators.

By local, I am referring to both local and county government.

If I asked you to open up your Rolodex, Blackberry, iPod or whatever mechanism you are using to keep track of people, would you be able to tell me the name and telephone number of a point of contact at the jurisdictional level that I just described? If you are a local government entity, who are you going to talk to when another organization is about to take action that impact your agency? If you are in county government, who is the individual that you need to communicate with? If it is a state issue, where do you start? Lastly, if it is a national issue, is there a channel of communications for you to participate in?

This article assumes that you have the motivation and interest to do something about something that is going to affect you. If, you are engaged in a political discussion with any of these levels of governance, I can assure you that there is going to be a certain amount of discomfort if your very first contact is going to be over a complaint by you. What I am proposing here is that you have some numbers that you have had regular contact with and an open channel of communication long before any issue becomes problematic.

For example, if you tend to be able to deal in a political world, you cannot be a total stranger to the individual that may control your destiny. My personal recommendation is that everyone has at least four numbers in their possession that they can access as quickly as possible. They are the secretary of the person who has been elected to run the Authority Having Jurisdiction over your department. That right I said secretary. Knowing who the boss's secretary is might be more important than you can believe. The second is the Administrative Assistant to the County Board of Supervisors or whatever county organization exists. The third is the staff person responsible for either the State Assembly or State Senatorial offices that covers your area. Lastly, of course would be a parallel set of numbers for your congressman and federal senator.



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What you need to be thinking about right now is contacting those people to become their latest best friend. I am not suggesting that you need to jump into the political arena and start getting engaged in things like fund raising and/or taking on problematic issues that are not specific to the fire service. But you cannot afford to be a total stranger to the political hierarchy if you want to influence political processes. My number one suggestion is that you make an appointment with those individuals and meet them on a face to face basis and merely have one item on the agenda. That item is to ask them how they prefer to be contacted on issues that might be relevant to your organization. The second half of the agenda is that you ask them if they would be willing to keep you in the communications loop on issues that you can mutually agree upon. We are not talking about this occurring during a specific political debate. This is a preplanning move on your behalf.

Once you have established that channel of communications you need to make it part of your background to periodically reinforce it. What I am referring to here is the fact that channels of communication are like any other distribution network. They get clogged up sometimes and they sometimes get changed. It is important that as long as you are an individual responsible for the future of your fire department that you periodically go back and reconnect in this network to be assured that you are not lost in the shuffle. Moreover, this process can actually be used to transfer influence. Let's say for example that you are planning on leaving as the fire chief. It might be for retirement. If you have this channel of communication you can take your replacement and reinsert them into that process. In other words, you get the opportunity to introduce them instead of someone having to seek them out later on.

The one thing I will not discuss in this piece is what you actually do from that date forward. There are too many variables for me to make sweeping generalities. What I am trying to suggest to you is that this is a form of preemption on your part. The more that you spend time developing a communications channel, the more likely it will function under stressful circumstances.

An example of what I am talking about occurred early in my career. I had an individual that I went to college with, who ultimately ended up being on the board of supervisors for my county. I can vividly recall an event in which we had a major fire in which he showed up on the scene. The level of dialogue between he and I was significantly different than what everybody else was experiencing. And I am not talking about personal friendships. What I am talking about is that he had the ability to ask me very specific questions based on our past relationship that were different than those that were being experienced by other parties.

So, let's go back to paragraph 1. Who you gonna call? It could be at the time of a major emergency or it could be at a time where there is a piece of legislation that you definitely need to have an opportunity to provide input. The only option other than what I am speaking of right now is that you become an observer of the process and do not provide any input. This will provide you with an ample opportunity



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to be upset, distressed and perhaps even angry about the outcome but it certainly won't make your job any easier.

Following through with this concept may not assure you success on any given issue but I will almost guarantee you that it will provide you with access.