AN EXAMINATION OF THE ASCENSION TO AND EXPERIENCES IN THE
METROPOLITAN CHIEF FIRE OFFICER POSITION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP
POLICY AND PRACTICE

Ann Marie Light

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

December 2016

Committee:

Judith Jackson May, Advisor

Matthew Kutz
Graduate Faculty Representative

David Neal

Patrick Pauken
ABSTRACT

Judith Jackson May, Advisor

This dissertation is a phenomenological examination of the experiences of nine metropolitan Chief Fire Officers in the ascension to and in the highest leadership position at metropolitan fire departments. An extensive review of literature showed a dearth of literature relative to how individuals ascend to the position and what they experience in the position. Research indicates that there is no widely recognized or shared path of preparation for Chief Fire Officers.

Several key concepts emerged from the analysis of the in-depth qualitative interviews with nine participants including, operational training and experience, discovery of leadership and management, developing leadership skills, responsibility and accountability, institutional complexity, and motivation and inspiration. From the six key concepts four overarching themes arose: the unique characteristics of the Chief Fire Officer position; the ability to master technical, human, and conceptual skills; significant developmental leadership experiences; and the importance of self-awareness.

The findings of the study revealed implications for policy and practice including the need to develop policies to outline a clear expectation and agreed-upon understanding of the components and complexity of the Chief position; to develop agreed upon practices to support skills mastery at milestone points, such as Lieutenant, Battalion Chief and/or moves to administrative positions, Assistant Chief, and Chief Fire Officer. Finally, the results of this empirical study represent a substantial addition to the existing literature base and provide a deeper and more robust dialogue relative to the ascension of metropolitan Chief Fire Officers.
DEDICATION

For my father, Dr. Raymond Barker, who convinced me I could do this.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I want to thank the Chiefs who participated in this study. Each committed significant time out of their already burdensome schedules to share their knowledge, experience and expertise for this research. That they trusted me to tell their individual stories is an honor and privilege.

I would like to thank Dr. Judith Jackson May, for agreeing to chair my committee and serve as my methodologist, but also for her enthusiastic commitment to my topic and for encouraging me to reach far beyond what I thought possible. Special thanks to my committee members, Dr. Patrick Pauken, Dr. Matthew Kutz, and Dr. David Neal for their immensely valuable feedback on this study, and also for their ideas on future research. Heartfelt thanks to Dr. Mark Early who introduced me to qualitative methodologies and also supported my research through the Mark A. Early Qualitative Research Award.

I am fortunate to work in an environment at Bowling Green State University where great value is placed on learning and growth. I am forever grateful to my professional colleagues who supported and encouraged me throughout this entire process. A heartfelt thank you goes out to my Leadership Studies family for their friendship and support and, especially to my 2011 Leadership Studies cohort members, your support, camaraderie, intellectual strength, compassion, humor and friendship throughout this journey was, and is, a gift.

To my family and friends, there truly are no words to express my gratitude for the concessions you made for me as my time, attention, perspective, energy and sense of humor sometimes dwindled. To those who were interested enough to ask about progress, read drafts, debate meaning, give feedback, and re-read…you are precious beyond words.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................... 1

Purpose of the Study ........................................................................................................................ 2

Academic Body of Knowledge .................................................................................................... 3

Policy and Practice ....................................................................................................................... 3

Guiding Questions ...................................................................................................................... 5

Definitions of Key Terms .......................................................................................................... 5

The Structure of the Fire Service in the United States .......................................................... 10

Delimitations .............................................................................................................................. 12

Organization of the Study ........................................................................................................ 12

CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................................... 14

History and Tradition ............................................................................................................... 15

History of Organizational Diversity ........................................................................................ 17

Professionalization of the Fire Service ..................................................................................... 22

  Hierarchical Structure ......................................................................................................... 23

  Accreditation ....................................................................................................................... 23

  Certification and Professional Development .................................................................... 24

  Higher Education ............................................................................................................... 28

Fire Administration as an Emerging Field of Study .............................................................. 30

Nature of the Work ................................................................................................................ 32

  Job Stress and Satisfaction .............................................................................................. 34

Theoretical Perspectives ........................................................................................................ 38

  Work Role Transition Theory ......................................................................................... 39
Career Development Theory ................................................................. 42
Leadership Theory ............................................................................. 46
Summary ............................................................................................. 54

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 57
Guiding Questions ............................................................................. 57
Rationale for Qualitative Design ......................................................... 57
Rationale for Phenomenological Approach ........................................ 58
Participants ......................................................................................... 61
Researcher Positionality .................................................................... 62
Ethical Considerations ........................................................................ 67
Data Collection and Interview Protocol ............................................ 68
Methods and Procedures for Data Analysis and Explication ............ 71
Trustworthiness .................................................................................. 74
Credibility .......................................................................................... 74
Transferability ..................................................................................... 75
Dependability ..................................................................................... 75
Conformability .................................................................................... 75
Summary ............................................................................................. 76

CHAPTER IV. INTRODUCTION OF PROFILES ........................................ 77

CHAPTER V. CHIEF CRAITH ................................................................. 79
Background ........................................................................................ 79
Personal History .................................................................................. 79
Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences .................. 80
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal History</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Relationships</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Emergency Management Agency Incident Management</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration and Influences</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences as Chief Fire Officer</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Challenging</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IX. CHIEF JAMES</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal History</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration and Influences</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences as Chief Fire Officer</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Command Staff</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Tough Decisions</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Planning</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER X. CHIEF JAMESON</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal History</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration and Influences</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences as Chief Fire Officer</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Day</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Strength</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Rewarding</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Stress/Maintaining Balance</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER XI. CHIEF LEWIS</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal History</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Experience</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Promotions</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition to Administration</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion to Deputy/Assistant Chief</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Mentoring/Succession Planning</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Name</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming from the Outside</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Change</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Stress</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER XIII. CHIEF WILLIAMS</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal History</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences as Chief Fire Officer</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with Challenges</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Rewarding</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition to Retirement</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER XIV. KEY CONCEPTS</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Concept One: Operational Training and Experience</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Concept Two: Discovery of Leadership and Management</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Concept Three: Developing Leadership Skills</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences External to the Fire Service</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences Within the Fire Service</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Concept Four: Responsibility and Accountability</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Concept Five: Institutional Complexity</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics and Labor</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Concept Six: Motivation, Inspiration, and Reflection</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER XV. EMERGENT THEMES AND IMPLICATIONS** | 191 |

- The Unique Characteristics of the Chief Fire Officer Position | 191 |
- The Ability to Master and Demonstrate Technical, Human, and Conceptual Skills | 193 |
- Significant Developmental Leadership Experiences | 196 |
- The Importance of Self Awareness | 197 |
- Implications for Leadership and Practice | 199 |
  - Competence Equals Credibility | 200 |

**Conceptual Framework: Competence in Context** | 201 |

- Pillar One: Operational Experience | 202 |
- Pillar Two: Leadership and Global Perspective | 203 |
- Pillar Three: Institutional Complexity | 203 |
- Pillar Four: Answering the Call | 204 |

**Recommendations for Practice** | 205 |

- A Call for Collaboration | 205 |
- Elevation of Status | 206 |

**Directions for Future Research** | 207 |

**Limitations of the Study** | 208 |

**Conclusion** | 208 |

**REFERENCES** | 210 |

**APPENDIX A. CONSENT FORM** | 224 |
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Structure of a metropolitan fire department (500 personnel)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Interview structure (Seidman 2013)</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Data explication process, Stevik-Colaizzi Keen Method (Moustaka, 1994)</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Participant demographics</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The preparation and career path in most readily recognized professions such as nursing, law, and education is clear and well defined. However, for those who aspire to become the highest-ranking Chief Officer in a fire department, the path can be fraught with a lack of clarity and conflicting messages, particularly with the value placed on operational and administrative experience versus formal education (Coleman, 2003). Given the size, complexity, and multiple constituencies served in the fire service, the absence of a common or shared understanding of the ascension path is unwieldy. Metropolitan Chief Fire Officers manage extensive staff and are expected to be responsible to a myriad of public entities. During his opening remarks at the annual Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education Conference (FESHE) at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland, Dr. Denis Onieal, then superintendent of the National Fire Academy, asserted that if a child asked his or her parent how to become a doctor, lawyer, or nurse, the parent would know how to describe a fairly uniform plan. However, if that same child asked how to become a Fire Chief, even parents affiliated with the fire service would not likely have clear and consistent answers (2000). Onieal (2000) further attributed the lack of clarity and consistency about this career path to a combination of disagreement about standardized curriculum at colleges and universities and a fire service culture that historically valued technical skill and bravery over higher education.

The original purpose of the annual FESHE conference, which began in 1998, was to connect professionals from the fire service and higher education to create standards for fire-related degree programs and develop a logical path of career development for the fire service (United States Fire Administration, 2016a). Although some progress has been made by this organization, it has predominantly focused on the associate degree level and fire science, which
includes building construction, fire behavior and combustion, fire prevention, fire protection systems, principles of emergency services, and fire/emergency services safety and survival (United States Fire Administration, 2016b), rather than at the baccalaureate and graduate levels with curricula focused on preparing Chief Fire Officers. Moreover, there is no single board or certifying body for higher education or professional credentialing in the fire service, so decisions about curriculum in degree programs are made at a variety of levels including state fire marshal offices, community colleges, universities, and state boards of regents USFA.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine, through the first-hand experiences of metropolitan Chief Fire Officers, the scope, complexity and challenges of the ascension to and experiences in the metropolitan Chief Fire Officer’s leadership position. The goal was twofold: (1) to contribute to the academic body of knowledge related to fire administration; and (2) inform policy and practice related to preparation, professional development, education, experience, recruitment, retention, and succession planning for the Chief Fire Officer position.

This study used a phenomenological approach and in-depth interviews to provide a platform to allow the participants’ voices to articulate their lived experiences as Chief Fire Officers. First, it explored the individuals’ perceptions about their preparation and journey toward the Chief Fire Officer position. Second, it delved into their experiences during the transition to and during their tenure in the Chief Officer position. The phenomenological design allowed for a deeper understanding of their preparation for, ascension to, and leadership experiences in the Chief Fire Officer position.
Academic Body of Knowledge

Historically, the focus of much of the research related to the fire service has been quantitative and focused on firefighters, rather than officers. The search for literature produced very few results specific to the unique demands of the Chief Fire Officer position. Moreover, the search for academic literature returned very few results published more recently than 2010 and, those that were, were typically action research projects conducted by students in the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program at the National Fire Academy. This dearth of research may be, in part, because there is only one fire-specific doctoral program in the United States, at Oklahoma State University, and its first cohort started in 2010 (Oklahoma State University, 2016). Although I have cited several thought-provoking and forward-thinking articles from the late 1990s and early 2000s by people whose names are readily recognized as leaders in the fire service, few were based on empirical research, illuminating the need for an increased literature base.

Policy and Practice

The nexus between policy and practice, which emerged as a major thesis of this study, is based on the premise that change in the way people approach their work can be altered by a documented edict relative to what needs to be accomplished and the process by which it should be completed (McCluskey 2007). Cohen (2012) defines a policy as practice that has been systematically formulized to govern the function of sizeable groups. However, “effective policy-making requires a clear understanding of the nature of policy and practice” (para.1). As a pervasive theme in the literature, the fire service as a practice is experiential and context-bound. While tacit knowledge may offer policy-making congruence for the technical skills of practice, such coherence is absent in the discussion of competencies relative to adaptive leadership skills
and systematic career path and ascension to the Chief Fire Officer position. Such ambiguity, at any rank, may leave an organization resistant to change on multiple levels.

Similar to Onieal’s (2004) assertion that a resistance to higher education was a factor in the lack of a clear and prescribed career path, Coleman (2003) added that, while rising through the ranks had been the dominant model of career ascension in the fire service, it was insufficient preparation for the Chief position. Further, Coleman identified a pervasive and lingering lack of consensus and awareness of the magnitude and scope of responsibility of the Chief position, even among the fire service community (2003).

More recently, as evidenced by the International Association of Fire Chiefs (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2013) postings for open Fire Chief positions, some fire departments are recruiting and hiring external candidates, rather than only promoting from within. It is also not unusual to see Bachelor and Master’s degrees preferred or required. This may suggest a shift away from the concept that job experience and seniority alone are a sufficient career plan for those who aspire to the Chief Officer position. Perhaps as in executive level careers in professions such as business and higher education, the need for pragmatic and visionary career planning as well as an understanding of the relevance and limitations of the concepts of protean (Hall, 2004; Mirvis & Hall, 1996; Baruch, 2004) or boundaryless careers (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005) might prove to be relevant for this population of leaders.

The analysis of the experiences and perceptions of Chief Fire Officers about their ascent to and experiences in the metropolitan Chief Fire Officer position, provided valuable information that will proactively inform practitioners and policy makers about the kind of preparation and prior experiences that are valuable to Chief Fire Officers in their work; provide credibility to Chief Fire Officers; and determine if the changing demands in the job necessitate a different
approach to preparation. The information gathered through the first person accounts of Chief Fire Officers begins to address gaps in policy and practice related to unified preparation and a lack of empirically based evidence of the skill set and preparation that are most likely needed to be successful in this position.

**Guiding Questions**

1. What do Chief Fire Officers describe as their experiences during their preparation for and ascension to the Chief Fire Officer position?
2. What are the significant leadership experiences that Chief Fire Officers describe in their leadership position?
3. What types of preparation do Chief Fire Officers describe as being exemplary, appropriate, and effective?

**Definitions of Key Terms**

For the purpose of this study the following terms will be used as defined:

**Administration:** Positions with the primary function of overseeing the non-emergency functions of the fire department.

**Administrative Officer:** An officer who supervises and manages the support functions, such as training, finance, planning, and logistics of the fire department.

**Assistant Fire Chief:** Second in command of a fire department. Represents the chief fire officer at official functions, on committees, and meetings as needed. Is also in charge of the department in the chief’s absence. Is normally also responsible for oversight of several bureaus and has other responsibilities.
**Authority Having Jurisdiction:** May be a federal, state, local, or other regional department or individual such as a fire chief, fire marshal, chief of a fire prevention bureau, or others having statutory authority (NFPA, 2016).

**Battalion Chief:** Third level manager/supervisor that may oversee several fire houses (lieutenants and captains) or may be in an administrative office.

**Bureau:** These may include fire prevention, special operations, public relations, fire investigation, and professional standards (internal affairs).

**Captain:** Second level line supervisor.

**Career Department:** A fire department at which all members are paid.

**Career Development:** The purposeful activities one engages in to reach a professional goal.

**Chief Fire Officer:** The highest level of authority in a fire department. Additional titles that may be associated with this position include: Fire Chief, Chief Officer, Fire Commissioner, Fire Marshal, and Fire Superintendent.

**Civil Service:** A branch of local or state governmental service in which individuals are employed (hired) on the basis of professional merit as proven by competitive examinations.

**Civil Service Commission:** A state or local governmental agency that has the purpose of ensuring that employees are selected on merit, rather than other factors, including relationships.

**Combination Department:** A fire department that may include fulltime/paid, part time/paid and/or volunteer members.

**Deputy Chief:** May be in charge of several operational units (battalions) and several administrative bureaus. Sometimes called District Chief.
Disaster Management: The management of resources and all humanitarian aspects of an event that disrupts community functioning and requires resources beyond those used for routine emergencies (Phillips, Neal, & Webb, 2012).

Emergency Management: 1. The managerial function charged with creating the framework within communities to reduce vulnerability to hazards due to emergencies (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2007). 2. Emergencies are events that can usually be handled by existing resources, particularly first responders, and do not disrupt the community (Phillips, Neal, & Webb, 2012).

Engine: Apparatus (truck) with hoses, pumps. Sometimes called a pumper.

Fire Administration: A discipline of study that focuses on the knowledge, skills and abilities that are required to prepare a person for a Chief Officer level position in a fire department. Curriculum includes: finance/accounting, communication, public administration, emergency/disaster management, research and data analysis, employment and administrative law, management, and public health. Prerequisites are professional experience in the fire service and mastery of the principles of fire science (Bowling Green State University, 2014b). The overarching group of strategies, activities, skills, knowledge, and abilities required to lead a fire department.

Fire Apparatus: Either a fire engine or fire truck. (see truck, engine).

Fire Fighter: A person, either paid or volunteer, who is trained to extinguish fires that threaten life and property (also known as fireman).

Fire Officer: Any promoted or appointed officer position below that of Chief Fire Officer. May include Lieutenant, Captain, Battalion Chief, Assistant Chief, and Deputy Chief.
**Fire Marshal:** A person with the title of fire marshal may be a designated member of a fire department with duties that include code enforcement and inspection. The title is also used for the person who has the highest authority for fire code, fire inspection, enforcement and, sometimes, fire training at the state or federal level.

**Fire Science:** A discipline of study that includes building construction, fire behavior and combustion, fire prevention, fire protection systems, principles of emergency services, and fire/emergency services safety and survival (United States Fire Administration, 2014).

**Fire Service:** The occupation of firefighting (Merriam-Webster, 2014).

**Fire Protection:** is the study and practice of mitigating the unwanted effects of potentially destructive fires (National Fire Protection Association, 2008).

**Fire Station:** A single fire station or firehouse in the context of a larger department. Usually identified in the possessive form of a number, for example, “I work at the 6’s”, (Firefly’s Fire Service Organization, 2011).

**First Responder:** A person designated or trained to respond to an emergency, whose job entails being the first on the scene of an emergency, such as a firefighter, paramedic, or police officer.

**Industrial Brigade:** A group of employees in industry who are also trained to be first responders at their place of employment.

**Lieutenant:** First line supervisor in operations– usually in charge of one shift or one shift on one apparatus.

**Line Officer:** An officer who supervises the operational components of fire and emergency medical services.

**Life Squad/Rescue Transport:** Ambulance/emergency medical response
Local Fire Department: Fire departments that include career, combination, and volunteer fire departments and fire districts, as opposed to State and Federal government fire departments, contract fire departments, private or industrial fire brigades, and transportation authority or airport fire departments (United States Fire Administration, 2012).

Metropolitan Fire Department: A fire department with at least 400 career members (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2010).

Operations: Positions with the primary function of responding to emergencies.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): A general term that may refer to fire coat, pants, gloves, boots, helmet, self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA). May also include specialized clothing worn during hazardous material and bio/chemical responses.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): A condition of persistent mental and emotional stress occurring as a result of injury or severe psychological shock, typically involving disturbance of sleep and constant vivid recall of the experience, with dulled responses to others and to the outside world (Oxford Dictionary, 2014).

Protected Classes: Groups protected by law from employment discrimination. These groups include men and women on the basis of sex; any group which shares a common race, religion, color, or national origin (U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, 2013).

Quint: Apparatus (truck) with combination hoses, pumps, ladders, and lift buckets.

Rescue Company: A team of individuals with specialized training and equipment to respond to more complex rescue scenarios (ice, water, extrication, confined space, structural collapse) and larger fires.

Transportation Authority Department: A fire department internal to the transportation authority that responds to emergencies at, for example, a large airport.
**Truck:** Apparatus with ladders and/or ladders and lift buckets.

**Volunteer Department:** A fire department at which all members donate their time.

Work Role Transition: Any change in employment status and any major change in job content.

**Work Shift:** Operations shifts are typically 24-hours on and 48-hours off, although some departments follow 48 hours on and 96 hours off or some other variation. Shifts may be labeled by numbers (1, 2, 3) or letters (A, B, C) or colors. Administrative positions more often work a traditional 40-hour week.

**The Structure of the Fire Service in the United States**

The United States Fire Administration (USFA) fire department census is a voluntary program through which departments register and provide demographic information to the national database. In 2016 the USFA estimated that 27,198 (91%) of the nation’s fire departments had registered in the census by January 1 and these departments collectively reported a total of 1.2 million active fire service personnel. The majority (96%) of the registered departments were categorized as local departments that included career (all members of the department are paid), volunteer (members may volunteer their time or be paid on an on-call basis), and combination departments (utilize a combination of paid and volunteer personnel).

The remaining 4% includes state, federal, and private departments, industrial brigades, and transportation authority departments. Although more than 70% of the fire departments in the United States are staffed by volunteers, the percentage of career versus volunteer departments varies greatly from state to state. For example, Hawaii reported 91% career fire departments and 9% volunteer departments, while Ohio reported 83% volunteer and 17% paid (United States Fire Administration, 2016c).
The fire service is sometimes referred to as a paramilitary organization due to its structure, hierarchy and titles that align with police and military organizations (Firelink, 2012). However, there are many local colloquialisms for position titles and variations of organizational structure across different fire departments. For the purposes of this study, an illustration of a representative organizational structure of a career, metropolitan department is provided as a visual reference for job titles, divisions, and hierarchy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Structure of a metropolitan fire department (500 personnel).
Delimitations

Due to the complexity and scope of their responsibility, only career Chief Fire Officers of metropolitan departments ranging from 400 to 2000 employees were selected for this study. This range of department size was necessary to ensure that the participants had enough common experience to contribute to the overall understanding of this position. More specifically, international, federal, state, and private fire departments operate under a multitude of different structures, regulations, and environments that may not relate to the metropolitan Fire Chief. Finally, the chosen parameters in no way implies that the work of Chiefs of smaller, volunteer and/or combination, private, military, and other types of departments is not complex and critically important to the communities they serve.

