

Credentialing from the Eyes of a Dual-Designated Chief Officer

As EMS responses now make up the majority of fire department calls, officers must adequately prepare for fire and medical planning. | **BY JIM SIDERAS**

In seeking dual-credentialing as a Chief Fire Officer (CFO) and Chief Medical Officer (CMO) designate, I wanted to ensure that I was meeting both the current and future needs of the community, as well as preparing to be an effective leader. The role of chief officers is significantly different and more challenging than those faced by past fire leaders. Today's challenges occur quickly, are magnified and scrutinized by the media, and can put a chief officer in the public spotlight with little notice. Whether the implications are from the financial collapse, terrorism, pandemic flu, fire or natural disasters, the chief officers are expected to have the answers and have a plan in place.

In addition to firefighting operations, emergency medical services

After 33 years in the fire service, I was looking for a program that would bring a wide variety of training, education, experience and public service into one complete package. Chief Fire Officer and Chief Medical Officer credentialing provided the mechanism to accomplish that. During a recent city commission meeting where I was recognized for accomplishing these designations, my city manager called this "the highest level of achievement possible for a fire chief."

*— Jack Taylor, CFO, CMO
Chief, Emporia (Kan.) Fire
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(EMS) now command the majority of emergency incidents. Often, over 75% of emergency responses deal with EMS. Unfortunately, this is an area that many chief officers have not invested the same amount of time as with fire response. The area of EMS is growing in importance considering the number of incidents, greater potential for legal concerns, and the need for continuing education and licensure.

Today's chief officers need to be more than leaders during times of crisis. In addition to being well-versed in fire and EMS, they need to be community leaders, facilitators, communicators, and visionaries. The key to successful leadership in today's challenging world is influence, not authority. Credentialing validates your knowledge, background, and education, which makes your input more valuable to community leaders and others.

The benefits of personal and professional development are truly appreciated as one begins the process of self-examination. The first duty of a leader is to define reality, and that means taking a hard look at how you compare to the best of class. Organizations cannot move forward to embrace a new paradigm if the leaders have not changed and embraced change. The personal and professional change process includes more than attending a seminar or conference. Personal and professional development need to be a way of life for successful chief officers.

Personal and professional development includes formal education, professional development, and personal skills such as presentations. As



one increases their formal education, they will begin to see opportunities to enhance and optimize their organizations. It is a reality that many in the community will place education as an initial benchmark for a chief officer's credibility. The expectation is that a chief officer is comparable to a corporate senior vice president, if not the CEO. That level of expectation also brings the comparison of educational pedigree.

It is more than formal education, as development also includes professional development such as the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. It is vital that chief officers are keenly aware of the current industry trends and standards. Finally, a chief officer must be comfortable in communicating to an audience. The skill of presenting is vital and only honed through the rigors of taking part in presenting topics to peers as well as groups outside the fire service. Chief officers are viewed as subject experts; however that impression may be fleeting if one cannot clearly articulate their ideas.

The process of dual credentialing ensured that my credentials, education, experience, and leadership have all been validated by an impartial third party. Those who validate and credential the CFO and CMO candidates are themselves credentialed, which makes the pro-

cess extremely valuable. That review includes formal education, professional education, and also presentations in various formats.

Chief officers need to be viewed as a “whole chief officer.” This means that today’s chief officers are viewed much differently than a few years ago. Not that long ago, chief officers were viewed as the person who managed a fire scene and that was their primary focus. Today, the public and elected officials are demanding more of chief officers. The new expectation is that chief officers are well-rounded in areas similar to what one would expect of other professionals in senior positions. These areas include advanced academic degrees, community involvement, professional development, and certification.

Advanced academic degrees are the new entry point for senior management. The degrees need to reach beyond the fire service into other fields such as business, medical, and management. Academic degrees do not replace experience; however they will increase one’s knowledge base, hone the ability to effectively communicate, offer new ways to deal with problems, and prepare for the future. Experience is important, but the roles of chief officers have branched further than managing the emergency scene. Senior chief officers are now involved in multi-million dollar budgets, human resources, staffing, union issues, delivery of service, continuing changes in medical care, quality improvement, as well as planning for community growth. It is difficult, if not impossible, to effectively learn those skills without spending time in the classroom.

Chief officers also need to be involved in the community at all levels. There are many important community committees and groups that need reliable leaders who have a stake in the community. Chief officers are encouraged to participate in community groups, especially those groups that may not directly be involved with the fire service. It will offer those groups the opportunity to work with the fire service in a non-

traditional role and view the chief officers in a new way. Chief officers are viewed as the role models and the most respected of leaders within any community.

By becoming more involved in the community, a chief officer can help implement positive change and also increase the professional impression of the fire service. This also offers excellent opportunities to network and interact with other professionals. It also offers new ways to see how others manage effective groups giving the chief officer new insights to increase their effectiveness within their roles in the fire service.

Chief officers also need to continually hone their craft within the fire service, and this requires ongoing professional development. There is no better place to achieve professional development than to attend the National Fire Academy. With little cost to the organization, chief officers can take classes in a wide realm of areas that will help develop their professional skill-set. Every chief officer should enroll in the Executive Fire Officer program at the National Fire Academy. This four-year program helps offer chief officers the tools to increase their effectiveness within the fire service, and offers valuable time to network with other officers from around the country. Although leaving for two weeks every year is a serious commitment, this time away from one’s organization allows time to interact with others, and in many cases reflect on one’s career.

