



In Trying Situations, it's Time to Chief Up

One thing that is unique about occupational slang is that a very short expression often stands for a lot more than the words express. For example, I have heard the acronym CHAOS used in the fire service. Reportedly it stands for "Chief Has Arrived on Scene." The image that acronym conjures up in my mind says a lot about command-and-control techniques and/or the absence of same by the white hats.

I also have heard the terms "chiefing around" and "chiefing off." Those terms often have been applied to fire chiefs who frequently disappear from the office. More often than not, this activity involves visiting other fire chiefs to lament the problems associated with managing fire departments.

But a new expression that I heard recently gave me a little bit of concern. My reaction was to slow down and check it out. The event involved an individual who was having a tough time dealing with a decision-making process in his community. One of his chief officers stated, while expressing frustration at the situation, that he expected his superior to take action — and soon. His comment was, "it is time to 'chief up.'" Obviously this is an extension of the phrase "man up" — or "woman up," for the gender-correct — which means to stand up for what you believe.

During our discussion, it became very clear that the fire chief's stress was associated with the fact that no matter what decision he made, it was not likely to be popular within his organization. The staff chief was frustrated equally in that the lack of a decision was resulting in huge morale problems in the organization. That scenario is not exactly a new phenomenon. Decision dilemmas have been going on practically since the advent of the first organized fire departments.

Being the chief is not supposed to be a popularity contest. Granted, in many cases,

especially in the early days of the volunteer fire service, making unpopular decisions often resulted in a chief not being elected the next time. In a more modern and contemporary sense, the chief making an unpopular decision often can result in an extremely negative reaction by the labor force. Therefore, the discussion of what it means to "chief up" is a lot more important than the phrase might apply.

I got into another discussion with another chief officer from a major fire department

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about the criticism being lodged against the fire chief for arguing against specific looming budget cuts. In that particular case, the city manager openly had stated "that there is no leadership in the fire service," meaning that the fire chief was resisting the change and was perceived as a weak department head. As a result, the chief felt vulnerable

In easier economic times, it is not hard to be the chief. But when the going gets rough, the demands and criticism endured by the chief become burdensome. Anyone can sail in calm waters, but it takes a sailor to handle rough seas.

In all of the schools, in all of the classrooms and in all of the training environments of the fire service, where does anybody talk about this phenomenon? It gets talked about a lot in an informal fashion, but seldom does the topic of personal integrity and inner strength enter into the formula of carrying out your duties as a fire chief.

But, that literally is what is meant by "chiefing up."

Decision-making during tough times is not always about popularity. It is about principle. And the fire chief must be prepared to stand on those principles, regardless of the consequences. I am not suggesting that you deliberately antagonize groups, but any given decision is liable to result in criticism from either your superior or your subordinate. Recognize it. Accept it. And then move on.

If you have gone through your entire career without having a serious conflict in making tough and/or unpopular decisions, then you are a fortunate person indeed. If you are looking down the path and seeing decisions of this nature facing you in the near future, you might be well-advised to examine the choices you are going to have to make from the perspective of your value system, and not your popularity.

It is vital then that your leadership strategy going into any decision-making process is not based on your personality or charisma, but rather on a set of ground rules that are well-defined. In advance of such events, there should be some introspective thinking on your part as to what you believe in, what you stand for and what you are willing to tolerate. Lacking definition of those three factors, you very likely will react to negative sets of circumstances in an emotional fashion.

I am not suggesting that conducting that kind of internal assessment will make the decision any easier. But I am suggesting that not doing it will make the decision a whole heck of a lot harder. [FC]

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