The homogeneity of this group, particularly in terms of gender, was a limiting factor. According to the 2016 USFA Census, there were only 82 individuals in the United States that met the parameters for this study. Further, at the conclusion of their analysis of the 2005 United States Fire Administration (USFA) census, the International Association of Women in Fire & Emergency Services (2011) reported, out of 35,000 professional fire departments in the United States, only 34, or less than .09% had a woman in the Chief Fire Officer position. The disparity of female versus male Fire Chiefs presented a challenge, since there were fewer than 8 female Chief Fire Officers in the highest leadership position at metropolitan fire departments at the start of this study. However, every effort was made to include female Chief Fire Officers and, across male and female Chiefs, to include as much racial and cultural diversity as possible.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the background and context of the problem, the rationale and purpose of the study, the research questions, and definitions of terms, and
delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature relevant to the topic of the experience of the metropolitan fire Chiefs and relevant theories on work role transitions, career management, and ascension to leadership positions. Chapter 3 is an explanation of the research methodology, procedures, data collection and data analysis for this study. Chapter 4 introduces the demographics of the participants and their individual profiles. Chapters 5 through 13 provide individual profiles of each of the nine Chiefs. The key concepts are presented in Chapter 14. Finally, Chapter 15 provides an analysis and discussion of the emergent themes and includes implications for leadership and recommendations for policy and future research.
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study builds on the small body of research that directly relates to the experiences of metropolitan Chief Fire Officers in their ascension to and within leadership positions. This chapter provides a review of the available literature related to the study. As previously mentioned, the literature review found a limited academic, research-based body of knowledge from which to draw. In addition to several quantitative studies on the physiological and psychological impacts of extreme work conditions on firefighters (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Doveh, 2008; Beaton, Murphy, Johnson, Pike, & Corneil, 1999; Kimbrel et al., 2011; Superko, 2009), sources include professional trade publications such as Fire Chief and Fire Engineering, edited books (Fire Chief’s Handbook, 1995; Chief Fire Officer’s Desk Reference, 2006), legal judgments, reputable web sites such as those developed by state and federal fire administration agencies, action research projects completed by individuals in the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program at the National Fire Academy (Herald, 2001; Kopp, 2003; Murgallis, 1993), and academic journals in related fields, such as emergency/disaster management.

This review includes an overview of the history of the fire service, the history and tradition of the fire service and its organizational diversity, professional development, fire administration as an emerging field, nature of the work as it relates to job stress and job satisfaction, and an examination of relevant theory on work role transition, career management and leadership. The magnitude of leadership expectations required to ascend and succeed as a Chief Fire Officer juxtaposed to the ambiguous nature of the career path and lack of empirical research provided an opportunity to inform future policy and practice.


**History and Tradition**

While the focus of this study is the contemporary Chief Fire Officer, it is important to also describe the Chief Officer position in the context of a culture that deeply values history and tradition. Benjamin Franklin, who is generally recognized as the founder of the American fire service, established the volunteer Union Fire Company in Philadelphia in 1736. On April 1, 1853, the Cincinnati Fire Department became the first full-time paid fire department in the United States and was the first in the world to use steam-powered fire engines (Firelink, 2012). For many years the singular responsibility of firefighters was to extinguish fire with water and hard physical exertion.

Not surprisingly, in 1887 the requirements for employment as a firefighter on the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) were quite specific: applicants needed to be male, (presumably) white, at least 21 years of age, have four male references, no criminal history, pass a physical and written test, meet specific height and weight requirements, have knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and not be subject to fits or piles. The starting annual salary was $1000 (Gotham Gazette, 2013). More than 100 years later, although many of the physical requirements remain the same, in FDNY (2016a), for example, applicants must also have either completed a minimum of 15 semester hours at an accredited university or college, show fulltime military service with honorable discharge, or show 6 months of satisfactory work experience. The starting salary in 2016 is $43,074, with lifelong health insurance for the firefighter and family, four weeks of vacation, and a pension. Salary increases are based on seniority and promotion. After five years of service on the FDNY, a firefighter’s salary is $99,104. Salaries for promoted positions such as Lieutenant, Captain and Battalion Chief range from $126,000 to $162,000 (Fire Department New York, 2016b).
Eligibility to take the exam for each level of promotion at FDNY includes a minimum number of years of service and rank and various levels of higher education from a regionally accredited college or university. While specific areas of study were not indicated, candidates for Lieutenant must have completed 60 semester hours, candidates for Captain must have completed 80 semester hours, and candidates for Battalion Chief must have earned a bachelor degree prior to applying to take the promotional exam (NYC Citywide Administrative Services, 2014).

As stated previously, the fire service is steeped in many traditions including dedication to service, self-sacrifice, and loyalty to the brotherhood, and family legacies that can include multiple generations serving on a single fire department. While this might not have been obvious to people outside of the fire service prior to the 2011 attack on the World Trade Center, the sheer numbers of funeral processions and ceremonial tributes, and the outpouring of support from national and international fire departments gave the public a glimpse into the strength of the cultural bond. For example, in the Fire Department of New York the concept of family tradition is so natural that legacy credit is element in the hiring process. In formalized recognition of the importance of family tradition legacy credit adds ten points to the final score of candidates who have passed the entrance exam and are the child or sibling of a firefighter, police officer, or emergency medical services responder who was killed in the line of duty as a result of the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001 (New York City Fire Department, 2011).

Another example of the value placed on family service is the Toledo Fire & Rescue Department (TFRD), which has many multi-generational and otherwise related family members among its ranks. In the 2010 TFRD annual report, three pages are dedicated to photos that honor the proud fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, nieces, nephews, brothers, sisters, cousins, husbands and wives who serve together on the department (Toledo Fire & Rescue Department, 2010).
Similarly, the volunteer fire service not only values, but also is dependent on the service of multiple family members to fill its ranks (Lowry, 2003).

Further, according to Lowry (2003), it is common for firefighters to speak with much gratitude about the member(s) of their families who served before them or continue to serve with them. Lowry also reported that firefighters often speak of the long-standing commitment of their families to serve the community. Thomas Stone, Chief of the Easton (MA) Fire Department, stated that the fire service is unique in that although most children at some point want to grow up and be like their mom or dad, it usually loses its appeal as children age. Stone stated, “For whatever reason, the fire service is one of those careers that maintains its appeal. Sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters remain committed to doing the exact same thing” (as cited in Lowry, 2003).

**History of Organizational Diversity**

The innately technical and exclusive nature of fire service juxtaposed to the membership diversity and the relationship to the public has resulted in a history that includes conflict. The culture of the fire service is based on tradition and the profession has evolved through many changes that have served to shape the need for increased leadership capacity.

One of the most significant changes in the fire service has been the mandate to increase the diversity of the workforce. In 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, 2013) afforded protection from employment discrimination based on gender, race, religion, color, and national origin. However, due to 24-hour shifts, sleeping/living arrangements and very specialized protective equipment, the impact of hiring women in the fire service was particularly complex. Further, while a law can be created with the stroke of a pen, facilities, procedures, attitudes, culture and practices often take much longer to change. Deep assumptions,
the tacit and shared assumptions that guide member behavior, are highly complex and take the most effort and time for leaders to impact (Cummings & Worley, 2008). Challenges to leading cultural change include incongruence with espoused values and private values of individuals and subcultures within organizations (2008). An existing organizational culture, according to Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (2007) will only truly change when the culture is attuned to a new strategy.

To further illustrate, the first record of a woman actively participating in the fire service was Molly Williams, an African American who had been a slave in New York, and joined the Oceanus Engine Company 11 as a volunteer in 1815. There are also many accounts of women joining the volunteer fire service during all major U.S. conflicts, including World War I (International Women in Fire and Emergency Services, 2011). However, although Title VII was enacted in 1964, the first fulltime paid woman was not hired until 1973 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (International Association of Women in Fire & Emergency Services, 2011).

Further, the 2005 USFA Census revealed that there were 350,000 paid firefighters in the United States and only 11,000, or 3.7%, of those were women. More specifically, the 2005 USFA Census revealed that more than half of the paid departments in the United States did not have, nor had they ever had, a female firefighter among their ranks. Furthermore, only 24 of the paid departments had ever had a woman in the Chief Officer position (International Association of Women in Fire & Emergency Services, 2011). The delay in widespread hiring of all protected classes, but particularly of women, was due, according to Olson (2012) to the fact that the change in law presented an enormous culture shift in the fire service that was not without conflict (Olsson, 2012).

While not the major focus of this study, the experiences of people related to gender, race,
sexual orientation, culture, and all forms of diversity must be acknowledged. In her book that chronicled the first year experience of the 52 members of recruit class 1-91 from hiring through basic training and assignment to a firehouse at Oakland Fire Department in 1992, Chetkovich (1997) described the different experiences of white and African American women and white, Asian American, Mexican American, and African-American men. According to Chetkovich (1997) an African American male, for example, may have to exert extra effort to prove he is capable of being a good firefighter and that he will fit into the culture of the firehouse. A woman, on the other hand, must first prove that she is not going to act like a woman. In a study of 22 African American women in the fire service, Yoder and Berendsen (2001) pointed out that the experience of women could not be over-generalized. They described situations in which African American women were treated as stronger workhorses while white women were sometimes treated as frail and incapable china dolls. Chetkovich (1997) reported that lesbian women had the advantage of not being accused of sleeping with male crewmembers, but had other issues of extreme isolation from male and female members of the group.

Similarly, Hughes (2011) described the challenges facing women who aspire to be Police Chiefs or Sheriffs in the United States. Like the fire service, work related to law enforcement has long been associated with brute strength, aggressiveness, and endurance. In a related study, Secklecki and Paynich (2007) reported, in reality, much of the routine work of law enforcement officers and administrators involves the ability to investigate crime scenes, dispute resolution, write reports, and respond to calls for service, none of which proved to be better performed by males. The larger contributor to the small numbers of female leaders in law enforcement is, according to Hughes (2011), the male-dominated culture, structural discrimination and still prevalent disparate treatment of women.
After reviewing and analyzing the data from the USFA Census (2000) Hulett, Bendick, Thomas, and Moccio (2008) concluded that there was significant room for improvement in the numbers of women in the fire service and that the adage that women are not interested in tough, physical, dirty jobs did not stand up to scrutiny. Specifically, when Hulett et al. compared the percentage of females in the fire service (3.7% in 2000) to 184 other highly physical jobs such as mechanics, enlisted military, professional athletes, welders and highway maintenance workers, they found an average of 17% female employees in these demanding professions. The culture of the fire service, concluded Hulett et al. (2008), plays a major role in the disparate numbers of men versus women:

The fire service has a long and proud tradition of bravery in the face of danger and its members belong to a select group that are often revered for running toward danger instead of away from it. The shift toward a more diverse workgroup can, “challenge the self-esteem male firefighters derive from perceiving themselves as doing a job for which only a few select have the right stuff” (p. 11).

Moreover, according to Yoder, Schleicher and McDonald (1998), women who are part of a token group, defined as less than 15% of a specific population, likely only succeed when their preparation is task related and also includes legitimization and status enhancement. The authors concluded, “for token women to be most effective as leaders of male-dominated masculine-task groups, they must not only be empowered with position (by being appointed the leader) and expertise (through training), but also be legitimated by high-status others” (p. 220).

Alternatively men, who represent a token population in a female dominated group, may actually benefit:

It has been found that token women tend to feel isolated, be contrasted against their male
peers, and experience heightened pressure to perform well, both when they are members of a male dominated work group and when they are tasked with leading such a group. It has also been found that token men generally do not have the same negative outcome and, in fact, they may benefit from their token status (McDonald, Toussaint & Schweiger, 2004, p. 401).

Numerous studies have been conducted on the similarities and differences of male and female leadership styles in more generalized work settings, particularly in regard to transactional versus transformational leadership styles. Whereas Manning (as cited in Young, 2011) found no significant differences between genders and leadership style, Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 45 previous studies and found that women often display more transformational behaviors than males.

In a study on executive women’s leadership styles based on the 360-degree evaluation of 2816 executives (Ibarra and Obodaru 2008), common wisdom was challenged when women and men rated women higher than men in seven out of eight dimensions, bringing into question the concept that women are typically more modest than men. The ability to envision the future was the one dimension in which both groups rated female executives lower than men. The authors surmised that the lower score resulted because:

Women are conditioned to rely on facts and data in mid-level positions because they have to know more and be able to back it up against male counterparts. This very same reliance on facts and figures, and a hesitation to take risks without them, can thwart the visioning process (p. 8).

In contrast, men and women tend to give more latitude, and in fact expect, men to make more apparently instinctive decisions and view male leaders as more authoritative than women leaders
In a related study on women in higher education, Johnson (2011) described a lack of mentors for women as a contributing factor to the low representation of women in high level leadership positions in higher education, since traditionally the highest ranking faculty and administrators have been male. However, her study of 59 women in school leadership positions indicated an optimistic outlook for future women leaders who realistically assess their strengths and areas for improvement; identify realistic goals; outline career goals; seek advice from more advanced persons; and develop and use professional support systems (2011).

In addition to the above mentioned issues, the fire service, like many institutions, is grappling with how it will manage the state of its professionalism in the wake of constantly emerging forms of social media, generational differences in the workplace (Jarvis, 2013) and becoming an inclusive workplace for people of all races, genders, religions, and sexual identities (Olsson, 2012). Although diversity is not the major focus of this study, the experiences and perceptions of each individual will be impacted by his or her own positionality and must be recognized and respected as a significant part of the professional practice of each individual’s journey.

**Professionalization of the Fire Service**

There are many ways to describe and define progress toward professionalization in any given field. The following model was selected because it addressed the professionalization of a related field, emergency management. According to Oyola-Yemaiel and Wilson (2005), in order for emergency management to be recognized as a profession, three elements must be present: hierarchical structural, accreditation, and certification. The following will review the progress and status of the fire service related to each of the three elements in this model.
Hierarchical Structure

While the literature suggests that there is much debate about the broad scope of the Chief Fire Officer’s position, the fire service does have a recognized hierarchical structure, particularly in emergency situations, with the status of the Chief Fire Officer recognized within the fire service and by members of the public. This allows for “immediate, instant and intuitive recognition by the public, elected officials and members of other disciplines of that individual’s ability to act” (Oyola-Yemaiel & Wilson, 2005, p. 78). However, as indicated previously by many researchers (Bruegman, 2002; Coleman 2003, 2006; Fleming, 2010) the status and role of the metropolitan Chief Fire Officer is less defined in non-emergent situations such as when interacting with other municipal department directors, lobbying for resources, and communicating with the external community.

Accreditation

The accrediting body for fire and emergency medical service organizations (not individuals) is the Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI), which is part of the larger National Center for Public Safety Excellence (CPSE). CPSE’s stated authority is to serve as the governing body for organizations that offer accreditation, education, and credentialing services to first responder and fire service industry professionals and agencies (Center for Public Safety Excellence, 2013). Fire departments that undertake this in this process pay a fee to CFAI, which varies with the size of the department seeking accreditation. The fire department must also designate a person to serve as the point person for the accreditation process, ensure that the point person attends CFAI training in assessment and planning, and engage in an extensive self-assessment in essential resources, external systems relations, financial resources, goals and objectives, governance and administration, human resources, physical resources, programs, and
training and competency. This is followed by a review, assessment, and evaluation by CFAI reviewers, and a determination of accreditation status (Center for Public Safety Excellence, 2013).

Certification and Professional Development

The final required element for professionalization is, according to Oyola-Yemaiel and Wilson (2005), a widely agreed upon level of certification, or credentialing, of individuals in the field. The authors also asserted that this element was most difficult to identify in practice and in the literature. While it is not a challenge to find organizations and agencies that claim some measure of expertise and authority about standards for certification, there is no single national agency that has jurisdiction to regulate or enforce professional standards and competencies for fire officers and Chiefs USFA (2013).

One of the most widely recognized sources of information on standards in the fire service is the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). The standard for Fire Officer Professional Qualifications 1021 (2013) defines the following six key components of the fire officer position: human resource management, community and government relations, administration, inspection and investigation, emergency services delivery, emergency management, and health and safety. NFPA 1021 also provides minimum job performance requirements necessary to perform the duties of a fire officer. The standard specifically identifies four levels of progression: Fire Officer 1 supervisory level, Fire Officer 2 supervisory/managerial level, Fire Officer 3 managerial/administrative level, and Fire Officer 4 administrative level (National Fire Protection Association, 2013). While the standard is used extensively, the NFPA does not have jurisdiction to impose or enforce these standards. Additionally, in some states, such as Illinois, the curriculum for fire officers is mandated and controlled at the state level (Office of the Illinois
State Fire Marshal, 2013). In others, such as Ohio, there are no state certifications at the officer level (Ohio Department of Public Safety, 2013) so the use of this, or any, standard related to requirements for fire officers is the decision of the Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ). While the NFPA Fire Officer 1-4 programs may be sufficient for smaller departments, it may not necessarily suffice for Chiefs of large metropolitan departments. While this is an interesting implication for future research, there is currently no definitive answer as to what standards are used for officers even between departments in the same state, let alone nationally.

In addition to the NFPA, other agencies such as the National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications (NBFSPQ) and the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) provide, at a cost, oversight and accreditation for training programs (Pro Board Accreditation, 2013 & International Fire Service Accreditation Congress, 2013). However, in states without centralized oversight for fire officer professional development, it is up to the individual who is seeking professional development to determine what is required by their own department and then evaluate the quality of the myriad of fire officer development programs and classes that are offered by state and national fire academies, private companies, professional organizations, community colleges, career centers, and universities (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2010 & United States Fire Administration, 2013). The United States Fire Administration (USFA), housed at the National Fire Academy (NFA) advocates for education and provides professional development opportunities for the fire service but, again, has no regulatory authority over certification. In 1985, the USFA launched the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program with the goal of providing senior officers with an opportunity to develop knowledge and leadership skills related to fire and emergency services (United State Fire Administration, 2016d). Prerequisites for application to the program include rank of Chief, Chief
Officer, or department head and, beginning in 2006, any baccalaureate degree from a regionally or nationally accredited university. In select cases, applications from Battalion Chiefs from metropolitan departments are also considered if they can document work in administrative leadership positions. The program spans four years and includes four residencies at the National Fire Academy which are, in order: executive development, executive analysis of community risk reduction, executive analysis of fire service operations in emergency management, and executive leadership. Candidates are also required to complete four applied research projects that address problems or issues in the student’s organization or jurisdiction (United States Fire Administration, 2016d). According to the USFA, more than 3000 people have completed the EFO program and the American Council on Education (ACE) and several higher education institutions align the courses with academic credit at the undergraduate and graduate level. The prerequisites suggest that it is important to be engaged in a role as an administrative officer in order to learn more about it. However, no other demographic information is available about the graduates, their position, or what impact the program had on their professional development and career path.

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) is another widely recognized organization that states one of its goals is “to support professional development in fire officers through the pursuit of the planned, progressive, life-long process of education, learning, self-development, and experience” (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2010, p. 8). The IAFC also asserts that firefighters are challenged by the lack of clarity and congruence in policy related to education and professional development and that many firefighters in the United States have earned college credit, often from a variety of institutions, but do not have a formal degree. Notably, according to the IAFC, many individuals in the fire service have duplicative
certifications, yet they do not have the competencies and/or credentials to perform at the officer level (2010).

Adding to this problem is the “stovepipe system in which education, certification, and fire service training operate in completely independent systems” (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2010, p. 8). Conversely, as an example of collaboration across agencies, the IAFC publicly supports the previously mentioned EFO program at the USFA as an appropriate and valuable step in the development of an executive level Chief Officer. However, even with these efforts, in 2013 the USFA website (since removed), citing Dr. Denis Onieal, Superintendent of the National Fire Academy (2003) still asserted the following:

For the American fire service, there is no single, national system of fire and emergency services professional development; rather, there are 50 state systems of professional development. Relationships between training, certification, and higher education providers vary from state-to-state where levels of cooperation between and among them range from fully integrated to nonexistent (State professional development summits: A call for collaboration section, para. 1).

In support of the literature, my experience working with participants in State Fire School and, Chiefs, and Training Officers is consistent in that individuals often report frustration about the lack of national consistency or oversight for standards in professional development in the fire service as, for example, exist in the field of emergency medicine. Additionally, many of the applicants for the FIAD degree have significant amounts of academic credit from a variety of institutions, but have not formally completed a degree. These people often report that this situation resulted from several factors including initial pressure from parents to pursue a profession with recognized and established degree programs, a lack of availability of fire-related
degree programs, and challenges with scheduling face-to-face classes on a 24-hour on, 48-hour off rotating shift. Further, due to a lack understanding on what professional development and education is rewarded at different ranks, motivated individuals report taking a multitude of professional development classes for self-improvement in the hopes of meeting the nebulous requirements for promotion in the fire service.

**Higher Education**

There is debate even among members of the fire service as to the value and necessity of higher education (Coleman 2003; Kramer, 1995; Onieal, 2004; Rivenbark & McCall, 2000). Even with the evidence of an effort at collaboration between agencies discussed in the previous section, it is apparent that there is a dispute about the importance of higher education when one considers the IAFC’s (2010) emphasis on experience (70%), mentoring (20%), and education (10%) to adequately prepare officers from the line/supervisory level through the executive officer level.

