

Things that keep a Chief awake at night.

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As I lay in bed, tossing and turning, it dawned on me that I have had more restless nights as a fire chief than I ever did while running calls as a company officer. I am not what you would call a “worrier” or overly anxious however, several times per month I catch myself having a night like tonight where I cannot turn off my brain and stay up till my alarm goes off. Generally these late night sessions are replaying the events of the day or thinking about how I am going to approach a looming challenge. Tonight I really want to go to bed before my alarm goes off so I thought I would try to write out what I think about as I lay here tossing and turning...what I came up with is the top ten things that keep a Chief awake at night:

1. Did I do enough to make the department better / safer than it was the day before?

I grew up in the fire service with the idea that a fire chief is the one person ultimately responsible for making sure everyone goes home. Nearly every single LODD can point back to a missing policy, procedure, or training deficiency. In between the personnel issues, budget responsibilities, future planning, and other administrative functions; did I focus on the ultimate goal of making the department better and safer? With so many aspects of the job, many of which can kill someone, did I prioritize corrections or attention to the most pertinent item?

2. What am I not doing/seeing that may end up costing someone their life?

This is one item that I have talked with my mentors about over and over again. When you walk in to work knowing there are so many things that need your attention, what am I not seeing that may cost someone their life? I know that there is no one that can catch every single issue and what this often boils down to is reassuring myself that I have the right people in key positions to catch things I miss.

3. Did I learn something today and apply what I previously learned?

I have always believed that a leader must be a habitual student. I also believe in what John Maxwell describes as the leadership lid; where the leaders under you can only develop as much as you have developed. Am I pushing myself to grow as much as I am pushing others around me?

4. Did I build up or tear down someone with a recent decision, change, or comment?

Every decision, change, or comment comes with the added weight of my position. I know that the simplest joke may be taken as a serious statement of a members performance. I also know that every decision I make while with the best intentions may end up negatively impacting those under me. The burden of making decisions for the greater good that may adversely affect someone is one of the most difficult things I have had to adjust to in my new position.

5. Did I do enough to make sure my department is prepared for whatever they might face?

Basically, did I set my people up for success? Did I make sure the right people are in the right positions? Did I ensure their training is appropriate, pertinent, and realistic? Did I give them the right tools to do their job efficiently and safely?

6. Are the plans and goals in the best interest of my firefighters, citizens, and stakeholders?

It is easy to get caught up in political issues, personal agendas, or even resume building. Let's face it, most Chief positions are not long term jobs. It is easy to push for a better ISO rating or accreditation to make yourself look good however, does it benefit the firefighters, citizens, and all of the stakeholders? I know benchmarks, goals, and even professional credentialing processes such as accreditation can be extremely beneficial but it has to be aligned with the administration's vision and goals.

7. Did I prepare enough, plan enough, and/or research enough to ensure I am competent to make a stand on items I should be standing up for/against?

Most chiefs (whether they realize it or not) are considered a subject matter expert. Their arguments, support, and positioning has a lot of weight...unless they prove themselves to be incompetent, unable to defend their stance, or appear to have no confidence during their presentation. Especially before major presentations, this one item accounts for a lot of lost sleep. I constantly go over what I'm presenting,

arguments, counter arguments, facts, figures, and depending on the crowd past history of questions. The last thing I want to have happen is to give someone a reason to doubt what I am saying.

8. Did my actions, words, and deeds bring honor to my position, the department, and the profession of firefighting?

Some may say I take my job as a firefighter too seriously but I joined this service with the understanding that I was branded for life with the title of firefighter. Everything I do, good or bad, will reflect on my brothers and sisters in the service. This core principle elevated to the next level when I became a fire chief. Everything I do reflects on the fire service, my department, and the title of Chief. There is nothing more embarrassing than reading the front page of a newspaper where a fire chief is caught doing something inappropriate. I wouldn't say I live in fear of ending up on the front page but I definitely have a healthy dose of respect for what it would do to my career, department, and the fire service.

9. Am I leading by example and seeing the standards high enough?

While I am not a "worrier" this is one thing I always think about. The best example of this came after I made the decision to make physical fitness mandatory. After being told I would never walk again, without braces on my feet, I lost my way in regards to my physical condition. I know I can still do the job but I am definitely not the shining example of fitness. I follow my own requirement and work out every single day but have not seen any results. Looking at me, I am not the example of what I want my department to be. It won't stop me from trying but it definitely keeps me up at night.

In regards to standards, I always strive to set high standards but not so high that no one can reach them. As with most things in life balance is needed and I think firefighters are built to reach higher than the average person. Our job does not tolerate failure and when a challenge is placed in front of us, it is in our personality to overcome it at any cost.

10. Are my people safe while I am at home?

As a company officer it is easier to take responsibility for your crew and while off duty not become overly concerned about everyone else. As the chief I am constantly checking the call notifications to see what my firefighters are dealing with...thinking about the other nine items and how it plays into their overall safety.

Since I can't be everywhere I am back to trusting those in key positions to take their job seriously and maintain the goal of making sure everyone goes home.

There are a million other things that keep me awake at night but with these ten written down, I am hopeful that I might actually get some sleep before the alarm goes off in four and a half hours.

Be safe!