

THE MANAGEMENT CONUNDRUM:

Can you afford to take the position?

Can you afford not to?

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By Patrick Kendrick

Finally, you are here. You have obtained a chief's position. Trumpets are sounding on high. You have worked hard for years, aspiring to the next position in your fire service career. You have slowly built upon your experience, learning from both successes and mistakes. You have attended numerous college classes, conferences, and obtained certifications and degrees, much of this on your own time. You have sacrificed valuable personal time, short-changed your family time and, perhaps, forgotten your own personal dreams, goals, or hobbies. While you were attending schools or committee meetings your buddies were working on their golf game or learning the subtle nuances of sport fishing. Your children went from diapers to Dodges while you muddled through hydraulics, building construction, fire ground tactics and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. But, you have done all this to move up the career ladder and, rung after rung, you have succeeded.

You spent your time as firefighter, perhaps driver (where you later realize you should have stayed) then took your first officer position, lieutenant, or captain. With this position came responsibility, not only for yourself but for others. And, with each successive position after that came more responsibility and...more money. With every certification, or degree you earned, you probably earned more incentive money. With increasing experience and education you availed yourself of step-up pay and overtime pay. You made yourself valuable and you reaped your rewards with increasing earnings.

Now, you enter the realm of the inner sanctum, you *are* a chief officer. Whether you are a battalion chief, deputy or assistant chief, division or district chief, or fire chief, you have achieved that goal you set out to obtain for yourself so long ago. But, with this, you traded the security of the labor union's bargaining unit for the mystery of the

“management package” which is, in a word, unpredictable. Now, what happened to the money? You traded your leisurely shift schedule for a Monday through Friday, 8 to 5 grind that has chained you to a desk, blurred your vision, and reduced your posture to that of osteoporotic curve and now you find yourself staring into the mirror screaming, “Show me the money!” But, no one can because there is a simple truth they didn’t tell you while you labored away on that Fire Science degree: *Chief’s (with very few exceptions) do not make as much money as front-line officers.*

“What’s that you say? No one told me that.” Well, Bucky, that’s what I’m telling you now. You may think that there must be some hidden bonuses. With few exceptions; no, there is not. We are trying to run fire departments like corporations, so maybe there’s some profit sharing, or a Christmas bonus. No, there is not. How about the incentives? Well, maybe, maybe not. Those incentives for education, for technical certifications, the holiday pay, even longevity, is not always available to many chief officers in management positions, and the big nut, overtime, certainly will not be. Sure, there is a pay scale that usually reflects a salary step-increase for a chief officer position, but in most cases, it is no more than 5 % more than the highest paid line officer. And, once you take that line officer’s salary, add in the incentives, longevity, holiday pay, and overtime, in most cases the line officer will be making more money than his supervisor and maybe even *his* supervisor.

While attending the National Fire Academy for the past four years, I often listened to informal conversations from chief officers lamenting the loss of perks that were available to them when they were still on shift. It seemed a lot of people who made the move into management were unhappy, not so much with the new position itself, but

for the lack of benefits they previously enjoyed. To confirm this theory, I did a survey of a cross-section of fire rescue departments from all points of the nation's compass: the Executive Leadership class at the National Fire Academy. Represented in the group were departments from places as diverse as New York, California, Florida, Texas, Minnesota, Kansas, Washington, the Carolinas, and numerous other states. All of the people who filled out the survey were chief officers or held responsibilities of chief officers. The results were interesting.

Of those chief officers who filled out the survey, 87% said they were in management. In other words, they were not in a labor union that utilized collective bargaining, i.e., they were without someone who could negotiate for their raises, or fight for their jobs if they were jeopardized for any variety of reasons. Nearly 83% said they were paid higher than "lesser" officers. However, most of them made no more than 10% than lower ranking officers. Almost 9% were paid the same and another 9% were paid less. 69.5 % said their salary raises matched those of labor. 17.39% said their raises were less than labor. Only 8.6 % said their raises exceeded the raises that their bargaining unit members received.