One example that illustrates the positive impact of an effort to encourage higher education in the fire service is a project undertaken by the South Carolina State Firemen’s Association (SCSFA), which created a Higher Education Committee (HEC) to address the issue of access for firefighters and transfer of credits between community colleges and universities (Rivenbark & McCall, 2000). The project began in earnest in the early 1990’s and, by 1995, all of the participating community colleges in South Carolina had articulation agreements with the University of Memphis, which allowed students to transfer associate level credits to pursue a as a bachelor degree in either fire protection or fire administration. In 1996 the SCSFA went a step further and commissioned the HEC to survey the Fire Chiefs in South Carolina to gauge their attitudes toward higher education. The HEC group believed this was an important undertaking
because, regardless of financial incentives such as tuition reimbursement, degrees were not required for promotion. Therefore, whether or not individual Chiefs considered education when making promotional decisions would likely have an impact on the rate at which individuals would pursue higher education. Given a variety of sets of work factors, the fifty-four Fire Chiefs were asked to respond to how they perceived the work of college educated versus non-college employees (Rivenbark & McCall, 2000).

The majority of Chiefs found no difference between the two groups on performance during response to emergencies; however they did report that the college-educated employees were superior in communication skill, problem solving, creativity and quality of work. Approximately 68% of the Chiefs, many of whom did not pursue education beyond high school, stated that college-educated employees were stronger candidates for promotion. The authors called for a greater effort by leadership in all states to demystify the higher education process and for more research to ascertain the level of support for higher education from Fire Chiefs (Rivenbark & McCall, 2000).

At the national level, the USFA has been an advocate for higher education in the fire service through the previously mentioned EFO and through its Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) conference, which was first convened in 1997 (United States Fire Administration, 2016a). In the years since, this group has developed a model for progressive education through higher education, certification, and experience. The FESHE group, motivated by a large variance in content of curriculum at colleges and universities, developed curriculum for core courses that they stated should be a part of every fire science associate and bachelor degree program. Community colleges and universities can submit curricula and apply to receive an endorsement from FESHE. The approval and endorsement by FESHE is also part of an effort
to provide a means by which the multitude of certificates and academic credits from multiple institutions could begin to be pulled into a cohesive portfolio for individuals (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2010; United States Fire Administration 2016a).

While some progress is being made, there is still much work to be done to clarify the roles of the contemporary Chief Fire Officer and define the commonalities and differences between professional development and higher education for the aspiring Chief Fire Officer. This study contributes valuable information to the literature base related to career path planning and execution for the fire service. It also identifies valuable and relevant curriculum for the academic programs related to fire leadership and administration.

**Fire Administration as an Emerging Field of Study**

Practitioners and academics in emergency/disaster management began to grapple with the issue of professionalization and legitimacy beginning in the late 1980s (Neal, 2000) and faced many of the challenges previously addressed. The fire service and, in particular, fire administration is evolving as a recognized profession and legitimate academic area of study. Issues such as location within the academy, consistent names of degrees, curriculum, a solid body of research, and access to qualified, credentialed faculty will all contribute to the legitimacy of a field in the eyes of practitioners and academics (Neal, 2000, 2005).

Few professions that provide such a vital and universally identifiable service struggle to agree on how to describe the knowledge, skills, abilities, and preparation needed to advance and succeed in their field. A 2016 search for fire administration degrees, using the Firefox browser, returned a myriad of results. For example, demonstrating the variance of location within academy, Idaho State University’s (ISU) Bachelor of Science in Fire Services Administration is located in the College of Technology and is heavily based in fire science, fire protection, and
building construction with a few classes related to management and an optional political science emphasis (Idaho State University, 2016). Eastern Kentucky University’s Fire Protection Administration Bachelor’s Degree is similar in content to ISU, but the degree resides in the College of Justice and Safety (Eastern Kentucky University, 2016). Bowling Green State University’s Bachelor of Science in Fire Administration (FIAD) is housed in the department of Political Sciences in the College of Arts & Sciences and purposefully does not include classes related to fire science, fire protection or building construction. The curriculum instead focuses on public administration, leadership and ethics, management, accounting, data analysis, and labor law and politics as related to fire officers, Chiefs and upper level emergency managers (Bowling Green State University, 2016). The University of Maryland houses its fire-related degree in the School of Engineering (University of Maryland, 2016) while, in a completely different structure, Colorado State University (2016) houses its Fire Administration degree in the Department of Forest and Rangeland Stewardship. Although all are regionally accredited institutions and assumed to be legitimate degrees, one can see how a potential student would need to take extra care to be certain that the curriculum of very similarly named degrees offers what they need to support their career goals.

Masters degrees related to fire and emergency services are beginning to appear on several university websites, however the more readily available related degree continues to be a Master’s in Public Administration. Currently Oklahoma State University (OSU) is the only university in the United States to offer a doctorate in Fire and Emergency Services Administration (Oklahoma State University, 2016). Clearly the fact that there is only one place in the entire country at which a person can earn a discipline-specific doctorate in fire and emergency services administration has implications for the pool of available faculty, research base, quality of publications, and
progress toward a recognized body of knowledge that comprises fire administration. In the interim phase of development, faculty from related fields and practitioners with terminal degrees will continue to be heavily relied upon to teach. If and when more fire professionals seek and earn terminal degrees, one would expect that the amount and quality of research and publication would also increase.

As mentioned previously, an extensive body of empirical research related to Chief Fire Officers and fire administration does not currently exist. The International Fire Service Journal of Leadership and Management is peer-reviewed, but appears to largely include essays and opinion pieces that do not involve empirical research. One needs to look outside of fire, and sometimes outside of the United States to find related research in, for example, the International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters. Otherwise one must, at least partially, rely on trade journals, dissertations, textbooks related to technical training, and sources in related fields.

**Nature of the Work**

The average citizen needs only to turn on the news to understand the dangerous and essential nature of this profession. Catastrophic events like the deaths of 323 FDNY members at the World Trade Center in 2001 (Fire Department of New York, 2013) and the loss of the 19 members of Prescott Fire Department’s Granite Mountain Hotshots in 2013 (CNN U.S., 2013) are painful examples of the ultimate sacrifices that are made by emergency responders. For those who subscribe to the United State Fire Administration (USFA) fatality notification email service, the far too frequent announcements of the most recent line of duty deaths are a sobering reminder of the risks of the job. On average, 100 firefighters die in active line of duty incidents in the United States each year, and many more are injured or diagnosed with chronic illnesses associated with the fire service (United States Fire Administration, 2016e; National Fire Fighter
Near-Miss Reporting System, 2013). In spite of this risk, firefighting regularly ranks high in terms of job satisfaction (Fire Chief, 2007). Irish-born Edward F. Croker, who served as Chief of FDNY 1899-1911, expressed this deep devotion to the fire service during his eulogy for a firefighter killed in the line of duty:

I have no ambition in this world but one, and that is to be a fireman. The position may, in the eyes of some, appear to be a lowly one; but we who know the work that the fireman has to do believe that his is a noble calling. Our proudest moment is to save lives. Under the impulse of such thoughts, the nobility of the occupation thrills us and stimulates us to deeds of daring, even of supreme sacrifice (Fire Museum Network, 2011, “Fire Heroism Quotes from History,” para. 2).

While tempting, it is a disservice to the complexity and culture of the fire service to simply romanticize it as a group of heroes who selflessly serve, work together in constant harmony, and provide dramatic storylines for movies and television shows. The realities of the profession can include exposure to extreme situations, physical and mental stress, as well as commonly recognized workplace stressors that exist in most work environments.

Accordingly, it stands to reason that the Chief Fire Officer brings with him or her all of the prior experiences that can include exposure to extreme conditions, possible injury and illness, and loss of colleagues through debilitating injury or line of duty deaths. He or she will also likely have experienced the sense of camaraderie, accomplishment and excitement and loss that comes from responding to situations in which the stakes are very high. While there is very little research on the impact of these experiences specifically related to Chief Fire Officers, it is relevant to include several studies on job stress and job satisfaction among firefighters and line officers to help place the vital leadership role of the Chief Fire Officer position in context. In other words,
the impact of their experiences becomes the vital link in examining the uniquely contextualized
c ascension path to the leadership roles.

**Job Stress and Satisfaction**

The focus of much of the available research related to the fire service has been on
firefighters and physical and psychological stress. Common variables include, extreme work
conditions, exposure to toxins, lack of sleep, the impact of 24-hour work shifts, and coping with
exposure to traumatic events (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Doveh, 2008; Beaton, Murphy,
Johnson, Pike, & Corneil, 1999; Kimbrel et al., 2011; Superko, 2009).

In a landmark study conducted by Superko (2009), the physical impact of stress related to
firefighting became abundantly clear. Superko and his medical team performed extensive blood
chemistry tests, genetic screening, and analyzed the arterial images and diet and exercise activity
of more than 300 firefighters over the age of 36 for more than a year. Results indicated that
firefighters have a 300% increased risk for cardiac disease than does the general population and
that one-third of the cases of cardiac incident in firefighters are unrelated to traditional risk
factors such as elevated cholesterol. One of the most surprising findings was that, at least
outwardly, many of the participants appeared to be extremely physically fit. Superko concluded
that the job-related physical and emotional stress contributes to the higher incidence of heart
disease and put these factors into context when he described the typical workday of a firefighter:

Imagine being awakened from a dead sleep by a loud, shrieking siren several times
during the night, responding through the rush of adrenaline carrying a hundred pounds of
equipment on your back, and meeting people at the worst possible moments in their lives
and you can begin to understand the toll it takes on first responders (2009, para. 7).
Not surprisingly, the manner in which first responders cope with the stress related to their work has been the focus of many studies. In a quantitative inquiry, Beaton, Murphy, Johnson, Pike, and Corneil (1999) studied the coping responses and post-traumatic stress symptomatology in 220 fire personnel at two urban fire departments. The researchers utilized the Coping Responses of Rescue Workers Inventory (CRRWI) and Impact of Events Scale (IES). Years of service and frequency of traumatic events in the previous six months were studied in an attempt to determine if these individuals possessed extraordinary coping mechanisms and/or if years of experience increased their ability to insulate themselves from the impact of traumatic events. A previous study by McCammon, Durham, Allison and Williamson (1988) indicated that cognitive strategies were employed more prevalently after large-scale disasters and suggested that more experienced workers possessed higher levels of coping skills. However, utilizing a baseline test group, and test/re-test at six months, Beaton et al. (1999) found no correlation between coping skills and years of service, nor to coping and the number of events the person had been exposed to in the previous six months. Additionally, Corneil (1995) found a positive correlation between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and years of service among a group of urban, professional Canadian firefighters, suggesting that perhaps the stress of dealing with traumatic events is cumulative and becomes more rather than less difficult to cope with after each exposure.

One of the challenges of studying job stress and job satisfaction, or a multitude of other variables, in the fire service is a dearth of instruments that are relevant to this unique work environment. In an effort to bridge this gap, Kimbrel et al. (2001) developed and evaluated an abbreviated version of the Sources of Occupational Stress scale (SOOS) that could accurately measure occupational stress in firefighters, but do so with a more practical and focused tool, the SOOS-14. When two independent groups of predominantly white, male urban firefighters were
given both the SOOS and SOOS-14, the SOOS-14 was shown to assess the same basic constructs as the SOOS (Kimbrel et al., 2001, p. 301). This is significant because, according to Kimbrel et al., firefighters who were already stressed or dealing with depression, conflict, and low morale would be unlikely to finish a cumbersome or repetitive instrument and, therefore, less likely to provide valid results. Another key attribute of the SOOS-14, according to Kimbrel et al. (2001) is that it focuses less on psychopathology and more on the occupational problems and hazards that are commonly associated with the fire service and, therefore, would be less likely to introduce more stress to the respondents. The researchers recommended additional studies to try to replicate their findings and assess the test-retest reliability of the SOOS-14. They also asserted that the development of a reliable, practical tool could support agencies’ abilities to assess, identify and measure how occupational stress impacts firefighters over time, thus identifying early intervention and treatment for those at risk for such things as depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), substance abuse problem, and suicide.

In another study on job stress in the fire service, Navarre (1984) created his own instrument to quantitatively measure Toledo Fire and Rescue Department (TFRD) firefighters’ perceptions of job-related stress experienced by themselves and their co-workers for his dissertation. Navarre (1984) expressed that the available instruments did not have the focus and relevance required for a study involving the fire service. In his study the promotional process received the highest and most frequent responses as a stress-causing factor. Navarre indicated that he was not surprised by this response because, at that time, the hiring and promotional process at TFRD was based on the Civil Service “rule of three” and was the source of much conflict and many grievances filed by union representation within the department. The “rule of three” meant that if one promotional (or open position for hire) was available and three people
passed the corresponding exam, any one of the three could be hired or promoted, regardless of ranking on the exam. If for example, there were 10 promotional positions and 30 people passed the exam, the person ranked 30th could, at the will of the Chief, promoted over the person who ranked first.

Conversely, the item in Navarre’s study that received the lowest ranking for causing stress was working the 24-hour shifts. Participants in Navarre’s study viewed this schedule positively because it also provided them with 48 hours off to work an additional job, share childcare responsibilities, or pursue other interests (1984). Furthermore, Herald (2001) found, through his research project for the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) at the National Fire Academy that changing from 24-hour shifts to a 40-hour, five-day work schedule was actually a deterrent for many individuals when deciding whether or not to pursue a promotion because they witnessed that, particularly in salaried positions, 40 hours was often the minimum, and the norm included additional obligations on nights and weekends with no additional compensation.

Navarre’s study (1984) found that the most frequent behaviors reported by firefighters for self and co-workers in response to stress were changes in sleep and eating habits, impatience, complaining, and mocking clients. Much like Coleman (2003) stressed the need for people who aspire to the Chief Fire Officer position to understand the scope and complexity of the position, Navarre recommended better orientation for potential recruits to provide a clearer illustration of the realities of the job and the creation of a job and a training program for personal development and communication to improve relations between firefighters. Navarre (1984) also recommended further research on stress in firefighters and emergency medical responders in departments similar in size, significantly larger and smaller than the Toledo Fire & Rescue Department.
Despite the many physical and emotional stresses associated with the fire service, the profession consistently ranks high in job satisfaction surveys. In 2007, Smith, through the University of Chicago, conducted a job satisfaction survey of 25,587 people across a variety of professions. Firefighting ranked second in overall occupation satisfaction and 80% of the surveyed firefighters responded that they were very satisfied with their jobs. In comparison, across all occupations, only 47% of the respondents reported being very satisfied with their jobs. The other two professions that ranked in the top three occupations were members of the clergy and physical therapists. According to Smith, director of the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, the most satisfying jobs are those that involve caring for, protecting, or teaching others (as cited in Fire Chief, 2007).

Given the available research, it may be a reasonable assumption that individuals in the highest-ranking Chief position will have experienced some, if not all, of the same stressors over the course of their career. Additionally, it must be noted that the Chief Fire Officer may be impacted by the experiences, behaviors, successes, failures, and tragedies that impact those that he or she has been charged to lead. To complicate matters, the Chief Fire Officer must lead in a field in which the requirements for individual preparation, comprehensive efforts to professionalize the fire service as a whole, and the scope of the highest Chief position are not necessarily universally agreed upon or clearly defined. In an attempt to provide a frame upon which to frame this inquiry, applicable theoretical perspectives relative to work role transition, and career development were explored.

Theoretical Perspectives

The lack of available literature, wide variance of patterns of ascension, the very nature of the job, multiple career stages, and role transitions leading up to and within the Chief Fire
Officer position present challenges to those who aspire to this position (Coleman, 2003; Fleming, 2010; Fleming & Zhu, 2009; Kramer, 1995; Rivenbark & McCall, 2000). As noted the dearth of theoretical perspectives upon which to frame the study present challenges, as well as considerable opportunity, for those who wish to study and research in this field. Fire administration is an emerging field and, as such, there is not yet a substantial body of research specific to Chief Fire Officers and how they manage career and work role transitions. There are however related bodies of research and theory to provide some structure and a starting point for research specific to Chief fire officers. Three such theoretical perspectives are presented here and they are work role transition theory, career development theory and leadership theory.

**Work Role Transition Theory**

Transition theories were originally grounded in psychology in areas such as grief, crisis, and depression and included works by such icons as Elizabeth Kubler Ross (Williams, 1999). As occupational psychology and industrial/organizational psychology developed into fully recognized fields, studies on the impact of and reaction to transitions in the work place, including private sector, military and public sector organizations increased dramatically (Williams, 1999).

In an effort to create a new theory on work role transitions, Nicholson (1984) generated a model to test variables and their impact on adjustment as defined by personal development and role development. Drawing on life-span development, organizational change, and occupational socialization theories, Nicholson (1984) developed a model that included role development and personal development as variables. Prior occupational socialization, motivational orientation, organizational induction, and role requirements were identified as determinants for modes of adjustment, which Nicholson described in four components: adjustment to a new position as replication (the person makes minimal adjustment to personal or organizational roles);
absorption (the person adapts to the change in role without exerting pressure to adjust the role itself); determination (the person adapts the role to him or herself); and exploration (the person adapts and exerts energy to adjust the new role).

Nicholson’s (1984) model predicted that situations in which there is low discretion and either high or low novelty would result in absorption, high discretion and low novelty would result in determination, and high discretion and high novelty would predict exploration. However, when tested by Ashforth and Saks (1995) these predictions were not consistently found. In a study with 295 new business school graduates who were starting new jobs, Ashforth and Saks (1995) used hierarchical moderated regression analysis and found that, at four months novelty of the new position was related to personal development, but only when high discretion was present and could only be identified at ten months if conditions of low desire for control or low desire for feedback were present; discretion could not be shown to be positively related to personal development; desire for feedback was positively related to personal development at four months, but was only present at ten months if the novelty of position was high; desire for control could not be shown to be positively related to role development; and there was no significant evidence that an increase in discretion would be associated with less role development than a decrease in discretion.

Ashforth and Saks (1995) pointed out that the results of their study might have been impacted by the age of the newly graduated participants and, therefore, their lack of career experience. However, they raised several issues and suggestions that may have relevance to the experience of Chief Fire Officers. These include examining responses in the context of the situation (which may or may not indicate personal traits and/or development), supplementing personal accounts with alternate sources, and the impact of organizational culture and
socialization that may supersede an individual’s preference for example, for feedback. Ashforth and Saks (1995) also suggested that additional research was needed to include the impact of disengaging from one’s previous role and development in the context of the holistic lives of individuals. The concept of levels of discretion and transition may also prove to be important to this study as the roles described previously would appear to have drastically different levels of discretion (such as command of an emergency scene versus working with budgetary constraints) within the Chief Officer position.

To further illustrate the complexity of transitions to management positions in the fire service, Herald (2001) examined why qualified candidates sought, or chose not to seek, promotions into middle and upper management positions at two separate fire departments. Responses about factors that were a deterrent to seeking promotion included the perception that the level of accountability for officers was increasing and punitive, the change from the 24-hour work shift to a 40 hour work week interfered with family time and the flexibility to work an additional job, and the expectation that the 40-hour work week was, in fact, a 60+ hour work week with obligations on nights and weekends. Responses also indicated a concern over giving up strong union representation, reluctance from witnessing others fail, and not wanting to give up the hands-on work associated with firefighting. When officers were asked about their current level of job satisfaction, 53% indicated that they regretted the move to management and salary and benefits were not sufficient for workload. Responses also indicated a surprise at the amount of time and energy that was spent on ‘tedious personnel issues’ and the stress of losing one’s peer group.
Career Development Theory

Much like work role transition theory can trace its roots to psychology, career development theory has a strong foundation in the works of human behaviorists such as Maslow, Skinner, Erikson, and Frankl (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2013). There are currently hundreds of individual development theories, which can apply to almost any career. However, all are somehow linked to one of the main foundations of career development theory: Trait-Factor Theory; Super’s Life-Span/Life-Space theory; Krumboltz’s Social Learning Theory of Career Choice; Holland’s Career Typology Theory; and/or Constructivist Models of Career Development (Canadian Career Development Foundation, 2013). Since this study is intended to be largely inductive, I will not yet go into extensive detail about the above mentioned models, but will remain open to the possibility that, in whole or part, any one or a combination of these theories may provide clarity to the data collected.

Since literature suggests, as stated by Coleman (2003) that simply rising through the ranks and moving up the hierarchy, while still a common model in line officer promotions, is not sufficient preparation for the Chief position, it stands to reason that persons who pursue the Chief Fire Officer position are likely to encounter ambiguity and frustration during the process. Further evidence of the increased roles and requirements for Chief Officer can be found in employment postings. A search for the term “Fire Chief” on the IAFC web page (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2013) produced a list of requirements that, in addition to fire-related technical expertise, including, executive leadership skills, ability to plan and execute large-scale emergency management response (including response to terrorism and incidents involving weapons of mass destruction and biohazards), experience with unions and negotiation, sophisticated financial management, grants administration, public administration, community
engagement, and executive staff development. All but one of the 18 positions posted required a bachelor’s degree (the other required an associate degree) and large departments in both Florida and Georgia listed a master’s degree as a preferred qualification (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2013). These prerequisites represent a major shift from the not too distant past when, as previously stated, the Fire Chief was typically promoted from within and qualifications were largely determined by seniority and technical expertise. Since many fire departments have shifted to the previously unheard of practice of recruiting externally for the Chief Officer position, those who aspire to this position must be prepared to undertake deliberate, focused, and visionary career development and planning (Baruch 2004; Hall, 2004; Mirvis & Hall, 1996) in order to meet at least the minimum requirements for many postings for Chief Fire Officer.