In addition to attending professional development programs, chief officers also need to give back to the profession. Chief officers need to be presenting and speaking at conferences, writing articles, and sharing their knowledge to the next generation. Other professions such as attorneys, physicians, and business leaders can have careers that span forty years. Because of the rigorous nature of the job, the fire service is unique in that retirements often occur at twenty-five years of service. This makes sharing our experiences and knowledge even more

important. This exchange helps strengthen the organizational DNA and offers the next generation the ability to learn and adapt from the experiences of the previous generation of chief officers.

Equally important for chief officers is credentialing. This offers a method of having a comprehensive examination of one’s career to determine if they meet the highest standards held for chief officers. Putting together the credentialing packet can be a daunting task, but it also reveals the expectations of world-class chief officers. It can show both strengths and deficiencies which can offer insights on where a person needs to concentrate more of their resources. Being credentialed by a third party

For me, the purpose of attaining professional credentialing was two-fold. First was to improve my standing in the eyes of my peers and employer. Second, and more importantly, was to guarantee the public and those that work in my organization that their Fire Chief had met the industry’s standards to be a true fire service leader.

Most Fire Chiefs have had extensive training, many years of experience, have obtained graduate degrees and/or have completed the NFA’s Executive Fire Officer program. All these achievements in their own rights are very impressive. However, professional credentialing, such as the CFO designation, is able to look at these achievements as a whole and validate your experience, training and competencies against a standard of excellence. The ability to meet this standard allows you, as a chief officer, to demonstrate your professional excellence to those you serve.

*— Jack Parow, CFO
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also offers an unbiased view of a person's career. The areas of academic preparation, professional development, community involvement, and future goals can help align a chief officer to achieve more than once thought possible. Credentialing also gives community leaders' confidence that their chief officers meet the highest standards. As the fire service continues to expand into emergency medical response, having both fire service and medical leaders credentialed with the Chief Fire Officer and/or Chief Medical Officer designations offers elected officials another method to ensure the leaders of their emergency services meet the highest of standards.

One of the most significant failures of any organization is not effectively developing the next generation of leadership. The days of being content with merely years of service and limited experiences is over. The expectation is that communities will want demonstrated credentialing of their chief officers.

Leaders most effectively influence change by setting the example. The current leaders of the fire service need to set the standard to ensure the success of the future generation of leaders. Credentialing offers the best method to critically view one's career, contributions, and effectiveness.

The process may seem intimidating, but is one of the best opportunities to analytically examine one's entire career. This can help provide a roadmap providing guidance to a successful future as an effective leader.

Credentialing also provides a chief officer with an enhanced level of credibility. As community leaders and elected officials become increasingly aware of the credentialing process, they will ask themselves if the leadership within the fire service is credentialed. In addition, credentialing may be one of their criteria for their next fire chief. By not striving to develop the next generation of leaders within the current organization, elected officials may look outside the organization for the next leader.

Finally, credentialing offers your community a certain degree of security knowing their chief fire and medical officers are credentialed to the highest standards. Just like other respected professions have board certification, the fire service also has credentialing in both the areas of fire and medical executive leadership.

The time to change is before change is needed. If one continues to wait and grow complacent in their education and abilities, they will be behind the curve trying to catch up. That is not the place for progressive

chief officers. I would encourage all chief officers to become credentialed. This will increase the level of professionalism within the fire service, as well as offer one of the best methods to benchmark one's career and accomplishments with the standards set by the Commission on Professional Credentialing.

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The Whole Chief Officer Model

When first tier universities recruit for students they are looking for outstanding academic achievement along with a very well rounded young person. They consider extra curricular activities both in and out of high school, participation in the broader community as well as demonstrated participation in a wide variety of post secondary educational arenas. Upon graduation these students find significant corporate and government employers doing the exact same thing on a much higher level. These employers not only want to know that the applicant can handle the academic/technical rigors of the highly competitive workplace, but will this graduate also fit well on the Board of a non-profit organization? They want to be assured that the prospective associate will comfortably and effectively represent the employer before the total community, be it the local zoning commission, elected officials, industry associations/organizations, and the United Way. These evaluations are intended to consider the "whole person".

As the issues facing the emergency services become more complex depending on the most senior person for promotion or

hiring as the new chief has become very undependable. Today's emergency services leaders must be no less accomplished than aspiring college students or corporate/government leader applicants. Whether one is leading the community emergency medical service or the fire department response, these individuals need to be able to credential at the highest levels of the industry. This accomplishment comes only with a strong academic achievement, a very diverse participation in the emergency services at the local, state and national level, demonstrated involvement in the broader community at large, and the validation by peers both in and outside of the emergency services community. Whether the organization is promoting a new chief officer or hiring the Fire Chief or Director of EMS, the need to consider the "whole person" has never been greater. The appointing authorities are keenly aware of this and it is absolutely essential that those aspiring to these roles know and commit to this "Whole Chief Officer Model" as society endeavors to provide the very best to all we serve.

— F. Patrick Marlatt

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