CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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You Win Some and You Lose Some;
if You're Going to Play the Game

Comparison and contrast is a legitimate way of conducting research. If you take something and hold it up against something else in order to determine whether it is equal to, greater than or less than the preferred object, you can often make decisions on the desirability of the object.

Recently I had a chance to witness this method of research being applied in the midst of a conversation. An individual was comparing his experiences as a brand new fire chief with those expectations he had acquired in pursuing the job. Essentially, the individual was expressing a little bit of confusion. What he thought the chief's job was going to be like was not the reality. So what's new?

In many other columns we've discussed that there are many steps to the developmental process before one assumes the gold badge. Among these we've talked about such things as negotiating the position and some of the managerial techniques that are required to be a success. This column will focus on another set of criteria. These are the things you need to think about as to what you may lose before you become a chief.

Once you've made the decision to step forward and accept the fire chief's position, you must be willing to place a few things on the line. Assuming more responsibility also implies you will have a lot more influence over the direction of the organization. But having responsibility and influence does not necessarily mean that a person always succeeds.

What are the three basic things you can lose? They are popularity, credibility, and control. The corollaries to these three statements are: you stand a chance of gaining power, influence, and confidence.

During the discussions with the chief officers on this topic, several of them remarked that if they would have realized how important these factors could become, they may have reassessed their pursuit of the job until a little later in their career. For future fire chiefs there is also a lesson here. If one is serious about career development, one does not just study the technical side of the job but also studies themselves to determine what their strengths and weaknesses are with respect to handling potential losses.

If there is any one particular aspect of a fire chief's job it is the fact you are totally accountable and responsible for the outcomes of what goes on in the organization. No matter what happens to you and no matter what happens to your organization, good, bad or indifferent, as the chief fire officer you win or lose with the entire organization.

Another phenomenon is that if you desire to change things and most chief officers do take that job with the idea in mind of making the organization change in some way, it doesn't just happen because you say it is going to. There are going to be times in the dynamics of an organization when you will be on top and there will be sometimes when you are on the bottom. The degree to which you are prepared for this inevitable reversal of fortune may well determine whether you ever get out from underneath the pile.

Let's take, for example, the phenomena of popularity. There have been many individuals who have been extremely popular in the leadership role; either as president of a labor group or as a very popular member of the staff, who have found out that once they've assumed the role of fire chief, their popularity begins to erode. What they wanted to do as the chief is not the same as they wanted to do as an informal leader and there is often conflict. The degree to which a person has developed the skill to handle conflict may result in losses of friendship and even losses of moral and political support. If you're not willing to risk the loss of popularity, it's a very dangerous proposition to become a fire chief because some of the things you have to do are going to be unpopular. You show me a chief officer who makes every decision on the basis of whether or not people are going to like or dislike it, with a preference for always doing what everybody else wants, I'll show you a person who is not really in control of the organization.

The issue of credibility is one in which every fire chief should assess their "potential" for dealing with their own errors in judgment. Sometimes we make a decision and it's wrong. If it's wrong and we fail to admit it, it often gives the organization the feeling you will continue repeating mistakes and never learn from them and subsequently your credibility can erode. If you have never developed your ability to handle ambiguity, in other words dealing with decisions when no one is there to tell you what to do but rather to only hold you accountable for what you did, you have a potential weakness. Credibility is not always built upon making decisive movements. Credibility often accumulates to those people who can make both good and bad decisions and still have effective relationships with members of the organization.

Then there is this issue of control. As fire chief you are always in charge but you're not always in control. If one assesses themselves regarding their ability to deal with different kinds of processes that are inherent in both government and politics today, then they can often maintain control by holding loose reins. On the other hand, if an individual feels that control means dominance and that there are only zeroes and x's on the board, then when a person loses control they lose their perspective and subsequently they suffer.

Of course, as you may have guessed by now, the corollary to weaknesses in all three areas are strengths that result in power, influence, and confidence. If a person can tolerate being unpopular at the short run

but being correct most of the time, while they may not be popular they will end up having a great deal of power. If a person can deal with the strength of their own convictions and stick to their guns long enough, learn their lessons from their mistakes, and move to higher levels of interaction within the organization and in the community, then their influence begins to spread like ripples in a pond.

Self-confidence does not come about from being cocky but a cruise to the individual who is successful at small sum games and moves onto larger opportunities for reward. It is not uncommon for top-level athletes to win contests and then lose contests and yet still emerge as a champion by the end of the year. Confidence is not event driven nearly as much as it is process driven. Making the habit of not losing very much usually results in an individual winning a significant amount of time.

Before a person makes a decision to pin on a fire chief's badge they need to spend some time assessing themselves with respect to these factors. If you are not willing to accept the fact that sometimes people will not like what you do, not agree with what you do, and will not always do what you want to do, then you're alright. If you go into this job with the idea in mind that the gold badge automatically means the organization owes you blind loyalty, blind acceptance, and blind obedience, you're setting yourself up for being a failure most of the time.

On the other hand, if you are able to handle ambiguity in these areas and at the same time maintain your focus on why you're there, it is possible you will gain an ability to get people to do things even when they don't agree with you. You will accomplish things that are far more visionary than any other individual in the organization can conceive and you will feel good about it when it is all said and done.

The conversation that sparked a review of this process was a lengthy one. It went on for several hours and the dialogue ranged from cynical to exuberant about the different rewards of becoming a fire chief. As the hour grew late and wound down in volume, I asked the person who made the statement that started the conversation, "If you had it to do all over again - would you still become a fire chief?" "Of course," he replied, "the only thing I would have done differently is to read the rule book before I began to play the game."