In a qualitative approach to studying career planning, Clarke (2008) used semi-structured interviews to determine how individuals viewed their own career paths and how ‘employable’ they felt. Of particular interest related to Chief Fire Officers is Clarke’s effort to determine if or how managers, who are generally expected to provide career-planning support for their subordinates, manage their own careers. In terms of identification of types of careers, the results revealed four career patterns: traditional organizational, traditional individual, the boundaryless career (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005) and the protean career (Hall, 2004 & Baruch 2004).

However, Clarke (2008) went a step further and asserted that the key issue is not which career pattern was identified, but what behaviors and mind-set individuals adopted to manage their own careers to the extent possible. The overall concept of employability was analyzed in terms of long and short-term goal setting, mobility, response to change and using career assets (knowing how, knowing why, and knowing whom). Following the analysis of data from semi-
structured interviews with managers in career transition, Clarke identified the following: plodders, pragmatists, opportunists, and visionaries. According to Clarke, plodders tend to focus on the present and on stability; they may be very technically skilled but are much less savvy about the power of networking and politics. Pragmatists share all of the same characteristics, but tended to be more willing to accept, if presented, new opportunities within their organization or narrow field. Both plodders and pragmatists seemed to gravitate toward more traditional career models. Conversely, opportunists described career models that involved some planning oriented toward the future, a willingness to take risks, be flexible, preparation for change, and an understanding of internal politics and a strong internal network. Visionaries described a very future-oriented mindset with a plan to build transferable skills and talents to increase employability in a variety of fields and a very strong understanding of the power of internal and external politics and networks (Clarke 2008).

In their theory, Planned Happenstance, Mitchell, Levis, and Krumboltz (1999) embraced the idea that chance plays an important role in everyone’s career and that rational planning alone would serve its purpose if careers were to follow a simple, straightforward, and logical path. The authors add that, “in virtually every employment sector, some occupations are becoming obsolete, and unforeseen occupations are being created” (p. 116). One of the most obvious of many examples of this type of change in the fire service is, in response to the 9/11 attacks, the creation of a national homeland security department and the resulting changes to federal, state, and local preparation for response to terrorism.

Mitchell et al. (1999) pointed out that this approach does not advocate leaving career development and planning to chance, but encourages individuals to become comfortable with ambiguity, take risks, prepare for future, and to remain persistent, flexible, curious, optimistic
and open to unexpected opportunities. Bandura (1982) also recognized chance as an important part of career development and exploration. While he recognized that studying continuity and looking for connections from, for example, childhood preparation to adulthood career choice was a valuable pursuit, he also pointed out that:

Personal lives, whether marked by continuities or discontinuities, have their particular characters. A comprehensive developmental theory must therefore specify factors that set and alter particular life courses if it is to provide an adequate explanation of human behavior (p. 747).

Krumboltz (as cited in Mitchell et al., 1999) created the Career Beliefs Inventory that includes several sections that may be applicable to the career planning and preparation of Chief Fire Officers. One scale measures the individual’s ability to accept uncertainty and provides information to support thinking through decisions, rather than making instant judgments. Another scale helps individuals consider the value of doing excellent work in the present, even if the way that the work is related to the future is unclear. This type of information might be useful both in career planning and in creating awareness about the shifts in role from fire officer to Chief Fire Officer.

In their review of 33 studies on career planning, many of which are previously mentioned, Vinkenburg and Weber (2012) sought to determine if the prevailing conclusion was that the more traditional/hierarchical career pattern, as had been predicted by Grzeda (1999) was less prevalent than it had been in the past. After meta-analysis of the 33 studies, the majority of which were quantitative, Vinkenburg and Weber (2012) found that the traditional career path was still present and relevant, particularly in management fields.
These models as presented serve to inform certain aspects relative to the examination and exploration of fire service. However, what was most striking about the Vinkenburg and Weber (2012) study was that they also found the body of empirical evidence to be somewhat limited and concluded that there is a need for more qualitative research in this area and that, “the use of narratives is crucial in enhancing our understanding of the construction of careers and the identity work involved in work role or career transitions, due to its emphasis on retrospective sense making, and on identifying and seeing patterns” (p. 605). While studies relative to Work Role Transition and Career Development may inform certain evolutional aspects of rising through the ranks, the models lack insight to the depth, scope, and complexity of top-level organizational leadership. Absent from these models is the significant discussion and application of leadership theory. As reflected by Coleman (2003) once the transition to the top position has been achieved, simply rising through the ranks is not sufficient preparation. As such, deeper and more comprehensive theories relative to leadership preparation may be necessary to effectively deal with the ambiguity of the role of Chief Fire Officer.

**Leadership Theory**

Conger, Spreitzer, and Lawler (1999) reflected that the “primary task of leadership is to create a context that calls forth and the taps emergent potential of ‘complex adaptive systems’” (p. 195). As cited in Conger, Spreitzer, and Lawler, Heifetz (1996) described adaptive skills as those required in social systems to address problems without resolutions. Practitioners have addressed the complexity inherent to the Fire Chief position and the need for adaptive leadership knowledge, and skills in the shift from strictly emergency response and technical skills to a complex administrative position. As discussed this position is dynamic and multifaceted. For example, Johnson (1995) addressed the level of knowledge required to effectively negotiate in a
union environment, and Coleman (2006) highlighted the pitfalls of not understanding fiscal management and the budget process. Additionally, both Kopp (2003) and Ray (2006) pointed out the increasing need for strong interpersonal and communication skills and a thorough understanding of the power of the political environment. In a study in which city managers were surveyed, Christiansen (2000) identified the impact of the Chief Officer’s professional image on the outcome of decisions about budget requests. Christiansen found that 60% of the city managers in his study chose the highest ranking when asked to what extent the professional image of the Chief Fire Officer had influence on the decision to grant or deny budget requests.

As indicated previously, the contemporary Chief Fire Officer position involves mastery of a myriad of rules and laws, internal and external roles, technical and administrative knowledge, and the ability to communicate with people on all levels of the department, local, state, and national community (Murgallis, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Purchase, 2006; Fleming, 2010).

According to Coleman (2003) the assumption that the same set of skills and experiences that are essential to firefighters will also prepare Chief Officers for the highest leadership positions is false. In fact, the knowledge, skills and abilities required of a Chief are vastly different than the technical and tactical skills that are required to handle emergencies (Coleman, 2003). Similarly, Kramer (1995) asserted that what once was a position that required a combination of years of experience and technical skills, evolved into a position that requires a considerable amount of expertise in human resource management, finance and budgeting, organizational change management, and a multitude of skills previously associated as part of the domain of Chief Executive Officers (CEO’s) in the private sector. Fleming (2010) also identified a shift from using titles such as Fire Chief, Fire Marshal, or Fire Superintendent to those more generally associate with business such as Director or Executive Director. Fleming further
asserted, in this senior executive leadership role, one of the most important things that a Fire Chief must do is recognize that the public citizens are stakeholders and that both the internal and external roles of the Chief Fire Officer must be fulfilled. Fleming (2010) used Mintzberg’s (1973) categories of management roles as the basis for a framework to describe the Chief Fire Officer position. Mintzberg (1973) identified three main categories and their associated roles: informational (monitor, disseminator, and spokesperson), interpersonal (figurehead, leader, and liaison) and decisional (entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator). Fleming (2010) asserted that the external roles, such as spokesperson, community liaison, and inter-agency collaborator are more recent developments in the realm of the Chief Fire Officer’s responsibilities. It is critical that the Fire Chief, and all stakeholders, understand the necessity for each role because according to Fleming (2010), “failing to recognize and balance these often conflicting role sets can significantly compromise the fire department’s effectiveness, efficiency and safety and has contributed to the demise of many careers” (p. 141).

The potential for dire consequences for Chief Officers’ careers speaks to the essential need for professional development and education. A Chief Fire Officer will, throughout their career, have been promoted from Firefighter to Lieutenant and Lieutenant to Captain, likely through a process that relies heavily on a written examination. At the Battalion Chief promotion, often the first administrative level, the promotion process may include education requirements and other forms of assessment in addition to or instead of written examinations. The next level of promotion, Assistant Chief, is administrative and may oversee an entire bureau. The Deputy Chief is the second in command of the department and will act in the Chief’s absence when needed. Additionally, in some departments, the Chief can be promoted from below the rank of Assistant or Deputy of Chief, which would suggest an even greater transition.
The leadership chasm between technical and adaptive skills among the people who primarily perform technical tasks, those in management positions, and those in administrative leadership positions is not unique to the fire service. Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (2007) addressed the need for managers to perform functions of planning, controlling, organizing, and motivating with a combination of technical, human, and conceptual skills. The difference between managers and leaders, according to Hersey, et al., is that leaders also need “the ability to diagnose and understand the situations they try to influence, adapt behavior and resources to prepare for contingencies, and communicate in a way that others can easily understand and accept” (p.11). While effective leaders may tend to possess some inherent traits such as intelligence, physical energy and social potential, Hersey, et.al also asserted that work experience, hardship, opportunity, education, role models, and mentors all go together to craft a leader (2007, p.11).

In his pivotal 1955 article, Katz defied the then popular notion of a perfect type of executive and proposed that the performance of leaders is far more closely tied to fundamental skills, rather than personality traits. He identified three specific categories of skills, namely technical, human, and cognitive, and described the importance and development of each at different levels of leadership in an organization. Katz (1955) emphasized that examining the skills separately is important and valuable for analysis but, in practice, they are interrelated. To illustrate, he offered the following analogy:

In playing golf the action of the hands, wrists, hips, shoulders, arms, and head are all interrelated; yet in improving one’s swing it is often valuable to work on one of these elements separately. Also, under different playing conditions the relative importance of these elements varies. Similarly, although all three are of importance at every level of
administration, the technical, human, and conceptual skills of the administrator vary in relative importance of at different levels of responsibility (1955, p. 37).

Further Katz surmised that technical, human and conceptual skills were each critical in different combinations and intensity at different stages of one’s career (1955). Supported by the research of many others (Kramer, 1995; Coleman, 2003; Fleming & Zhu, 2009; Fleming, 2010) the above example of mastering golf can also be applied to the development of a leader in the fire service. In the early to middle stages of one’s career, technical and human skills are most important. Technical skills, defined as the ability to demonstrate understanding and proficiency in the processes, techniques, and procedures of one’s work, is the first step toward building credibility. Human skills, such as the ability to operate as part of a team and communicate effectively are also essential throughout the early and mid-stages of career. Katz described a person with highly developed human skills as one who “is aware of his own attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs about other individuals and groups; he is able to see the usefulness and limitations of these feelings” (1955, p. 34). Finally, at the administrative levels of leadership, one must also possess strong conceptual skills, which include the ability to see the entire enterprise and the impact of each part on the other.

In further support of valuing skills over traits, Fullan (2008) developed a model to help leaders help their organizations. Included in the model are six components that address the importance of valuing members of the organization, engaging in purposeful interaction that generates knowledge and commitment, building individual and collective capacity, learning and expecting others to learn on the job every day, valuing transparency as a means to mark progress (rather than as a way to simply generate and share endless data), and knowing how systems learn. In contrast to the belief in great leaders or gurus who are expected to be all-knowing and
all-powerful, Fullan’s model supports the development of a culture of learning that develops leaders at all levels and is constantly providing for the development of new leaders within the organization. One of the greatest benefits of this, according to Fullan (2008) is that a change in top leadership has little or no effect because the culture and processes and purpose of the organization are so apparent. This is not to say that the individual leader is not important or does not bring their own strengths but, according to Fullan, allows for the important truth that no single person possesses all the answers and that “leaders who operate from a position of certitude are bound to miss something, are likely to be wrong more than their share of times, and almost certainly will not learn from their experiences” (2008, p. 117). Fullan acknowledges that this model creates a paradox because people tend to want their leaders to know what they are doing, be confident, and be able to tackle complex issues. The answer to the paradox is for leaders to “appear more confident in the face of complexity than the circumstances warrant, but not be so certain that they ignore realities that don’t fit their action plan” (Fullan, 2008, p. 117).

Similar to Katz’s (1955) description of conceptual thinking, Fullan (2008) describes the need for leaders to possess the ability to engage in integrative thinking and possess the ability to hold diametrically opposed ideas in their mind without panicking or feeling the need to immediately choose one or the other. Integrative thinkers, says Fullan, “take a broader view of salient issues, try to figure out complex causality, visualize the whole while working on individual parts, and eventually arrive at a creative resolution of tensions” (2008, p. 120). When the entire organization, or system is engaged in learning and focused on the purpose, the burden of solving problems is shared. Certainly in the fire service, where a person at almost any level may be faced with a decision between two less than ideal options and/or an ever-changing environment, an organizational understanding of culture, processes, and purpose is essential.
Relative to the development of strong leaders within an organization, Argyris (1985) posited that the very structure of many organizations creates a gap in levels of maturity between the workforce and management, which also suggests a need for leadership training. The organizational structure that Argyris described as detrimental to individual maturation, is not only present in the fire service, it could be argued that it is necessary. For example, some of the traits that Argyris prescribed to immaturity on his continuum included behaving in a few specific ways, having a short term perspective, having a subordinate position, and a lack of awareness of self. While not suggesting that firefighters do not think for themselves or do not master highly specialized technical skills, the traits that Argyris described contribute to order and followership and a willingness to go into dangerous situations without question or consideration about consequences for self. On the other hand, Argyris included independence, the ability to behave in multiple ways, having a broad, long-term perspective, a superordinate position, and awareness and control over oneself as indicators of maturity (1985). Illustrated here is the potential for challenging transitions when, what worked and was rewarded in operational positions, is counter to what will work in higher level administrative positions. A Chief Fire Officer must be able to transition to being a leader who has very strong self-awareness and a perspective not only for the fire department, but the community and beyond. Additionally the leader must be capable of dealing with ambiguity, have command of a multitude of disciplines, and be able to self-regulate, at least at the department level without necessarily having a supportive peer group.

Another way to frame the need for leadership training and education is that a Chief Fire Officer must be able to shift from a highly transactional to a more, but not exclusively, transformational leadership style. According to Bass and Avolio (1994) transactional leaders tend to follow existing rules, procedures and norms; all traits that are extremely valuable and
necessary at the operational level of the fire service. However, in the leadership role, Chief Fire Officers may need to shift to a more transformational model in order to understand the complex organizational culture and be able to influence change with a vision that articulates and includes shared assumptions, values and norms (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Again, in an emergency situation in which the stakes can be very high, a transactional style is needed. Orders must be followed, protocol adhered to, and followers must be trained, willing, and ready to take immediate action within a very structured hierarchy. However, in the myriad of other roles required of the Chief Officer (Coleman, 2003; Fleming, 2010; Fleming & Zhu, 2009) there is a need to employ more transformational strategies such as creating a vision and recognizing the need for revitalization (Tichy & Devanna, 1986), inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, and modeling the way (Kouzes & Posner 2007). While there are traits that great leaders may possess at birth, research has shown a need for traits beyond intelligence and charisma and the value in studying one’s craft (Collins, 2001; Kotter, 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 2007). Just as a firefighter must learn the technical skills and knowledge to perform safely under extreme conditions, so must a Chief Fire Officer study how to be effective in a challenging and new environment. Further, Kutz (2015) developed a theory of Contextual Intelligence and described the importance of mastering the ability to engage in, “3D Thinking, which is the integration and convergence of hindsight, insight, and foresight” (p. 198) to effectively meet the challenges presented in very complex situations. Contextual Intelligence, according to Kutz,

Is the ability to quickly and intuitively recognize and diagnose the dynamic contextual variables inherent in an event or circumstance that results in the intentional adjustment of behavior in order to exert influence appropriate for that context (2015, p. 199)
And finally the timeless work of Warren Bennis (1989) supports the need not only for strong skills related to the specifics of one’s profession, but also for the need to know oneself and to take responsibility for one’s self and action. Bennis offered four basic tenets of self-knowledge, “You are your own best teacher; accept responsibility and blame no one; you can learn anything you want to learn; and true understanding comes from reflecting on your own experience” (1989, p. 52). Much like the path of career and personal development will not be identical for any two people, the path toward self-awareness and knowledge will vary from person to person, therefore, “Leaders are self-directed, but the learning that is foundational to our self-direction comes from our relationships with others. Leaders must be able to resolve this paradox by learning from others, but not being made by others” (Bennis, 1989, p.59).

**Summary**

This review of the available literature illustrated that fire service roles are inherently stressful and dangerous, and yet its members rank their satisfaction high, often expressing their passion as a calling rather than a job. The research reflected that the roles of the Chief Fire Officer position and the preparation required remains an unsettled question within the fire service, professional training organizations, and higher education. While there are several independent, and collaborative efforts to clarify these issues, there is no consistent message to provide lucidity for academics and professionals. The literature also revealed, while there are many fire-related associate and bachelor degree programs with some title variation relative to Fire Administration, great ambiguity remains in regard to content and its placement in the academy. As such, Fire Administration is still an emerging profession and developing field of academic study. As cited in research related to the field of Emergency Management (Neal, 2000), the expectation is that Fire Administration would evolve to a fully legitimate area of study...
as its members earn terminal degrees and undertake empirical research in the field. However, this evolution cannot be taken for granted and it requires informed and prepared leadership and a commitment to academic research to move the field toward legitimacy.

While the literature review revealed a few empirical studies related to the fire service, the bulk of the literature cited in this review was either quantitative, based on action research (from EFO projects) or from edited books and trade journals written by practitioners. The practitioners cited are all well-known and respected members of the field. However, this study sought to provide empirical data, through the first-hand accounts of metropolitan Chief Fire Officers of their preparation for, transition to, and experience in, the Chief Officer position.

From a practical standpoint, the results will assist aspiring officers prepare for the increasingly complex role of Chief Fire Officer by providing a rich, deep realistic and first hand illustration of the demands and rewards of the position. Since research supports a link between self-directed career planning and achievement (Clarke, 2008), the results of this study demonstrate actionable applications for leadership training, career and succession planning, and policy development.

This study, through the use of narrative, contributes to the body of knowledge surrounding how this specific population, Chief Fire Officers in metropolitan settings construct their careers, respond to transitions, and make meaning of their own identities related to career and work. From a more global perspective, the implications of this study are significant to those who develop curriculum in higher education and in subject-specific professional development programs. This research contributes to the scholarly body of knowledge that seeks to provide, “important insights to those within the academic community whose research focuses on the
broad topic of managerial responsibilities or those with specific interest in fire department management and related public administration issues” (Fleming & Zhu 2009, p. 64).

According to Neal (2000), adding to the body of research related to the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities of this population contributes to the legitimacy of the field, both as a profession and as an area of study within the academy. And finally, Vinkenburg and Weber (2012) asserted that “the qualitative design and use of narratives are crucial in enhancing our understanding of the construction of careers and the identity work involved in work role or career transitions, due to its emphasis on retrospective sense making, and on identifying and seeing patterns” (p. 605). Using qualitative, narrative methodology, this study begins to address gaps in the current literature.
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the rationale for the qualitative research design, use of the phenomenological methodology. In addition, this chapter describes the role of the researcher and positionality, ethical considerations, interview protocol, data collection, analysis, and the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

This study explored the lived experiences of the participants throughout their ascension to and in the position of Chief Fire Officer at metropolitan fire departments. The goal of this phenomenological study was to understand the participants’ lived experiences throughout their career path toward the Chief Fire Officer position, to explore and gain insight and understanding into the experiences of Chief Fire Officers, and to appreciate the complexity of the Chief Fire Officer position.

Guiding Questions

1. What do Chief Fire Officers describe as their experiences during their preparation for and ascension to the Chief Fire Officer position?
2. What are the significant leadership experiences that Chief Fire officers describe in their leadership position?
3. What types of preparation do Chief Fire Officers describe as being exemplary, appropriate, and effective?

Rationale for Qualitative Design

In order to capture the essence of the experiences of the metropolitan Chief Fire Officers, it was important to collect the rich data from their stories, descriptions, and perceptions of their experiences. Additionally, the qualitative research approach allowed for themes to develop from the participants’ descriptions of their experiences and allowed for an emergent design.
Furthermore, the qualitative design provided the opportunity to discover how the Chiefs make meaning of their own experiences (Josselson & Lieblich, 1999). The use of a qualitative research design was appropriate for this study because it sought to discover the essence of the experience of the participants and meet the objectives as described by Creswell (2013) and Maxwell (2013), which include the:

- Deep exploration of a problem or phenomenon;
- Empowerment of individuals to tell their stories;
- Understanding of the meaning of the context, culture and/or setting of the participants;
- Recognition of the uniqueness of individuals;
- Understanding the processes by which events and actions take place;
- Identification of unanticipated phenomena and influences; and
- Generation of results and theories that are understandable to participants and audience.

Maxwell (2013) pointed out that quantitative researchers focus on variables, while qualitative researchers focus on process. Process theory focuses on a view of the world based on people, situations, events, and the processes that connect them. Rather than cause and effect, the analysis of data is based on how some situations and events influence others. The ontological belief (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011) that accompanies qualitative interpretivist research, that it is important to know how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences and situations, allowed me to study the experiences of Fire Chiefs, based on their own words and perceptions.