Nearly 35% of the officers surveyed were on a pay-for-performance system of salary increases. That is, if you desire to get that annual raise that allows your salary to keep up with inflation, you have to tap dance. You have to keep your staff and crews in a state of operational readiness, motivated, trained, up to date with certifications and licenses, while also trying to keep city hall content, develop policies, fill out grant applications, etc. Pay for performance also means that when times get tough financially, you may not get any raise, no matter how much tap dancing you were doing.

Incentives varied widely. 43% of those surveyed indicated they received holiday pay, or the holiday off. Only 13% indicated they were paid for higher education, specifically a 2, or 4-year college degrees. 47.8% indicated they were given longevity pay. Only 21% were paid for professional certifications such as: EMT, paramedic, hazmat tech, fire inspector, or fire instructor. Nearly 35% said they received no incentive pay.

Benefits also varied widely. Almost 35% indicated they received “comp time”. Only 13% received annual bonuses, but these were also based on performance. About 48% received take-home cars. Almost 61% said they received some type of city-paid insurance. 17.39 % received various benefits that varied from matching 401K contributions to “special duties” and “paid retirement”. None of them received some of the contemporary benefits being offered by proactive organizations such as child, or elder care, flex time, or telecommuting by home-based computer.

This was not a particularly scientific survey; it was structured but informal. However, after attending the Academy for several years and networking with chief officers from, literally, all over the world, a question began to emerge for me: why do so many people want to be a chief if they don't make much money (or get equal benefits) doing it? Do people just want to boss others around? Are there are so many unfulfilled egos? Do people think there will be power associated with the position?

Well, there is power associated with the position. You're not going to be the president, or the commander of a battleship but you will have some power. And, that power is, or should be, the power to make effective change. It is one of the primary driving forces that compel people to aspire to be president, or general, or admiral, (all

positions that do not pay much, considering their overwhelming responsibility), or fire chief. Perhaps, as a fire fighter, or along the way through the ranks, you witnessed administrative policies, or operational procedures you thought could be improved upon. Perhaps in those lower-ranking positions you were not able to affect sensible changes and you began to think...*if I were chief, I could*....And, now you can.

As a chief officer, you are in a unique position to leave a legacy of quality. Of progressive thinking and management. Of safety, for your personnel as well as your community. With that potential, how could you not want to aspire to the position?

Oddly, the inspiration for aspiring to the position may have come to you from either a very good chief officer, or a very poor chief officer. If you ever worked under an excellent chief officer, you probably hoped one day to emulate him, or her. If you ever worked under a poor chief officer, you probably learned *what not to do*, which can often be as important as knowing the right things to do. Either way, you became inspired to try to obtain the position so that you could assure someone was going to do it right. The simple fact is, you weren't looking for a position that would make you a lot of money or you wouldn't have come to the fire service in the first place.

There are some perks and benefits that come with chief positions that no one can effectively measure, at least in financial terms, and you can't bargain, or negotiate, for them. The most valuable of those intangible perks is respect. And, if you're doing your job right, if you're doing it for all the reasons that compelled you to aspire to it in the first place, you will receive that perc, that respect. But, you'll have to earn it. And that is the hardest thing you'll ever have to do because there is no class you can take, or book you can read that will guarantee that particular perc. It comes from being able to read the

political landscape, knowing not only what is needed for your personnel to perform well operationally but also what is right for the community's needs. It comes from balancing the needs of that community with the needs of your fire rescue personnel, without compromising quality to either group. It comes from being able to make good decisions, most of the time without the most valuable of all commodities: *time*. It comes from being accountable, fair and consistent, not just to city hall but to your personnel, operational as well as administrative. Respect is an excellent perc, though, and one if you're ever lucky enough to obtain it, you'll relish that perc long after the memory of a holiday bonus is gone.