



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Don't Trash That Gem - Pass it on to Your Men

Hold it there, chief! What was that that you were just about to throw into your wastebasket? Take a few minutes and think about what bit of information you were going to discard into the round file.

Was it a flyer for some school you weren't interested in attending? Was it a sales brochure about the specifications of new equipment? Perhaps it was a flyer on a textbook or some visual aids produced by one of the fire service agencies? It even may have been one of those thousands of invitations a fire chief receives every year to attend a function, open house or other activity.

So what, you say. So what if I throw it in my trash can? It was addressed to me, wasn't it? Don't I have the right to decide what best belongs in the trash basket?

Well, perhaps you're right. As fire chief, you are inundated on a daily basis with paper. Some of it is important, but a large amount of it seems irrelevant. I've actually heard some fire chief's brag about the fact they don't even bother to read this information. One friend told me his secretary has instructions to open up the mail and, if she doesn't believe it's appropriate for him, automatically toss it.

Well, chief, you may well be contributing to the eventual degradation of your department's ability to keep up with modern times, because the information flowing across your desk is a powerful means of enhancing job performance. The more a person knows about a given function or activity, the more likely he/she is able to influence the outcome of decisions relating to that activity. Information is power.

What am I suggesting? Only that we all take a little time to reconsider what we're throwing away. Instead of putting it into wastebaskets, we should be redirecting those opportunities to the other members of our staff. While something might be useless to you as fire chief, it may be very beneficial to the growth and development of one of your subordinates.

One striking example of this situation occurred in my own office a couple of months ago. An officer from a neighboring department who was a student in one of my classes asked if he could come to the station periodically to read our department's bulletin board.

Although I readily gave him my permission, my curiosity was piqued. I asked why he wished to do this. He stated that nothing ever appeared on his department's bulletin boards but orders and notices from the fire chief's office. Furthermore, the bulletin board was divided into two distinct sections: those things the chief promulgated and those the firefighter's association had permission to post. Nothing falling outside those two specified categories was allowed.



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This request indicated two things. First, this upwardly mobile officer was thirsty for information and wasn't going to allow his own department's parochialism to prevent him from finding out what was going on. The second thing it signaled was that the department he represented may well be on its way to serious morale problems if the fire chief thinks he is the only one capable of channeling information to his men and if the only additional information that's allowed on bulletin boards relates to labor relations.

A chief officer has a tremendous amount of responsibility in the coaching and mentoring of his subordinates. Unfortunately, we don't have all the time we would like to sit down and talk to our men on a one-to-one basis, advising them as to what they should do to cultivate skills for their future in the fire service. It is also prudent that we should not be wasting resources to address that same need in a roundabout way.

We should seriously consider short-circuiting information on its way to our trash basket by funneling it to other members of our organizations. This doesn't cost a dime. If you open up a piece of correspondence and it is in reference to some new equipment or technology, for example, it's just as easy to write the name of a subordinate officer across the top and send it through inter-departmental mail as it is to throw it in the trash.

Granted, we cannot force subordinates to utilize the information. However, if information is allowed to flow across our subordinates' desks, they cannot help but become even slightly more aware of what's going on in our profession.

To be even more effective, we can add something behind the officer's name such as: "What do you think of this?" or, "What else do you know about this?" We can certainly do a great deal to encourage our subordinates to open up their minds by asking them what they already know about what we're forwarding for their review.

If nothing else, it encourages them to engage in a bit of professional curiosity. By increasing their desire to broaden their knowledge base, we're challenging them to grow.

Another method of utilizing information is to label the top of the information post on the bulletin board. A neat, orderly, sterile bulletin board may indicate a tremendous amount of discipline in controlling the paper flow, but it doesn't convey openness by the department to deal with the outside world. When I'm engaged in either management or leadership training in a fire department, I'll walk through their stations and look at the items on their bulletin boards.

Commonly, the bulletin board becomes a form of official "altar." The only things attached are those that are "official." The firefighters and officers are expected to go to the bulletin board to be properly



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notified and duly warned of those things they are held responsible for or those things they can be disciplined for.

In other situations, the bulletin boards become nothing more than a “swap meet.” They are covered with notifications of vehicles for sale, cabins for rent in the mountains, requests for somebody to swap shifts, etc., etc. These bulletin boards tend to be layers and layers deep of various sizes of documents pinned, one atop the other, to create a scale-like appearance.

Bulletin boards of the third kind - those combining the needs of the firefighters, the department and the profession - tend to fall somewhere in between. Here you'll find official documents usually sequestered off into one corner and properly identified and labeled so they can be periodically purged, combined with an area where individuals can buy and sell various wares. A third section is devoted to information.

A clear indication of a fire department with a high degree of self-confidence is one in which all job announcements and career opportunities are posted on bulletin boards soon after they appear in the department's mailbox. Notifications of special educational or training opportunities also seem to find their way quickly to bulletin boards in such departments. Individuals are encouraged to take advantage of every opportunity the department is made aware of.

There's yet another use for all that information coming across the chief's desk. Even if a department cannot participate in an organization for lack of funds, for example, there's nothing wrong with recording the name, address and any additional information about the organization in a card file for future use as part of an information network. Frankly, I think it's counterproductive for someone to belong to all organizations. It dilutes participation and is a drain on the financial support of any one organization. Nonetheless, an effective fire officer should be aware of all organizations, who the prime movers are in those organizations and how to contact them in the event the department faces a problem a specialty organization can help resolve.

So there it is, chief! It's up to you. Every day you go to your office you'll probably receive a variety of unsolicited information. It's up to you what you're going to do with it. You can toss it into the trashcan unopened, if you think by looking at the return address that it's not going to impress you. Or you can open it up, give it a casual glance, wad it up and toss it into the trashcan. Or you can treat it as a new resource to help your department become more viable in meeting the needs of modern fire protection.

You might consider that paper as a form of fertilizer. As it is distributed out through the organization, it contributes to the growth of ideas.



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This isn't to say that your wastebasket won't fill up daily. If you use this concept and share it with other department members, you'll probably be very successful in filling up that basket with empty envelopes and packing materials.

If you're doing it right, the troops won't feel a compulsive desire to go through your trash at night to find out what's going on. Oh! You don't think that happens? You don't think that your personnel periodically get hold of that information anyway? Well, they do, and if they have to obtain it through such means, it's eroding your credibility, no one else's.

So, go ahead, fill that trash basket. But fill it up with trash, not information. Fill it with debris, not data. Fill it with flotsam and jetsam, not knowledge your fire department should have access to.