**Rationale for Phenomenological Approach**

The major difference between phenomenology and other qualitative methodologies, such as case study and portraiture, is that while those methodologies focus deeply on the experiences of each individual, phenomenology seeks to capture the common experiences or meaning for
several individuals who have experienced the same concept or phenomenon. Following data collection and analysis, the researcher creates a composite of the experience or phenomenon that includes how the participants experienced the phenomenon. The goal is for the reader to feel as if he or she has a much better understanding of the experience or phenomenon after reading the study. This is important to this study because, rather than testing a theory or hypothesis, the goal of this study is to provide a rich and deep description of the complexities of the participants’ experiences.

The word phenomenon comes from the Greek word phaenesthai, which means to flare up, to show itself, and to appear (Moustakas, 1994). All phenomenological perspectives seek to understand the nature of human experience as it is lived, in the words of those who live it. von Eckartsberg (1986) went so far as to describe the participants as co-researchers, who are engaged in dialogue and actively interested in the description of the phenomenon. First person reports are critical to phenomenology, as is looking at each experience on its own before attempting to describe the phenomenon as a whole.

The concept of intentionality is an important concept in phenomenological philosophy. This is not intentionality in the sense of planning. It is, instead, the consideration of how much one’s thoughts and actions are directed toward something. Pollio (1997) explained, “What seems to be the case is that we learn and relearn who we are on the basis of our encounters with objects, ideas, and people” (p. 8). This concept of growth through socialization into the culture clearly provides important insights into the experience of participants in this study as they reflect on the transition to the Chief Officer position and the experiences within the scope of the position.

The two major approaches to phenomenology are Heuristic (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997) and Transcendental (Moustakas, 1994). Heuristics, in addition to interviews,
requires reflective interpretations of text, such as poems, journals, artwork and other personal documents to achieve a meaningful understanding of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Alternatively, transcendental phenomenology focuses on the first-hand descriptions from people who have experienced the phenomenon to gain a meaningful and concrete understanding it (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas also asserted that transcendental phenomenology, with its systematic processes and detailed outline of analysis steps, is well suited for less experienced researchers. In summary, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is designed for collecting data through the telling of lived experiences, then explicating and explaining the themes, meanings and essences of human experience (as cited in Moustakas, 1994) and is, therefore, more explanatory. Heuristic phenomenology involves immersion of the researcher, incubation illumination, and synthesis and is, therefore, more exploratory (Moustakas, 1994).

As discussed previously, there is much debate about what the position of Chief Fire Officer actually entails (Bruegman, 2002; Coleman, 2003; Fleming, 2010; Kramer, 1995). Since this study used in-depth interviews, first person reports and, when possible, observation to provide clarity about what it means to be a Chief Fire Officer in a metropolitan setting, transcendental phenomenology was the most appropriate qualitative method. While the data collection is largely designed around a phenomenological interview model (Seidman, 2013), it could also be argued that it also encompasses several features of a collective, multisite case study design. This was done purposefully to ensure more substantive and varied data to provide an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013) or phenomenon of becoming a metropolitan Chief Fire Officer. While qualitative researchers are reluctant to claim that the results of their research can be generalized, Yin (2009) suggested that the multisite case study design uses the logic of replication in that the researcher attempts to follow the same protocol with each
participant. Maxwell (1992) also asserted that internal generalizability, the ability to recognize patterns and diversity within the group is critically important because everything cannot be observed or collected in each setting. Creswell (2013) further emphasized that “the validity of the conclusions of a case study depend on their internal generalizability to the case as a whole” (p. 137). While qualitative research is certainly not accepted as being externally generalizable in the same sense as is quantitative research, the findings of this study provide important insight into the unique and shared experiences of the members of this bounded group, and provides valuable research-based information on the realities of, and relevant and valuable preparation for, the metropolitan Chief Fire Officer position.

Finally, phenomenology was most appropriate because the intent of this study was to transform the Chiefs’ original descriptions, using their own words, into textural descriptions that are meaningful to them personally and that allow the reader to understand and grasp the reality and significance of the experience.

Participants

Purposeful sampling, as it is an appropriate protocol for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2001), was used to select participants for this study. According to Merriam (2009) it is not only important to predetermine the criteria that frame sample selection but also to explain why these are important to the purpose of the study. Due to the assumed complexity and scope of their positions, only Fire Chiefs of metropolitan departments ranging from 400 to 2000 employees were selected. The range of department size was necessary to ensure that the participants had enough common experience to contribute to the overall understanding of this position. Of the nearly 30,000 fire departments that registered for the 2012 USAF census, only 82 met the parameters for this study. Therefore, criterion sampling ensured
that each participant’s inclusion in this study was based on the satisfaction of predetermined standards and provided additional credibility to the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In order to gain access to the group of participants, a snowball sampling strategy was used. First to be contacted were Chiefs who met the criteria and with whom the researcher was familiar. Several of the initial group then recommended and introduced others (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009) to expand the sample. These introductions were critical because they provided endorsement from members of a group with a strong culture of membership and trust.

Sample size in qualitative research is a topic for which concrete answers seem to elude even the experts, and certainly confounds doctoral students. In a meta-analysis of qualitative studies, Mason (2010) reviewed 560 studies that used qualitative interviews and found, for a group of 179 case studies, a range of one to 95 participants. Additionally, in the 25 phenomenological studies Mason reviewed, he found a range from seven to 89 participants. The concept of saturation, while compelling, also has practical weaknesses, as the concept of exploring every potential concept to the point of saturation could be limitless (Mason, 2010). Using careful criterion-based selection, recognizing the need for a manageable yet meaningful research study, and following Creswell’s (2013) guide interviews were completed with one retired and 8 current metropolitan Fire Chiefs.

**Researcher Positionality**

It is important to acknowledge that my professional work with the fire service, through State Fire School at Bowling Green State University for the past 15 years, has led to many opportunities to meet, work with and develop relationships with Firefighters and Officers and Chiefs from all over the world. I have had a very unique opportunity to observe, although not always consciously, the culture of the fire service at different levels and ranks and in a variety of
situations. My interest in this area of inquiry began through my work as Director of State Fire School and, more recently, as Director and Advisor for the online Bachelor of Science in Fire Administration degree (FIAD) at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). Founded in 1910, BGSU is a public university located in northwest Ohio. Although BGSU offers several online degree programs and has been recognized as a veteran-friendly campus, it is still primarily a residential campus for traditional students (Bowling Green State University, 2014a).

State Fire School began in 1974 at BGSU as an annual training conference for firefighters and emergency medical responders. It has since grown to include two annual on-campus training events with more than 1000 participants, technical rescue training certification programs in Cincinnati and Columbus, online training, and multiple classes focused on fire officer and instructor professional development (State Fire School, 2014). The first cohort of the FIAD degree began in fall 2011, and both FIAD and State Fire School programs reside in the Department of Political Science in the College of Arts and Sciences (Bowling Green State University, 2014b).

In my role as Director of State Fire School, part of my responsibility was to identify and develop new educational opportunities for fire and emergency response professionals. As a result of collecting more than ten years of feedback through course and program evaluations, conversations with students and instructors, and working with an advisory board, it was clear that there was a demand for an accessible, relevant, and respected degree program. After hosting several focus groups with firefighters and officers, and analyzing additional market data, it was also clear the market in Ohio and nationally was saturated with Associate degrees in fire science and fire engineering. The determination to develop a Bachelor degree specifically designed to
prepare fire officers was the result of an extensive market survey and review of job projections and trends in the fire service (Eduventures, 2008).

A particularly valuable source of information during the development of the core curriculum and approval of the FIAD degree were focus groups and consultations with Chief Fire Officers who were instructors and/or advisory board members at State Fire School. I asked them to describe for me what, if anything, they wished they had known prior to their first day as a Chief Fire Officer. Their answers included surprise at the sheer magnitude, intensity, and complexity of the job and several expressed discomfort during the transition away from operations to a much more administrative role. There were great variances in their reflections on how prepared they felt, which seemed to be related to some combination of experience in other line and administrative positions, formal education, and/or having been mentored by his or her predecessor. All expressed an initial level of surprise at the intensity and required scope of knowledge about the political environment. Additionally, several reported that decisions that may have looked straightforward from a lower organizational perspective were much more complex from their new perspective as the Chief Officer. In addition to describing high levels of satisfaction and a sense of achievement, many also described insomnia, an inability to relax at home and on vacation, and difficulty balancing work and family obligations.

As my purpose was to gather information about what areas of study to potentially include and focus on in the FIAD curriculum, I focused on what prior knowledge, in their opinion, could have made the transition smoother from line or administrative officer to the Chief Officer position. In light of the information I received during the aforementioned conversations, combined with an intense focus on this profession during the development of the degree and throughout coursework in the Leadership Studies program, my interest in understanding the
experience of this unique group of leaders intensified. What does a Fire Chief need to know? What does it mean to be a Fire Chief? How can one prepare for the position? As illustrated in the review of literature, there is still much debate about the role and ideal preparation for a Chief Fire Officer. However, Johnson (1995) and Purchase (2006) pointed out that a Chief Officer must be fully versed in all laws and regulations related to the fire service and must make training of the members of his or her department a top priority. Murgallis (1993) strongly asserted that firefighter life safety and health is the ultimate responsibility of the Chief Officer and requires the highest level of attention and executive leadership. Finally, Fleming (2010) asserted that the ability of the Chief Officer to recognize, understand, balance and enact all of the required roles is so critical that failing to do so can contribute to the demise of the Chief Officer’s career and the future of his or her department.

While working on the development of the Bachelor of Science in Fire Administration (FIAD) program at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), I gained an entirely new perspective on the difference between being a firefighter or line officer and being an administrative officer. In fact, the dearth of research-based educational programs for administrative fire officers, and requests from area Chiefs and State Fire School students for BGSU to fill this void, was the impetus for the development of the FIAD degree and greatly contributed to my interest in this study.

A phenomenon that intrigued me during the marketing/research phase of the FIAD project was the evident lack of agreement among and between members of the fire service and people in higher education about whether fire administration was significantly different from fire science, whether higher education for the fire service was necessary or valid, and/or whether technical experience was not only sufficient, but superior, preparation. Due to the shallow body
of academic literature on the subject of the fire service, I have drawn on examples in other professions.

I have tremendous respect for the fire service, but do not idolize or romanticize the profession. The fire service in the United States is comprised of 1.2 million people (United States Fire Administration, 2012) who are brave, smart, proud, motivated, flawed and challenged by all of the frailties of the human condition. Due to my professional and personal relationships I, for someone outside the profession, have the privilege of having access and insight to group and culture that others might not. However, I am not ‘in’ the fire service and am careful to not lose sight of that fact. More than fifteen years of managing training programs for the fire service and the last five years as the director and advisor of the Fire Administration Bachelor degree provided me with a foundation of knowledge to undertake this study. However, the fact remains that because I have not lived the experiences of the participants in this study, there are cultures and customs that I have not experienced and boundaries that needed to be, and were, respected.

Additionally, because I have a strong commitment to higher education for members of the fire service, I took great care to not project any biases about education onto the participants. Conversely, my familiarity with the technical language, history, structure, culture and traditions was an enormous asset as I built relationships with and interviewed the participants, analyzed the data, and interpreted it in such a way that is meaningful and valuable to the reader. According to Hammersley (2000), phenomenology is an appropriate method in this situation because, in contract to positivists, phenomenologists do not believe that researchers can completely detach themselves from their own pre-existing knowledge, nor should they pretend to do so. The people who participated in this study had the personal perspectives and lived experiences of
metropolitan Chief Fire Officers. It is because of my interest and knowledge of this phenomenon that I engaged with them to collect the data.

**Ethical Considerations**

Creswell (2013) stressed the importance of establishing trust, credibility, and respect within the boundaries of a study. As a researcher who engaged in multiple in-depth interviews with each participant and, as someone who has professional and personal connections to the many people in the fire service, I was keenly aware of the ethical responsibility that I bore. It was my sole responsibility to educate the potential participants and myself so that they could truly make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

First, I completed the online Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) training and secured HSRB approval through the IRB committee at BGSU, prior to starting research (Appendix A). This process afforded me additional opportunities to assess and predict any additional ethical concerns or issues. I closely followed Seidman’s (2013) list of considerations that must be clearly understood by participants and the researcher before informed consent could be established. These included an explanation of who is doing the research, for what purpose and to what end the information will be used. Equally important was an explanation of how the results would be disseminated. This is, as Seidman (2013) pointed out, an important consideration if the researcher wants to use the results for publication and presentation beyond the dissertation. Seidman (2013) additionally challenged researchers to take the time to think intentionally about how each consideration may impact the participants and the research.

Next, I reviewed the approved consent form with each participant and secured his or her signature prior to the first interview. I also personally assured each participant that the recordings and transcripts from our conversations would be coded and secured until destroyed. Each
participant was given a pseudonym and all references to department names and cities were removed from the textural and contextual descriptions. Finally, I emphasized with each participant that he or she had the right to withdraw at any time and to decline to discuss specific topics. The interviews and member checking process required a fairly significant commitment on the part of the participants, so it was important that they understood this and, barring additional unforeseen circumstances, agreed to accommodate the additional demands on their time and energy.

**Data Collection and Interview Protocol**

When using in-depth interviews as a method of data collection, a relaxed and informal atmosphere is preferred (Moustakas, 1994). While the words ‘relaxed’ and ‘informal’ aren’t necessarily synonymous with ‘Fire Chief’, this model was achieved within a framework of my basic understanding of the position, reason for the research, in an atmosphere of respect and trust. Each individual participant set the tone for the level of formality during the interviews and it was my responsibility to provide a level of structure that enhanced his or her comfort with the process.

As previously mentioned, to support a rich and meaningful description of the experience of the Chief Fire Officers, and out of respect for their time, I chose to follow a modified version of the well-established Seidman (2013) framework. The Seidman (2013) in-depth interview method engages each participant in three interviews. The first is historical, the second focuses on the details of the experience and the third focuses on reflection on the meaning of the experience (see Figure 2). Again, out of respect for the demands on the participants’ time and the geographic challenges, I employed two interviews, with a third reserved for clarification and member checking. As Seidman (2013) recommended, I prepared broad questions, with the understanding
that they were a starting point for conversation, rather than the basis for a highly structured interview (Appendix B). During the first series of interviews, I met with eight of the nine Chiefs individually in their offices. This required extensive travel on the part of the researcher, but was well worth the effort and expense in that it demonstrated a level of commitment and respect for their time and position. Additionally, the in-person interaction supported a level of focus and rapport that is difficult, although not impossible, to achieve on the telephone. In the second series of interviews, two were conducted in person and seven by telephone. For all, any additional follow-up for clarification and member checking was conducted through email.

According to Seidman (2013), a 90-minute format for each interview is recommended because this allows enough time for each participant to feel he or she is being taken seriously and to provide a framework that is neither rushed nor overly taxing. Again, out of respect for the Chiefs, I asked them to allow for two hours, but took cues from each about when to conclude the interview. All of the first interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours and the second interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 60 minutes. Seidman (2013) further recommended spacing the interviews three days to one week apart to allow the participant and researcher enough time to reflect on the prior interview, but not so much time as to lose momentum or connection. Although this model requires significant commitment from both the researcher and each participant, Seidman (2013) maintained that the work involved contributes to a more meaningful relationship and, ultimately, more meaningful results. Due to geographical distance, intensity, and unpredictable nature of the Chiefs’ positions, the time in between interviews was adjusted to fall at a convenient time, which varied, for each participant.
As it is important in first person reporting to capture the exact words, inflection, tone, and emphasis of the participants, each interview was recorded. Supplemental field notes captured quick impressions and allowed me to be fully present and focused during interviews. As stated previously, the protection of the participants’ privacy and their trust in my commitment and ability to represent them accurately was extremely important.

The interviews were intended to be didactic and conversational: however, according to Seidman (2013), the level of comfort desired does not indicate a lack of planning on the part of the researcher. Thoughtful planning, preparation, and a high degree of organization are precisely what, according to Seidman (2013) contributes to the comfort of both researcher and participant during the interviews. Additionally, one must be mentally prepared to listen and interact without leading or interrupting and also be able to tolerate silence and the normal ebb and flow of conversation without feeling pressure to speak unnecessarily. Finally, due to the design of the separate interviews it was important, when necessary, to be able to guide the participant back to the overarching goal of the current interview without being dismissive or disrespectful to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview 1: Focus on Career Path</th>
<th>Interview 2: Details of the Experience and Reflection</th>
<th>Interview 3: Clarification and Member Checking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishes the context for the experience.</td>
<td>Concentrates on details of the experience.</td>
<td>Requires participants to review their individual profile and determine whether is captures the essence of their experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explores relevant experiences leading up to the phenomenon.</td>
<td>Constructs details of the present experience</td>
<td>Clarifies any vague or inaccurate interpretations made by the researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience</td>
<td>Requires participants to consider contextual factors that influence the present situation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Interview structure (Seidman, 2013).
participant (Seidman, 2013). Fortunately, this was rarely an issue and, in fact, the ebb and flow of talking about current and past experiences and any relevance between the two added to the richness of the data.

After much consideration about the potential complexity of the participants’ schedules, their geographic location, and in consultation with my methodologist, it was decided that the interviews would be scheduled sequentially. I listened to, transcribed and reviewed the text from each participant’s first interview before conducting the second interview with that same individual. This was important because, according to Seidman (2013) any emergent themes from one interview can, should, and did, inform for the next.

**Methods and Procedures for Data Analysis and Explication**

While this section of most studies contains the term ‘analysis’, several researchers have cautioned against this term because of the implication that the researcher will take the whole and break it into parts to find meaning (Groenewald, 2004 and Hycner, 1999). The term ‘explication’, on the other hand, involves an investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon, while keeping the context of the whole (Hycner, 1999, p. 161). The review of the series for each individual was used to create a profile for each person, which he or she reviewed to check for accuracy of the overall essence of experience. The more in-depth explication for key concepts and themes, as well as the development of a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under study began only after all of the interviews for all participants were complete (Groenewald, 2004; Seidman, 2013).

The data explication for this study was based on thematic categories that emerged from the interviews and allowed the participants’ own words to drive the creation of ‘emic’ categories (Fetterman, 2008). As discussed previously, it is critical for the researcher to set aside any of his
or her own predictions and allow for the organic development of the initial substantive categories based on the participants’ own words and perceptions (Creswell, 2013). Similarly, Seidman (2013) emphasized that is critical to approach the data with an open mind, but also stated that no researcher’s mind is a clean slate. Seidman (2013) maintains that it is appropriate to consider one’s own knowledge and experience and reflect on the guiding questions during the process of discovering thematic categories, as long as the researcher is aware of, and acknowledges, any bias.

Throughout all of the stages of data review, it is, according to Creswell (2013) important to use connecting strategies to search for any relationships among the data collected for each participant and between participants to preserve the contextual ties that exist in the data as a whole (Atkinson, 1992; Coffee & Atkinson, 1996; Mishler, 1986). It is also necessary, according to Maxwell and Miller (2008) to balance both connecting and categorizing strategies to analyze and synthesize all of the emergent categories to provide a comprehensive account of the phenomenon.

Figure 3 illustrates the steps that I undertook to collect, analyze, and explicate the data, based on the Stevik-Colaizzi-Keen Method (Moustakas, 1994) for phenomenological data analysis.
For Each Participant

1. Conducted first interview;
2. Listened to recording;
3. Transcribed recording;
4. Read transcript and made notes for second interview;
5. Conducted second interview;
6. Listened to recording;
7. Transcribed recording;
8. Highlighted and extracted significant statements;
9. Developed initial categories from significant statements;
10. Created individual profile, and
11. Member checked, edited as needed.

Collectively

1. Combined categories from all participants and horizontalized information;
2. Developed “clusters of meaning” and placed in the first impression of themes;
3. Reread all profiles, original transcripts, and significant statements. Identified separate set of themes, to ensure researcher bracketing, absence of bias;
4. Reviewed and finalized key concepts;
5. Developed description of key concepts/textural description;
6. Member checked, edited as needed; and
7. Developed emergent themes, structural description, implications and recommendations.

Figure 3. Data explication process, Stevik-Colaizzi Keen Method (Moustakas, 1994).

The structure of the Stevik-Colaizzi-Keen Method (Moustakas, 1994) was appropriate and exceptionally valuable for creating a semblance of order during analysis and through the discovery of the emergent themes and creation of the textual and structural descriptions. However, the reality of handling hundreds of pages of transcripts can feel chaotic and daunting and exciting on any given day. For this researcher, periods of time to ‘percolate’ or ‘marinate’ or ‘ruminate’ while not in direct contact with the data were extremely valuable although initially
stress-inducing as I had to contend with the self-imposed feeling of not accomplishing something tangible on a given day. The process was ultimately very rewarding and entirely worth learning to cope with the ambiguousness of qualitative data analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Merriam (2009) research must be rigorously conducted and present conclusions and insights that are relevant and authentic to readers, whether they are practitioners or researchers. While staying true to the fundamental concept that reality is in the eye of the beholder, there are a number of steps that I took to increase the trustworthiness of my research (Seidman, 2013). These included (1) placing the participants’ comments in context, (2) encouraging participants to reflect in between interview to review internal consistency, (3) engaging with the setting, in the case of each Chief Fire Officer over a period of time, (4) member checking, which allowed the participants to react to my findings, (5) interviewing multiple participants, (6) demonstrating an audit trail, and (7) providing a rich, thick description of the data. While quantitative researchers speak strictly in terms of validity, qualitative researchers must inform about the trustworthiness of their work through credibility, transferability, dependability, and, conformability.

**Credibility**

In the context of qualitative research, credibility refers to the extent to which the description, analysis, and conclusions drawn are rational and believable, particularly to the participants. In other words, do the results “ring true”? Again, Seidman (2013) asserts that the opportunity for both researcher and participant to reflect between interviews, thereby allowing for idiosyncratic days and providing a structure that supports clarification, increases the likelihood that both will agree with the conclusions. Saturation, the point at which no significant
new data is being collected (Creswell, 2013) was employed at a tool to increase the ability for readers to find contextual meaning in the findings.

**Transferability**

Transferability occurs when the reader sees enough specifics in the context or situation described in a study to compare them to an experience or context with which he or she is familiar (Siegle, 2014). Although transferability is a process that is performed by the reader, I supported this process by using purposeful sampling to increase the relevance of information provided by each participant. I have also provided rich and highly detailed descriptions of the content and context of my research as well as the methods and procedures I used.

**Dependability**

Dependability is increased when the study is conducted in a consistent manner that can be repeated (Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E. G., 1985). The process and structure outlined in the Seidman (2013) method and Figure 2 provide a roadmap for the structure of the study. The audit trail, detailed description of data analysis and review by committee members ensured a systematic and rational explication of data.

**Conformability**

Conformability is achieved when the findings and conclusions support the goal of the study and are not a result of my bias, assumptions, or preconceptions (Siegle, 2014). In order to ensure conformability, I tied the data to sources by linking to the relevant research and the words of the participants. The qualitative and narrative design of this study supports the belief that it is critical to hear, in the participants’ own words, about their experiences and perceptions about this phenomenon. The study also incorporated an inductive analysis of data, followed by a
comparison of data to the literature, between the participants, and, when appropriate, to career development and work role transition theoretical frameworks.

Summary

In this chapter I have described the research design and rationale for a phenomenological approach with a case study framework. I also discussed the boundaries of the population used in the study and the in-depth interview design that was used to collect data. Finally, I described how the data was analyzed, my role as a researcher and strategies that were used to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity of the results.
CHAPTER IV. INTRODUCTION OF PROFILES

The following nine chapters present the profiles of each of the participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each and the title of Chief was included out of respect for the person and position. Each profile is a composition informed by conversations during individual interviews. The profiles have been largely organized under the following categories: Background, Personal History, Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences, Inspiration and Influences, Experiences as Chief Fire Officer, and Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts. However, in some instances, additional or different headings were included in order to meet the unique needs and accurately represent the genuine voice of each participant. For ease reading, Figure 4 includes a composite of the participant demographics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years in Fire Service as Chief</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Sworn Staff</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Craith</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30/5</td>
<td>B.S. in Management and Accounting</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>First externally hired Chief of department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniels</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20/3</td>
<td>B.S. in Communication</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>First African American Chief of department. Promoted from within.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29/6</td>
<td>B.S. in Biology, Master in Public Administration</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>First African American Chief of department. Promoted from within.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graves</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23/8</td>
<td>B.S. in Fire Science Management</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>First African American and first externally hired Chief of department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32/1.5</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Promoted from within.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jameson</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25/5/6 *5 years as Chief at prior department</td>
<td>Bachelor in Education, Associate in Fire Science, Master in Public Administration</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>First female Chief of current and previous department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30/5</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>First Latino Chief of department. Promoted from within.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morris</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36/5</td>
<td>Bachelor in Business</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>First externally hired Chief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28/5</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Promoted from within. Retired at time of interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Participant demographics.*
CHAPTER V. CHIEF CRAITH

Background

Chief Craith has had a varied career, beginning at a department in a very large, very urban area in the East. He was firefighter for nine years, then promoted to platoon officer (Lieutenant) where he worked in various Engine and Ladder companies for the next six (6) years until promoted to Captain. He was then assigned to the training division for two years. During his tenure as a captain, all promotions stopped for five years due to a lawsuit regarding hiring practices. After the lawsuit was settled, he was promoted to Battalion Chief, where he served in a field command position for the next three years. He was then transferred back to the Training Division for the next two years until he was promoted to Division Chief. As a Division Chief, he served as the Director of Emergency Communications. Chief Craith was promoted to Deputy Commissioner of Services in August 2001, a position in which he reported directly to the Fire Commissioner. In this position, Chief Craith was in command of all units of the Fire Department other than those in Operations. He was interviewed for the Commissioner’s position but another candidate was chosen. He instead became the Chief of Operations, with all eight divisions of the department reporting to him. He eventually began to apply for chief positions at outside departments and was hired as chief at his current department, which is in an affluent community in the South.

Personal History

Chief Craith is one of twelve children whose father’s career was in the fire service. Chief Craith originally wanted to be an accountant and started working on a degree in business. At age 20 he married the woman he had been dating since age 14 and they have four adult children. With the responsibility of a growing family, encouragement from his parents, and the realization
that he didn’t want to be an accountant, he applied to and was hired by the department where his dad worked. He worked two jobs and continued to attend school part time and earned a bachelor’s degree in business after 7 years. He worked two jobs so that his wife could stay home until their children graduated from high school. He coached his kids’ teams and attended as many recitals and other events as humanly possible. In his words, “My wife and children are my universe.”

**Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences**

Chief Craith described the tactical/technical training and experience gained while “on the street” as the essential foundation to his career. He purposely put in for extremely busy station houses, honing his technical and incident management skills. “Tactical ability builds respect. When I showed up on the fire ground, I wanted my bosses to know I was an asset, not an ache.” While he asserted that fire tactics is now less than 5% of what he does as a Chief, he believes it is a craft that must be perfected early on. The knowledge of knowing one can still command a fire ground is a place from which to draw strength and confidence.

The first significant transition in Chief Craith’s career was shortly after his promotion to captain and his first administrative assignment, in the training bureau. He offered that he was not initially happy about the move but that it was significant in broadening his perspective from a company officer in operations to a larger view of the department as a whole. “Every officer should spend at least 2-3 years doing a staff / administrative job if they truly want to understand how a department works.” He described an ‘aha’ moment in his first administrative position, when he became aware of all of the things that had to be done to allow the fire department to perform its core mission, such as finance and budgeting, equipment acquisition, public relations, and strategic planning.
The next significant, and far more challenging transition, was his promotion to Battalion Chief. He reflected that departments have traditionally trained well technically, but have not done as well with providing professional development in leadership and guiding new officers through that growth period. “Firefighters want to be part of a group, which is essential to their success at that level. They want to be a ‘good guy’. They need professional development in order to know how to make the transition to a level of responsibility, when they promote.” In his insightful and humorous style, he described how he handled being reminded, as an officer, of things he had done as a young firefighter, “As you come up through the ranks, everyone knows your baggage. People say, I remember when you used to do this or that. I would tell them, ‘Yeah I know, I used to crap my pants too, and I learned not to do that also. Now what else are you going to try to hang over my head?’”

In addition to the on-the-job developmental experience, Chief Craith took advantage of other opportunities, such as classes at the National Fire Academy where he started to learn that there was more to the fire service than putting out fires. “I met people from all over who had the same kinds of issues, even fewer resources, and they were coming up with new, different, and innovative ways to accomplish their mission.” He described taking every class offered and being willing to go on a moment’s notice and he ultimately completed the Executive Fire Officer program. He attended Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government program for Senior Executives in State and Local government and described the experience as life changing. He met an exceptional group of people and learned about mindfulness, privilege, and dominance. He recalled the moment he realized that, as a white male, he had a level of freedom and privilege that his six sisters did not, that people of color did not. “It blew me away. Once you understand that we all, every one of us, has privilege and dominance over someone else, it allows you to
become mindful of where the other party is coming from and to be mindful of their point of view and needs.”

Chief Craith described a strong belief in the value of higher education in the fire service and has instituted education requirements for officers at his department, stating that the traditional method of promoting from test scores is not enough. “There are people who have risen to the highest ranks in operations, but they couldn’t put out a can of smoked fish or manage a phone booth, but they were great test takers. The exams can give you some indication, but when they are running a department, they absolutely need education. Education teaches you to think critically.”

Further on promotion and education, “Promotion is not a birthright, it is a privilege. If you are coming to the party, you have to bring a present. That present is your education.” He expressed that he is less concerned with the major that a person chooses, but adamant that it is a liberal education because, “Nothing stays the same and for us to be flexible you have to be open to other ways. That is what a liberal education gives you. It teaches you to think critically.” He was adamant that technical training is crucial, but it is not enough. “Education is not technical training. Education expands your opportunity to understand that there are other ways of doing things out there. We have to get outside our own walls so that we don’t become provincial and inbred.”

**Inspiration and Influences**

In addition to being inspired by his father’s career in the fire service, Chief Craith recalled the impact of an opening speech by a Deputy Chief from FDNY at the National Fire Academy, “Know that in 20 years you are going to climb the ladder and a lot of you are going to be running your own departments. I ask you this, no matter how high you go, remember every day you come
to work it is to support that one fire fighter who has the courage to take a water line down a hallway and preserve a life. Never forget what you come to work for.” He also expressed that he was fortunate to learn from wise officers who impacted his leadership style and taught him that, while an autocratic style is appropriate and necessary on the fire ground, it cannot bleed into everyday affairs. “You cannot simply be autocratic when dealing with adults with different talents, goals, agendas. It is the Chief’s job to blend their talents and make them work for the core mission.”

**Experiences as Chief Fire Officer**

Chief Craith described the experience of being a Fire Chief as both very rewarding and challenging and drastically different from being on the operational side of the fire service. He described his position as 5% fire and 95% people and business and believes that his business degree is a huge asset. “The higher up you go, the less you have to do with tactics and strategy, but more with running a corporation. We're a 55 million dollar corporation.” He referred to the politics of the job as a, sometimes visceral, sport and described feeling like a Spartan after more than years at his previous department. He emphasized the importance of good health to deal with the physical and emotional stress of the job and reflected on his decision to quit smoking cold turkey, and begin a regimen of long distance running, after having been a pack a day smoker for years.

Chief Craith emphatically described the need for inner strength to put the mission of the fire department ahead of one’s own needs, stating, “If you aspire to climb the ladder, you better give up all hope of being elected prom queen. It is nice if you like me, but it is not essential. My job here is to facilitate you doing your job and getting home to your family. If that means you don't like me, well, I'll get over that. Some people get personal in their attacks, but you must rise
above the fray. If you internalize the criticism you can’t function properly.” Further on the topic of responsibility to the mission, “In my 30 plus years I have known more than 40 firefighters who kissed their spouses goodbye, made promises to their children, plans for the weekend, and never came home. I cannot guarantee that you’ll go home, but I promise that we will optimize your ability to go home. My staff and I take that very seriously.”

On the topic of job security, “There is no safety net as Chief. You are not going to get sent back to operations if you fail. Chiefs are at-will employees. When people ask me about how I feel about this I say: I have the same contract as most of America: show up on time, tell the truth, work hard, do a good job and they’ll pretty much keep you.”

While he described negotiating with labor as a challenging part of the position, he emphasized that his philosophy is that just because you don’t belong to something, doesn’t mean you are against it. “I never forgot that I was able to get my teeth fixed as a kid because some union guy fought for benefits for my dad. On the other hand, labor talks about enlightened management. What they sometimes fail to realize is that if you really want to get somewhere, you have to have enlightened labor.”

He identified the most rewarding parts of the experience as having direct input to affect change, building strong teams, adding education requirements for officer promotions, and protecting those who don’t have a voice (both firefighters and citizens). One of the things he said he is most proud of is developing an executive training program for new Battalion Chiefs. Chief Craith also said that the most challenging part of the position, besides living with tragedy and loss, is dealing with the ever-present human trait of being resistant to change.
Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts

“What I've learned in 61 years is that no matter how much I want it, nothing, but nothing, but nothing ever stays the same.”
CHAPTER VI. CHIEF DANIELS

Background

Chief Daniels served more than 20 years at his department and is its first African American Chief. In addition to working his way up through the ranks of the fire department, he also served 27 years in the U.S. Army Reserve. By the time he was appointed Chief of the fire department, he had also achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

He was initially hired as a firefighter, but soon after earned his paramedic certification. After ten years he was promoted to Lieutenant and, only 19 months later, was promoted to Captain. Nearly simultaneously with his promotion to Captain, he was called up for an 18-month deployment to Iraq as an Operations Officer in the U.S. Army Reserve. When he returned to the fire department he was assigned to the hazardous materials division (HAZMAT), where he remained for four years, during which time he was promoted to Major and became the HAZMAT leader for the department. Ten months later he was promoted to Assistant Chief and, only two months later, was asked to step in to be the interim Chief of the department. Four months later he was officially sworn in as Chief of the department.

Personal History

Chief Daniels grew up in the town where he is now Chief of the fire department and reflected that he used to walk past the building where his office is now on the way to elementary school. He recalled that, as a child, he had wanted to be in the fire service, but, “it never really was an avenue.” He recalled that he also wanted to be a soldier and, as it turned out, he became both. He attended university, joined the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC), and earned a bachelor in communication. After graduation he worked as the manager of a large department store for a few years, as he continued to serve in the Reserves. He applied to the fire department
after being encouraged by a friend, with the intention of being in a better position to pay for graduate school. However, once he began working as a fire fighter he found his true calling, “Unbeknownst to me, I fell in love with being a firefighter.” He credits his strong work ethic to his family and is very close with his mother and his 90-year old grandfather, who he confides in regularly and referred to as, “My Yoda.”

**Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences**

Very early in Chief Daniels' military and fire service career, he was confronted with the realities of death and tragedy in both worlds. As a young paramedic he responded to the call when his grandfather died, and to the line of duty death of a fellow firefighter and close friend. He recalled the first day of his deployment to Iraq, when he saw a 19-year-old soldier killed. He had to immediately recognize and respond to the gravity of his responsibility and the need to remain composed in the face of tragedy. He recalled being in a combat situation and working with wounded soldiers compared to less critical challenges leaders face in a more traditional workplace, “It is a very different perspective to have an 18-year-old say to you, I’d really like to go home alive to my mom. Then, from a leadership perspective think, “How do I make sure? Because I am a poor kid from the projects and now I am leading these young men and women in combat.” While he had to learn quickly to function at a high level regardless of the circumstances, he became more compassionate rather than cynical. As he said, “You can't just be a robot following standards. We transitioned 1000 soldiers into Iraq and Afghanistan and every one of those kids wanted to get home. You tell them you love and respect them because everyone there can get shot or blown up.”

He expressed that his military and fire service experience had a profound impact on his leadership style, “I’m very conventional, and I have read all the leadership books from Colin
Powell to Jack Welch. I am also very unconventional. I’ll tell you I love you and respect you. I teach this at our officer development program. It is okay to be an unconventional leader, but no book teaches you that.”

Chief Daniels’ military career also afforded him the opportunity to travel across the United States and to many other countries, which he credits for giving him a broad, global perspective, “My training in dealing with generals, state senators and congressmen, and all of the experiences in the Army Reserve, gave me an advantage coming into this position.” Additionally, as a Battalion Commander he managed a 100 million dollar budget so, when he was appointed Chief and took responsibility for a 50 million dollar budget, he felt confident and prepared. “When I came into it, one of the first things I said is that we are going to have to look at and understand the programs and processes of the division. I looked at the budget from a different perspective. If you look at a budget and all you see is a bunch of letters and numbers and don’t understand them, you’re at someone else’s mercy. When you do understand the budget, you can align it organizationally. I knew if I could manage my battalions that were spread out across the county in the Reserve, we could apply some of the same principles to the fire department.”

**Education and Professional Development**

In addition to the significant experiences from his military and operational fire experience, Chief Daniels expressed the importance of formal education and professional development from programs such as the Executive Fire Officer at the National Fire Academy. He expressed that, while it important to develop technical expertise in order to gain credibility, it is critical to also develop the knowledge and skills to prepare for administration: “If a person gets promoted through the ranks and they don’t understand the administrative part, this is where the
biggest failure comes in. We all understand the organizational aspect of it because, hey, we’re firefighters. But if you don’t understand the administrative part, that’s where you can get into a lot of trouble with the councils and the mayor, because you’re managing the department based on the tactical aspect and not understanding the administrative aspect of how to get things done. He also stated that the experience of being on professional committees, attending conferences, and outreach in the community were all important for building relationships and growing as a professional.

Whether facing the reality of death in an active combat zone, responding as a paramedic to a fellow fire fighter’s line of duty death, learning to interact with high ranking officers and elected officials, or managing a multi-unit battalion across several states, he learned something from each experience, “In the grand scheme of things, I have been tested.”

Inspiration and Influences

Chief Daniels indicated that he has been fortunate to work for and learn from Chiefs who were educated and who understood the administrative side of the position. He was appreciative of their support and guidance, but also talked about his resistance to some of their advice, “My mentors tried to get me off the line and into administrative positions for years. I fought it and stayed on the line because I wanted my credibility. Had I known better, I would have listened to them sooner. That’s one of the things I’m trying to change, the idea that the administrative work is important and can have a lot of impact.”

Experiences as Chief Fire Officer

Chief Daniels accepted the interim chief position, with the caveat that he was not going to, “act like an interim and would lead like a chief” when the previous department Chief was demoted to the rank of firefighter. As is often the case, he inherited the command staff from the
previous Chief and several years passed, through attrition and retirement, before he assembled a team of his own choosing.

However, even as interim Chief, he immediately had to respond to some major issues including controlling the overtime budget, dealing with personnel shortages, burnout among the ranks who were assigned as paramedics, developing a plan to temporarily or intermittently close fire stations to control spending, replacing aging apparatus, and preparing people for new positions and promotions. Within weeks he had met with all of the senior officers and then brought in all of the majors to come up with a plan to deal with station brownouts and establish an on-duty paramedic class. He explained that all of the immediate issues required administrative skills, “All that has to do with changing the mindset and understanding, administratively, how we had to fix some things. We had to look at how we conducted business, our programs and processes. We had to look at the budget from a different aspect and understand it because, if you don’t understand it, you are always at the mercy of someone else. We had to line out each budget item, each budget section and prepare the officer in charge of each part of the budget to be responsible and accountable for it.”

One of the early decisions that he made that was met with resistance was to reduce from four to three Assistant Chiefs, thus reducing cost, but also losing an opportunity for promotion. However, he stated that, “from a budget and administrative perspective, it was clear that this needed to be done.”

He again credited his experience in the military as a significant part of the foundation for preparing him for the challenge, “I had an advantage when I came into the chief position because nobody really understood what I had done as a battalion commander in the military. So I took it and I applied it to what we have here and we changed things. That was sort of easy for me. I
made some drastic changes that were subtly done. In doing that, I’ve had an opportunity to change not only the mindset of the department, but how we are viewed downtown.”

Chief Daniels also explained that being able to reach out to other Chiefs to talk about challenges and solve problems was and is tremendously helpful.

**Leadership through Responsibility**

He spoke at length about his commitment to “leadership through responsibility” as well as accountability of individuals and the department as a whole to the community. He realized, in order to increase the credibility of the Chief’s office, he had to set a very high standard for himself, “I think if you are responsible, you must hold yourself accountable. I just lost thirty pounds and got back to running. The gist of it is that the recruits have to pass the physical agility and fitness test and they challenged me on a bet to do it. I lead from the front. If you drive through town at 6:30 am on any given morning, you are likely to see me running.”

He realized very early on that he had power through position and needed to make a conscious decision to be mindful of the responsibility that comes with power, “I realized early on that, as the Chief, I had the power to retaliate against people in the organization. A Chief needs to be able to admit this and have the self-discipline to never be tempted to use that power.” Additionally, “We must always stay focused enough to not put ourselves in a situation that makes people disrespect the ‘second floor’. It takes a lot of discipline.”

His commitment to responsibility and accountability extends to his officers, including preparing them for their position, delegating authority, and holding them accountable. “We must prepare all officers and hold accountable to deal with budget issues and discipline at the source; deal with things and move on, not sweep under the rug and ultimately have them get bigger.”
He pointed out that being able to delegate responsibility provides him more time to advocate for the department. “I make sure the officers know that as long as I am not dealing with discipline, I can be downtown getting what the department needs. In this department, if you’re over an area, you’re responsible for the management of it. Like the shift commanders are responsible for the overtime on their shifts and the special operations Chief is responsible for his money, what he buys and how he deals with overtime. Then each Assistant Chief monitors that. I get all the big numbers and they may get a phone call from me asking, Hey, what in the hell is going on and who is managing the overtime? But it gives me much more time to advocate for the department and we see far fewer discipline issues.”

He talked about the need for accountability for the officers and expecting them, whenever possible, to deal with discipline issues at their level, which again, requires him to hold himself accountable. “I do evaluations on all of my Assistant Chiefs, I don’t require them from everyone else and not do them myself. I can go out and look at every evaluation in the department. If an officer is verbally saying that someone is terrible as a firefighter, but on the evaluation he says the guy is wonderful, that is a teachable moment. Hold yourself accountable, don’t demean a guy and then be too chicken to write it down.”

He explained that his ability to successfully delegate requires proper training and preparation of the officers and referred back to the military structure, in which no one would receive a promotion without prior training and assessment. He reflected that a change he made was an example of the positive and wide impact that is possible in an administrative position, “We now forecast personnel changes as much as possible so that the incoming person can shadow his or her new job. So, for example, when an officer takes over the garage and building maintenance or the communications/radio center, he has had 60 days to shadow the person who
is transferring or retiring. It takes a lot of planning and communication and trust, but that is an example of the impact that an administrative position can have. Like I’ve said, one of the issues that occurred in the past is that we just threw guys into positions. It’s not good for the department or the community. You get thrown in, then the first day you get a big fire, that is your first day in your new position. That’s not fair to anybody.”

The commitment to training and preparation ultimately led to the creation of an officer development program, “The initial idea for the program came from people on the line. Now all new lieutenants go through training on the whole process, even pumping the truck, because some of them haven’t done it in a while. We teach them how to pump the truck, run a ladder, how to conduct tactics. Then we start on the administrative and organizational aspect of it. Then we go through leadership development. For three weeks these men and women are being indoctrinated with how we do things on our fire department. I open and close it and lead a session on leadership, culture, and life lessons. On the last day we bring in senior officers, retired officers, most of the staff. We talk about life, leadership, and tell stories of how we got to where we are. On the last day we cook a big breakfast, talk for a couple hours, then we have graduation. We’ve seen a big difference. It’s proven to be a great thing for us and we’ve opened it up to lieutenants from area departments.”

Chief Daniels described the most challenging part of being a Chief as “Knowing you’re never done. It is never good enough. What we see is our vision. We’ve tried to do a good job at giving as much information as we can and providing a clear mission. We’ve done communication studies, put out memos, hold quarterly meetings, publish newsletters, but there is always that five percent who want to stir up the other 65 percent. Then there’s that 30 percent of us who know what we want to do.”
He added, “Once you accomplish one thing, there’s something else you need to scratch for. That’s probably the most difficult thing. I’ve been around long enough to understand that you’ve got to deal with discipline. You have to deal with ‘downtown’ and there are certain politicians you can’t make happy. I get that.”

Further, he expressed that he wants to be sure that he approaches retirement deliberately and thoughtfully so that he will be aware when it is time for someone new to take leadership of the department. He said this is one of the things he discusses with his Grandfather, who assures him that he will know when “the time is right.”

He identified the most rewarding part of the experience as being able to make positive changes, improve officer development and preparation and, “Opening doors for women and minorities. It has been a great opportunity for me and I am humbled by it every day when I see the impact of the changes.” He promoted the department’s first female Assistant Chief and is making renovations to stations so that they are more conducive to women in the workplace, “As the department grows, they’ll come into a situation where they don’t have to worry about locking the doors. They can just come in and use the bathroom like a man can.”

**Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts**

When asked what he had learned during his tenure and how he had changed, he said, “I’ve learned, and I don’t mean for this to sound arrogant, my expectation of others is not as high as I hold for myself. If anything has changed for me, it’s that I have probably been more tolerant of people not meeting my expectations. I used to be one that, if you didn’t do it this way, then you are a slug and I didn’t have a lot of respect for you. But I've learned not everyone is going to be 50 years old and up at 3:00 am thinking about how to fix this issue or that problem. I don’t
hold them to my standard. People work at different pace. If anything, it has made me a little bit softer."

“It has been an interesting career for me. To be in this position. To be able to make some changes, I hope for the positive. It is rewarding to be able to open doors for women and minorities and deal with some of the issues we dealt with in the past.”
CHAPTER VII. CHIEF GORDON

Background

Chief Gordon did not originally consider the fire service as a career but, instead, aspired to be a dentist. He earned a bachelor’s degree in Biology but, when he was not accepted to dentistry school his first summer out of college, he saw several job postings for respiratory therapists and thought it sounded like an interesting profession. One of the requirements for the respiratory therapy associate degree program was to ride on a fire rescue truck and observe how medical care is delivered on the streets. It was the first time he had any exposure to the fire service and he found it to be a very exciting day. He finished his respiratory therapy training and worked in that profession for four years, before taking the test and being hired at the fire department where he is now Chief. He was hired as a firefighter and earned his paramedic certification soon after. After six years he became a Lieutenant and spent four years in that position. He continued to promote until he reached his first fully administrative position, as Division Chief in charge of the support services division, equipment, technical services, and began working more closely with the union leadership. After two years he was appointed Assistant Chief and returned to school to earn his Master’s in Public Administration. After four years as Assistant Chief he was appointed to the Deputy Fire Chief of Administration position. After ten years as Deputy, he became the department’s first African American Fire Chief. Throughout his career he has also been very active in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team in his state and has deployed to several large-scale events, including hurricane Katrina and the earthquakes in Haiti.
Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences

Chief Gordon described his education and experience as being important in his journey toward the Fire Chief position, “I went back to college to get a Master’s Degree in Public Administration because I was doing the job and I figured it would give me some tools and training to be a professional manager. Also, it would give me the credibility. I never wanted to be in a situation where I sought a higher position and someone could say that I was not qualified.” He also reported that the John F. Kennedy Leadership School at Harvard was a significant developmental experience.

And on experience he also reflected that his administrative was valuable preparation for becoming Chief, “I think ten years as a Deputy Chief of Administration really gives you a bird’s eye view on how the department operates. You’re interacting with all of the elected officials and other administrators in the city. That’s your job, so it prepares you.”

“There’s no aspect of the department that I don’t know. I started out as an officer with the Support Services division. It was a good one because you learned about the infrastructure. You learned about fire trucks. You learned about EMS equipment. Then I went on to manage the administration, administrative functions and then technical services, which was payroll and CIV projects and legislation. In the Deputy spot, I was over all of the administrative functions in the department, so that those different assignments were all integral in learning the nuances and all of the details about running a fire department. Then the intangibles came from working hand-in-hand with the very seasoned and professionals, and the challenges that the City affords, because there’s always a crisis. There’s always something coming that you have to deal with, and you have to be creative.”
Transitions

He reported that the biggest transition in his career was going from operations to his first administrative position, “The biggest change or the most significant transition was going from the front line to the Fire Chief’s staff. You’re going from being on 24 hours, off 48 and your day ending when you get off shift, your responsibilities ending when you get off shifts, to a management position where really there are no time constraints.”

On the change in level of responsibility, “It’s about whatever it takes to do the job. So it was enjoyable, but that was the most challenging part. I guess the biggest transition or the biggest step was moving up to Division Chief.”

Regarding the transition to the Chief position, “I think it was I think it was very important that I came from staff as opposed to from the outside. In this fire department, we’ve never had a Fire Chief from the outside. Not that that’s a bad thing to get one from the outside, but all of our – my job from day one was to start to groom people to take my place, and I’ve taken that responsibility seriously. So has every Chief before me.”

Inspiration and Influences

On the first day of his ride-along experience during respiratory therapy clinical, he rode with at Lieutenant who became his friend and mentor and who also became the Fire Chief, the city manager and is now the major of another large city. “As far as mentorship was concerned, I was really fortunate to be on his staff because he is a consummate professional. He’s a man of impeccable integrity, and that’s what I admire the most.”

Experiences as Chief Fire Officer

While there is no ‘typical’ day in the life of a Fire Chief, Chief Gordon described a few elements of a work week, Every second Thursday we have a City Commission meeting, and they
start at 9:00 a.m. and they go until they’re done – and that could be two in the morning.

Sometimes, short of major occurrences, it’s a pretty standard business day. You get in at eight, eight-thirty, seven-thirty, whatever my schedule mandates, and I leave when I’m done. The thing is, you’re never really ‘off’. The city is plugged in. The administration, my staff, the manager, the mayor, I mean anybody has an issue, we’re all available. It’s seven days a week.”

When asked about his first day as Chief, “I felt comfortable from day one, but I’ve become more comfortable as the years have passed, and in August it will be six years as Fire Chief, so I do feel like I’ve – as you go on you hit your stride. I feel like I hit my stride a few years ago where you know, you really feel like you’re very, you’re in your element.”

In terms of the shift in intensity, “Nothing surprised me but there is a different weight of responsibility because, you know, you make the final decision, and the men and women in the department, including staff, they look to you for leadership, and they watch what you do. They also look for you to see how fair you’re going to be, and do you actually have integrity when things are tough. Are you going to take a shortcut or are you going to do something because there are a lot of pressures pushing you in that direction, political and otherwise. So there – it is very different. I mean, there’s nothing like being the Chief, because good or bad, you’re responsible. I embraced that, but I also – you feel it during tough periods.”

Chief Gordon spoke about responding to changes in leadership at the city-level, “I’ve had less than six years as Fire Chief. I’m on my fifth City Manager. There is a mayor and city manager, who is the CEO of the city, and I'm on my fifth one. Fortunately I've had very good relationships with all five, including the current.”

Additionally, he stressed the importance of the Chief and the department having a clear mission and professional reputation, “As a department we are recognized as a group that is
responsive to citizens and we take our job seriously. So, we’re part of the city. I’m on the City Manager’s team, but my mission is very specific. It is not a mission that is easily politicized. Unlike law enforcement, our mission is clear, and we are the experts in our field, and the administration respects us as such.”

**Responsibilities**

Chief Gordon reported that developing a succession plan is a large part of the Chief’s responsibility as a leader, “The department in the last two and a half to three years, we had 240 retirements. When you’re talking about 722 fire fighters, that’s a significant percentage, and we did a succession plan a few years ago. We’ve followed that plan like a road map, and it’s helped us to absorb the attrition.”

On choosing his command staff, “I choose my staff and the city manager has to sign off on it. I can choose anyone I want, I can choose a captain, but the city manager has to sign off on it. The person has to have credibility because the manager has to approve it and then they do have a real job to do. They actually have to come up here and work.”

**Communication**

Chief Gordon stressed the importance of communication from the Chief, especially during tough periods, “We have a process. I didn’t start it. The two Chiefs before me started it. We call it Road Shows where the Chief will get out and hit three stations for a day on each shift, and all the crews will converge in that district at that station. It’s a great opportunity to give the troops first-hand information, and more importantly get questions from them and concerns from them. You dispel so many rumors just by getting out. In addition to the Road Shows, I mandated that my staff get out to the fire stations. We developed a schedule where the executive staff
would make sure that we hit all the stations periodically, not with an agenda, just to ride or to hang out and to have conversations just to keep the program of information going.”

Communication in the fire service can be especially challenging because of the 24-hour (or more) shifts and multiple station houses within a large department, If you’re not careful with communication, “They can all think and operate like individual operations within themselves and forget they are part of something bigger. I have, of course, it sounds cliché, but I literally have an open door policy. Anybody can see me if they need to, if they want to, and under certain circumstances, unless they say it’s personal, I’ll bring their immediate supervisor with them or not. You know, it depends on – I’ll follow their lead on it. They know that if they want to see me, and I don’t mean like months from now. It’s going to happen pretty quickly. I can always find a spot in my schedule to talk to the men and women in the department.”

Chief Gordon also stressed that clear communication is important in dealing with discipline issues, “When there’s severe discipline, the employee can request an administrative hearing, ironically these guys all request administrative hearing which is great for me because I get a chance to go face-to-face and tell them exactly what I think. In those administrative hearings, the union is welcome. So the union president sits right here. The employee is sitting here and my staff member is in here as well, and it can’t be more direct than that. It works.”

And on working and communicating with the union leadership, “Most important for this fire department is our relationship with our union president. We have a formalized labor management process that was started in the early ‘90s with the former Fire Chief. We had monthly meetings with the union representatives, with prepared agendas. There was fluid communication during the budget crisis, both the one in the ’90s and the most recent. I don't
think the department could have made it without working closely with the union because they agreed to certain concessions.”

He stressed the importance of integrity in leadership, respect and trust, “You have to earn their trust. I mean, if you only talk to each other when someone files a grievance, then you are operating at a deficit. Because we communicate, across Chiefs and across the union president, that relationship has stayed strong. We don't always agree, and there is a process for when you disagree. It is civil, respectful. You let the process sort it out. You learn from all of that. I think it was I think it was very important that I came from staff as opposed to from the outside. In the Miami Fire Department, we’ve never had a Fire Chief from the outside. Not that that is a bad thing to get one from the outside, but all of our – my job from day one was to start to groom people to take my place, and I’ve taken that responsibility seriously. So has every Chief before me.”

He spoke extensively about his and the whole department’s responsibility to citizens, and dealing with those individuals who lose site of the mission, “We have a complaint process in this department whereby you can call or walk into any fire station or call any office in the department or call the alarm office and file a complaint. The citizen is going to get a call back from one of my officers to get the details. They’re going to get a letter from me saying I got your complaint, and we’re going to investigate. Then they’ll get a close out letter in the end telling what we’ve found and what we did.”

Since all complaints are logged and charted, if a pattern of complaints begins to emerge, he is able to identify that and address it through the discipline process, “If there’s a complaint, I’ll get it on my iPhone, by email, as soon as it’s entered into the system that same day. I and everybody on staff gets that complaint, and we track it in a way that allows us to identify the
lieutenants who are what we call frequent flyers. We get about 60 complaints a year with 95,000 calls for service. If a person on the department get three or four complaints, then it is reasonable to believe they are part of a problem. The citizens who file complaints don’t know each other or communicate or compare experiences. What I tell these officers when we call them in is that they have lost the benefit of the doubt.” On his role in managing behavior, “I can’t turn them all into nice people, but I can keep them in the margins. I can stop them from being rude with clear expectations and progressive discipline.”

He stressed the importance of attending to outside feedback, “It’s what they (the citizens) deserve. We also are implementing a survey where we’re going to send surveys to a certain percentage from different types of calls and let the citizens tell us how we are doing. You know, we think we’re going a great job, but we’ve really got to find out from the people that we serving how we’re doing.”

On dealing with fiscal challenges, “The city has gone through several cycles of economic distress, and we went through a very big one early in my career as a Division Chief, Assistant Chief, and even a part of my tenure as Deputy Chief. The governor, in fact, sent down an oversight board so the city couldn’t spend any money without going through that oversight process, and through it all I got to work shoulder to shoulder with our previous Chief and Deputy Chief. These are the two guys that I identified as mentors, and they invested the time in making sure that I knew how to do things right. Most of the training is all the intangibles that you learned from folks, and with the previous Chief and Deputy Chief, who are all about integrity, it was all about the citizens; realizing what we’re here for, you know, not thinking that it’s about the Fire Chief or the Fire Chief’s staff, or the fire fighters. It’s all about the citizens.”
Chief Gordon reiterated that it is the constant succession of issues and the complexity of the city that adds to the intensity, but also the provides reassurance that the work is important, “ Administratively the fiscal crisis, one after another, those are the administrative challenges, and just managing to maintain your service delivery levels, you don’t have the proper resources as it is. It’s challenging but that’s part of what makes it worthwhile is that you get it done despite the challenges. The city is very exciting, but it is also challenging. We have both extremes. We have some of the most affluent people in the country, but we are also one of the poorest cities per capita in the country. So, my department often serves as a primary care provider for a lot of our citizens.”

Chief Gordon was adamant that, for the department to be successful in its mission, the culture and expectations must be taught early and reinforced often, “We hire people with basic certifications and bring them into our Fire College, where we train you to be a firefighter in this city. It’s a five to six month academy. You’re a fulltime, fully paid employee. The first six months are training and that is when we instill our values, culture, and expectations. After that, you are on probation for a year. Then back for re-evaluation where they put you through the paces and make sure you can do your job.”

Part of the importance of this is to define realistic expectations for the job itself, “Our mission is all about service. It is not glamorous and it is not always pretty. It is not easy. Citizens will call you for whatever they need. You will not say, “Why did you call me?” You will be courteous and treat them with respect, whether you think it is an emergency or not.”

He emphasized that new recruits can have a skewed view of the profession that they are entering and that, unaddressed, this can cause problem, “I think that's the most shocking part to new fire fighters. They think every call is life and death, but this is service. You will be called for
any and everything a citizen needs. A lot of it is quite honestly not an urgent situation. It may be someone who is abusing the system. Still, you're going to treat them with respect. You can educate and pass it up to management that this person needs another service so that they can get linked to it, but you have got to be nice.”

On the importance of hearing about the cultural and expectations directly from the Chief, “We put every promotional rank through a week of dedicated training and I address them all on customer service. It’s a huge investment but absolutely necessary. It may be different for Chief Officers than Lieutenants, but it is still the same message: you can never do too much for citizens.”

**Dealing with Stress**

Chief Gordon presents as someone who is very calm and he expressed that he deals with stress by having hobbies, such as an avid love of fishing, and other activities that he loves. He also faith in his command and operations staff, “I’m due for so many years of stress, but I feel calm. I feel like, you know, we as a department, and me as the Fire Chief that we can deal with any situation. That’s the confidence that I have, and the men and women that work for this department. So I am calm. But I can ramp up - I'm not in a stupor.”

Chief Gordon relies on a strong group of peers and mentors, “I’m a part of the Metro Fire Chiefs, which is an organization that consists of the Fire Chiefs of all the major fire departments in the world, not just in the United States. We communicate quite frequently by email. We have an email group. If a Fire Chief has an issue or question, he puts it to the group and various Chiefs respond. The folks - we have each other’s phone numbers and emails. So that group is a good resource, and also locally I can still reach back to guys like (the previous Chief and Deputy Chief). He was the second African American hired by this department back in the sixties. He
went on to be the Fire Chief in two more departments. So he’s a friend and a good resource. So I have a network of folks.”

Chief Gordon reflected that his favorite part of the job remains responding to emergencies, “That sound you hear right now (sirens). I say that and I mean it and it is what is rewarding. I have to always remind myself that whenever a truck rolls down the street, that’s why we’re here. Even with all of the things that we go through in management, you know, working with politicians and working through difficult budgets. It’s all about that truck rolling down the street. When the citizens call, we show up very quickly. We’re well equipped, well trained. Our standard operating procedures are tight, and we do a good job. So the most exciting part is being a part of a system that really makes a difference.”

**Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts**

When asked how he has changed during his time as Chief, “I think I am a different fire Chief now than I was on the first day on the job. We had some occurrences early on, you know, during this fiscal crisis, during that period. There was a lot of angst, and we had some disciplinary issues early on that we dealt with them pretty severely or retrospectively, a couple of those individuals. If something like that happened now, they would be terminated right off the bat. So I think I’ve gotten progressively tighter with the discipline. I’m dealing with the young generation. We see a change in motivation. We see a change in what they want out of the job and what they bring to the job. So I think in order to maintain our culture and maintain the level of discipline that we need, we have sort of brought the circle in tighter, and that’s a learning process. It’s been a learning process with me as well.”
CHAPTER VIII. CHIEF GRAVES

Background

Chief Graves was hired in 2007 as the first externally hired and first African American Chief of his current department. He spent the first 23 years of his career at a metropolitan fire department that is well known for its culture of commitment to positive internal and external customer service. He said he always knew that he wanted to be a firefighter, “From the time I was a little kid I’d go out in the rain and put the raincoat on and shoot the water hose or run out and chase the fire trucks if they were in the neighborhood.” When he was initially hired his immediate goal was to earn his paramedic license and, someday, promote to captain. He recalled, that from the perspective of a new recruit, promotions seemed far into the future, but he also recalled that he was, “thrust into leadership positions pretty early into my career.”

When he promoted to captain he was assigned to the busiest station in the city, which responded to 5000 calls per year. As a captain he also held his first staff position, when he was assigned to the Tactical Services Division, during which time he was involved in representing the fire department in planning for visits from the Pope, President, and several other dignitaries. Over the course of his career, he also served as the department’s Public Information Officer and managed the department's public education program. He also worked in special operations, airport firefighting, the training academy, fire prevention, and arson investigation. He promoted through the ranks and ultimately became the Deputy/Assistant Chief at his previous department.

Personal History

Chief Graves does not have a family history in the fire service but did have a childhood friend whose father was a captain on the fire department in the town where he was raised. He recalled visiting the fire station and from then on, he always knew he wanted to be a firefighter.
His parents were divorced and he was raised by his mother, a schoolteacher who also worked a second job. He has four sons with whom he is very close. He recalled that when he was in the process of applying for his current position and was feeling confident that he would get the job, he had a moment of doubt about taking the risk. He had great job security, he knew his job well and taking the new position would involve a major move, “I had a lot of concerns and so I told my then 12-year-old son, man I'm going to pull out and he said, well, what kind of example are you setting for your kids if you do that?” Chief Graves said that his son reminded him that human beings sometimes have a natural fear of success and the unknown and he made the decision to step up to the challenge and opportunity.

**Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences**

One of the first significant experiences he described was being assigned, as a new Captain, to the busiest fire station and one that “nobody else wanted to go to.” He described it as a very transient station in which people transferred in and out of regularly. He credits the high run volume for honing his technical skills, which, in turn, earned him credibility. “I had a lot of credibility because I'd always worked at very, very busy, busy companies and busy places.”

He soon realized that he needed to address the transient nature of the station and its reputation as an undesirable assignment. He seized the opportunity to recruit and develop his own stable team, “I recruited a crew. I recruited five people I knew really well. That's also a challenge sometimes because it's kind of hard to be the buddy and be the officer and all of those things.” He recalled that he had experienced the loss of two firefighters on the department and that this solidified his commitment to discipline and safety, “I felt really responsible for the safety of my crew and it was a big thing for me. I was all over them because I didn’t want them to get hurt.”
The next station he was assigned to had a much lower run volume, but presented the opportunity to respond to and formulate his personal philosophy about dealing with discipline challenges, “People talk about supporting the guys. I am always going to support them, but I can’t enable them. If I didn’t discipline them I was going to enable them to do the things they were doing. Some of the issues were difficult and progressive. A lot of officers don’t do it (discipline) but, if I don’t, then that's that whole internal customer service piece that I'm not providing good service to the rest of the folks on the truck or the station or the department if you don't discipline.”

**Building Relationships**

Chief Graves reflected that coming from a department with a culture of internal and external customer service had a profound impact on his development as a leader. He realized that building relationships was key. He recalled that it started as a lieutenant and captain, getting to know his crewmembers as a group and as individuals, “I treated them well and we ate together and worked out together and we had a lot of fun. I had a young crew and, for example, “I had a guy that was married and he had a couple kids and his wife did hair and every day he would go home on his two days off and he'd have to watch the kids and so his first day he’d be so tired he would lay in the doorway, the threshold of the family room, so he’d know where they were. Sometimes he’d come to work incredibly tired but I knew him and I knew his baseline. I didn’t just sit in my office, I’d get up there and help him wipe down the truck in the mornings.”

When he promoted to Battalion Chief, he applied the same principles, “We were going to be safe and these are the reasons why we're going to be safe and this is how we're going to do it. And now I've got to build a relationship with ten stations and maybe 150 people. So how do you that? You do it the same way you did it with those four or six that you had at one station.”
He talked about the personal and genuine commitment that building strong relationships requires, “You have to get out there and bring the energy. You can’t sit with the remote control. I think it’s really hard to be a really good leader without building quality relationships with people so that they speak to you. You have to show that you really have concern for them and you care about them.”

Chief Graves also spoke about the dividends of having good relationships in times of conflict, “I had to learn to be comfortable in the role as a leader and dealing with conflict, because that is not my nature. Because I’d spent time cooking brunch at a station on a Sunday or hang around to talk, it wasn’t like every time I showed up it was to deliver bad news.” And as a Deputy Chief and Chief, “Now I am dealing with more civilians and I have a whole lot of uniforms, but it is the same doggone thing. I had credibility and that made it easy for me to get people to work with me and to lead them.”

**Federal Emergency Management Agency Incident Management**

Chief Graves was a member of the Red Incident Support Team, which is the highest level of national incident management. He reflected that, in addition to the high level of response and management training, there were significant opportunities to learn about politics, power, and human nature. He reflected, “That experience definitely helped me in the political arena here. I was the liaison officer during Katrina so I briefed the mayor for ten days. In dealing with the military and generals and admirals, I learned a lot.” He also reflected that it was an invaluable education in managing one’s ego, “Ego management is huge because we’re all a bunch of alpha dogs in the USAR community. It’s about being able to check your ego, but also having enough of it to have a command presence. I have a command presence, but I don’t care who gets the
credit and the idea doesn’t have to come from me. My previous Chief used to say that egos eat brains.”

**Education**

Chief Graves attended university for three years before being hired by his first fire department. After promoting to captain he returned to college to complete an associate degree in fire science and then earned a bachelor of science in fire service management. He also attended the Harvard Kennedy School of Executive Education.

**Inspiration and Influences**

Chief Graves reported that he felt fortunate to come from a culture, at his previous department, of internal and external customer service, relationship building and mentoring. He said that his Chief was committed to providing opportunities for education and experience to develop well-rounded officers.

He spoke of a retired Chief who is a significant figure in his life. “He’s like my dad. He and his wife, I’m very fortunate to have them in my life. I remember he took me to lunch one day and we talked about having a leadership philosophy, understanding how important that is and being able to stick with it. So I had a guy who was interested in my success and who was there for me to kind of point me in the right direction. So that was, that was very helpful. And a lot of people don't have that. I still have him on speed dial.”

Conversely, he also admitted that he learned much from working for individuals who were not effective leaders. “I've worked for a couple of Assistant Chiefs who were micro managers and I learned a lot from them. I learned that this is not what I want to be like because, when you operate as a Chief, you work at a strategic level. I would say I'm up at 30,000 feet and
I don't want to get down in the weeds or hitting trees or mountains or whatever. I want to stay up here and manage and let my folks do their jobs.”

Chief Graves emphasized the importance of mastering the operational side of the fire service as a strong foundation, but also the need to balance experience with education, “I think you have got to be balanced to be a well-rounded Chief and operations is a young man's game. It is harder to gain that experience (as a fire ground commander) as you get more tenure in the organization because you're automatically drawn away from that." Additionally, "A Chief can still be successful without strong operations because it is about managing people. I could probably go be the Police Chief. I don't know anything about law enforcement but I know about managing people. I had to get that four year degree and then attending the Harvard programs helped balance me out.”

When he discussed his own leadership style he said, “I think there are different types of leaders and I think my style is more charismatic and that works for me. But to do that, or be that type of guy, you have to bring energy every day. If you don’t, people aren’t going to respond the same way. I’m not saying I run around like someone with their hair on fire every single day but I have 200 people in my building, civilians, staff and uniformed. I engage. I never shy from speaking, I never shy from going to shake their hand or having a conversation with them. Those are things I have always done. You show people that you care about them and I didn’t read that in a book.”

**Experiences as Chief Fire Officer**

On coming to a new department as an external candidate and becoming Chief for the first time he said, “I came to a completely different culture. In (previous department) I was the number two guy, so I had a lot of responsibility, but I wasn’t the Fire Chief. Being the Fire
Chief, there are so many other hats that you have to wear, you are responsible for everything. I mean it’s just, there’s a million different things coming at you. The biggest transition was stepping up to this level and then being able to find people that you trust, that you’re comfortable with, and letting them do their jobs.”

As a new Chief in a new department, Chief Graves decided, with the exception of matters of discipline, safety and customer service, he would not make any major changes for the first 100 days. “I had a 100 day plan which I showed it to the city manager. I had an open door policy where you could meet and talk with me. I went out and rode on fire trucks, ambulances, spent time in dispatch, went and had dinner and just hung out and met as many people as I could. I went on a lot of calls just to see what they were doing.” He recalled that he was immediately faced with disciplinary issues in the form of ‘red folders’ (critical and time-sensitive discipline files) that were on his desk on the first day. He said, “We started on the very first day and I had some staff pull all the discipline and go back and research it and figure out what we needed to do to fix these red folders and then how we were going to change the discipline system, which we did immediately.”

As challenging as the first days as Chief were, he described some aspects of it as easy. He made the immediate decision to wear a uniform to work, rather than a suit, as had the previous Chief, “I generally wear a fatigue uniform. I dress just like my firefighters unless I have the event and I've got to go put the white shirt and gold on. I look like a firefighter because I am leading firefighters.”

He also said that his genuine concern for and commitment to people was immediately well-received, “There were challenges but there was so much low hanging fruit here. A lot of it was to just let people know that you care about them, that they’re doing a good job, that you
support them, that you're going to get them the things that they need to go out and do the job. In a lot of ways it was extremely easy. It was really, really easy because they had never had leadership to where the Chief learned people's names.”

When hired as Chief of his current department, he inherited the command staff of the previous Chief and was very aware that some of those individuals had applied for the Chief position. As stated above, for the first 100 days he focused on learning about the department observed and purposely didn’t make sweeping changes. However, soon after, he reorganized the department. “After that 100 days I did a complete reorganization of the department and I moved all of my command staff. I tell other Chiefs if you're going to go into a place and you have incumbents who wanted that job, you have to move them because if you don’t they’re going to shank you and you’re going to look around and you're going to be in a pool of blood and realize it is yours.” He reflected that the decisions were not easy, but necessary, “I was able to promote the people that I wanted. So now my whole staff is pretty much handpicked and they have the same ideology or philosophy that I do. Now it’s really running pretty smooth for the most part. But again dealing with those staff it can be an extreme challenge.”

Chief Graves also pointed out that, just because an individual competed for the Chief position, didn't make them ineffective, but clear and open communication is required to mitigate the potential for passive-aggressive behavior. With open and direct communication, “One of the guys who wanted the Chief job became a solid performer for me on my command staff.”

Chief Graves reflected that one of the things that surprised him when he took over as Chief was the intensity of the financial management of the fire department, “We have a $298 million budget here. This is a business. We are running a $300 million corporation. I don’t consider myself a bean counter, my strength is on the operations side, but I’ve rounded myself
out now so I completely understand how much it costs to run this business. You have to be able to understand it, articulate it, and defend it. You have to understand operations and business in order to know where the efficiencies are.”

When asked how long he was in the Chief position before he felt confident about the scope of the position he said, “You’re never, never completely but probably a year-and-a-half where it's like, you know I got this. I have it figured out. I'm okay if this person retires, if this person leaves, I'm okay because I have this next person I'm going to bring up.” Further on the importance of succession planning, “I'm trying to build successorship because there's no reason that when I leave there shouldn't be a person in this department that's going to be the next fire Chief. If that hasn’t happened then I didn't do my job completely.”

Most Challenging

Chief Graves predicted that many of the Chiefs interviewed would answer that personnel issues and dealing with labor are the most challenging aspects of the position, “I mean the stuff that we deal with is—people just don't know. I mean— a few years ago I had 19 off duty fire fighters get cited for driving while under the influence in one year. We implemented a zero tolerance. And got high, got high praise from everybody in the fire service but, I didn't want to do that, I didn't want people to lose their jobs, but I knew we had to do something and since then we haven't had any more. But I mean those are the hard things of leadership that people just— they don't see.” He reflected that he does not take any pleasure from handing down discipline “I don't get off on that, it's not fun to me but it's something that is necessary.”

He pointed out that it is important to keep perspective when making difficult decisions. “I don't take it personally. It is part of the function of what I do. They’re not intentionally doing something to me even though, at this level, sometimes it seems like they’re doing something to
me because I'm answering questions to the media or I'm talking about why this guy got drunk or why this guy did this and I didn't have anything to do with it. I represent this organization and so sometimes it seems personal but just part of what we do. I really have always tried to be fair, get all the information. I don't want to get people in trouble and I don't want to deal with it but again, they’re doing it to themselves. I'm not doing it. And so that was always how I kind of looked at it. Even the personnel stuff, you know it's what you signed up for, it is part of it, so it can't be a surprise to you, but it's just—it's challenging.”

He reflected that he came from a department that had a very good model for labor management and that has helped him, but it is still a challenge, “Dealing with the local. It’s a challenge sometimes too because in these positions and I’ll tell anybody, it’s like you always had to be the bigger me. The relationship with a union president can be very adversarial. That’s just part of it, but the rewards outweigh the negatives.”

When asked about the most difficult aspects of the position Chief Graves responded, “There are decisions that really eat you. I guarantee any Chief that has had to fire or force somebody to resign, they’re going to tell you that the second worst thing, next to giving a flag to someone, is having to fire or dismiss somebody. Those are the things that I always stress when I talk to those company officers and I do those speaking engagements. I talk about their role and their responsibilities with taking care of the members and to help us not get in those positions.”

On the other hand, he was emphatic that his work is very rewarding. “There are so many different things. I mean just the fact that we provide a really good service. Taking care of the citizens and then taking care of the members. Just taking care of my folks. If you lose your wife or your husband or your kid or somebody in your immediate family, I call you, I send them a card, I just go out of my way to make sure that they feel appreciated, so those things. The
comments that you get back from people, they make you feel good. There are so many positives that outweigh the negative.”

When asked what strategies he uses to cope with the stress of the job, he talked about having a strong professional support system, “There are also a few other people, mostly Chiefs, that I can call when I need to make a decision. I still make the decision, but it helps to have someone to validate, give perspective, or commiserate. I don’t know where I would be without those resources.”

He expressed that exercising and staying shape is very important to him. “The one constant is that I work out every single day. I come in about 6:30 in the morning and I don't schedule any meetings until after 9 o’clock unless it's something external that I can't control. That is when I get my best thoughts in. You have to look the part. You really have to commit to fitness, if you want your members to be healthy and do those things that they need to do.”

Finally, he talked about the personal benefits that result from the commitment to developing a strong command staff, “Because I have hand grown my staff, and they totally understand what our mission, expectations, and philosophy are, I can go places, I can travel. When I first got here I was scared to go any place because I didn't have the staff intact so that I knew they were going to take care of anything. Now if I want to go away for a week, the place is in good hands. That's a rewarding feeling and it's also helped me to be able to be more balanced. I have good friends, I have four boys, I spend a lot of time with my kids and I do a lot of travelling.”

Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts

“I brought with me the same doggone philosophy that I had as a captain with six or seven people to a department that's about 2,000. It's the same thing. If I could go to a community event,
if I’m talking to a bunch of firefighters, if I’m talking to staff, if I’m talking to anybody, everybody knows what my expectations are. I always over communicate my expectations of safety and internal customer service and that is such a huge deal here because when I got here there was none.”

“I’m proud to be doing this because sometimes people want to do things or they dream about doing something and they don’t get a chance to do it. And I’ve had a chance to do it for a long time. I couldn’t be happier with the career that I’ve been blessed with and I never take it for granted because somebody else could be sitting here and I might not have ever gotten a chance to really do what I want to do.”
CHAPTER IX. CHIEF JAMES

Background

Chief James was hired as a firefighter at the age of 20 and has served 32 years on the fire department where he was Chief at the time of this interview. For 20 of those 32 years he was working as a firefighter or officer on a suppression company. He was promoted to Lieutenant after 11 years. He was Lieutenant for four years before promoting to Captain, a position in which he was a traveler, filling in for other captains who had the day off, for a year before being assigned to the rescue company. After three years he promoted to Battalion Chief in charge of operations and served as the safety officer on each shift. After three more years he was promoted to Assistant Chief in charge of operations. At the beginning of a new Chief’s tenure he was moved to the Executive Office where he served throughout the tenure of two different Chiefs. When the second retired he was named interim Chief and then Chief. Chief James has since retired from the department.

Personal History

Chief James has a strong Catholic faith and a very close family. He has been married for many years and has five children, the youngest of whom is five. He has always lived in the city where he was Chief of the fire department at the time of the interview. He started, but is not quite finished with an associate degree in fire science.

He relies on very strong support from his wife and family, as well as his faith to help him deal with the difficult parts of the job, “We see some gruesome things, the human condition. There’s more to life than what we see here. We live in a fallen world, a lot of pain and suffering, and my faith that there’s more to it than this helps a lot."
The department where he was Chief during this interview had been plagued with negative press for shift trading scandals, inappropriate behavior, discipline hearings, and the murder of one of the department’s fire fighters. The previous Chief retired, under pressure, and Chief James was called upon to step up to the Chief position and make positive changes.

**Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences**

Chief James reflected that he began to think globally, or more broadly, about the fire department during a shift trade scandal that reached the national news media. “I’m not sure, but I think they lost focus to the mission and instead started thinking, what is in it for me? Some of the firefighters got a sense of entitlement and became self-centered instead of being unified as a service division.” In essence, members of the department were paying other members to work their assigned shifts. Chief James was sworn in toward the end of this scandal and was tasked with restoring public trust and ensuring the practice was no longer in place.

He reflected that he had a lot of experience on the department and some professional development, but regretted not finishing his degree, “I didn’t go to college right out of high school, which I regret. I had experience on the department, I’ve taken classes, and I did some time in the bureau and in arson. I have a good understanding of the different facets of our department. The Ohio Fire Executive Program has been helpful and I have good mentors. I was the first person on our department to attend the Ohio Fire Executive program. What helps me most is a strong faith in God and the support of my wife and friends.”

He spoke about how most Chief positions require at least a bachelor degree, but that he had a lot of experience, “Most Chief positions want at least a bachelor degree, sometimes a master's to qualify. It is a career liability if you don’t have the educational background, but I feel I make up the shortfalls with my experience in the fire service. I have 32 years on the job. I have
had some bosses that I felt I could do better than or at least as good as, so that motivated me to want to promote.”

**Transitions**

He talked about how the promotion from firefighter to lieutenant is a big step in terms of transitions. “Going from firefighter to Lieutenant was a big jump, probably the biggest. It is a big step because you're not one just of the guys anymore, you're the adult supervision, the one responsible for the crew and accomplishing the goals and objectives of the Chief in the company setting.”

**Inspiration and Influences**

Chief James reflected that he had many good officers who were role models for him as he promoted up the ranks. He also spoke of the other metropolitan Fire Chiefs in his state, and one in particular who is a role model for him. He spoke about how all of the metro Chiefs in the state have a monthly conference call and share situations and debate various solutions or courses of action and also provide moral support for each other.

**Experiences as Chief Fire Officer**

By his own words and from information that was reported by the media, Chief James stepped into a difficult position. There had been several people in the Chief position in the past several years. His immediate predecessor was, after seven months in the position, asked to retire as a result of falsifying training records. James became the interim, and was then sworn in as Chief.

Chief James was faced with the lingering discipline from the shift trades and improper record keeping, but also several disciplinary issues that reinforced the need to a major culture shift. On his predecessor’s last day, the department also graduated a recruit class. Later in the
evening at a celebration by the recruits, the outgoing Chief’s photo was placed in some urinals and remained there for the evening. Several officers and many of the new graduates’ family members were also in attendance. As a result of the disrespectful behavior unbecoming a firefighter, let alone an officer, Chief James had to discipline several individuals, including senior staff, which included suspensions and demotions.

He reflected that his first year as Chief was difficult, “It’s been a rough year. I’ve handled more disciplinary hearings than the last four or five Chiefs combined. The union just filed their 109th grievance today. It’s a battle. I’m all about trying to get our image back and to keep doing the next right thing. We have outstanding firefighters who do an excellent job, serving the public, risking their lives every day. They do a great job, but there are still some of them who think that is all they are here to do and that, when the run is over, they go back to the station, close the doors, and that is it. The vast majority are people who do a great job for us. There are just a few that push the envelope, a few knuckleheads.”

Chief James said that the culture and volume of work can be a trial and there is little or no job security, “There’s a lot of support, but there are also people testing you. It can be overwhelming. Right now the only two people on the fire department who aren’t in the union are me and the executive officer.”

**Command Staff**

Chief James inherited the command staff from the previous Chief and said that one of the challenges is that they are all very near their retirement dates and they, “don’t want to make any waves.”
Making Tough Decisions

Chief James referred to the politics and tough decisions that a Chief must make, often alone. Pointing to a map on the wall with a pin representing each engine and ladder company, “The politics gets ugly sometimes. I have to eliminate one company and we’ve lost 25% of our companies in the past 10 years. City Administrations says, “You’ve got too many pins (referring to fire companies on a map) up there, Chief. You’ve got to get rid of a few of those.” However, to the Chief, each of those pins represents something more, “Those pins all mean something. Those pins are the engine and ladder companies in the neighborhoods.”

According to Chief James, he often doesn’t have the luxury of legal or human resources counsel prior to making a decision. “I have a lot of support, but it gets pretty lonely sometimes. You have to make some tough decisions. Everything is stretched pretty thin, people are difficult to access. There are times that I have to make the best decision I can without timely legal advice.”

Further on making decisions, “Sometimes you've got to make decisions quickly and, hopefully, they are good decisions. You’ve got to be firm too. Your people have to believe in you, and believe that you've got their back and their best interests. I base my decisions on what’s best for the department. It’s not my department; it’s not your department. We’re all here doing a job, serving the public. I try to base my decisions on what is best for all of us. What’s the best for all of us is what I try to base my decisions on.”

Strategic Planning

After a year in the position, Chief James expressed a strong desire to actively engage in longer term strategic planning, “We need to develop a strategic plan because it seems like we are just one year to the next, we’re just managing this year’s budget and then we move to the next
budget. We don't have a vision. Where do we want to be in 5 years? What are we striving toward? We need to get buy in to work toward that goal.”

**Challenges**

Chief James also spoke about how it is difficult to become more proactive as a department, if only because of the sheer volume of work in his position, “Just the sheer volume of phone calls and emails and tasks. Trying to stay organized. Following up with staff on assignments. Going to back-to-back meetings, long days, working 10, 11, 12-hour days. Also, discipline takes a lot of time: physical time meeting, preparation, and particularly if it goes to arbitration. There’s a lot to keep track of. It is mostly relationships, but a lot of paperwork too.”

He said that learning to speak publicly and speak on camera with the media was something that he had to learn to be comfortable with. He credits his wife for helping him realize he is prepared to answer questions and will, therefore, be credible. He said that the more he does it, the more comfortable he is.

**Stress**

Chief James said that the job is definitely stressful and difficult to decompress from on nights and weekends and the rare vacation, “Even with the support of family and faith, there are times, you wake up in the middle of the night thinking about 20 things. Once in a while we get away, but not as often or for as long as I’d like.”

**Rewards**

Chief James said, despite the challenges, there are many things he enjoys about the Chief position. He said, however, it is more a calling than a career, “About 5-10% of the time you get to do some really neat stuff. I just met the president a couple of weeks ago.”
He spoke about fulfillment and enjoyment from community service work, raising funds for charities, satisfaction from ‘leading the troops’ and working on policies, such as how to handle Ebola patients, which will ultimately save lives. He also spoke with great satisfaction and pride about several times he was involved in saving lives.

For the other, the difficult and challenging things, he said, “It has to be a calling.”

Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts

“I’m trying to get everyone on the same page. I want us to be respectful. This patch, it means a lot to me and it means a lot to most of our people. Unfortunately some people like to push the envelope I have to make examples of those who won’t comply. It’s not what I like to do, but it shouldn’t have to be this difficult sometimes.”

“The job’s been great to me. It is my turn to give back.”

“The biggest thing I've learned is that it looks easy from the outside. I've served under four Chiefs since I've been up here and it is always easy to look in and say, what is that guy doing, why doesn't he just do that to help us out? Until you get here and go through the dynamic between the city, the safety director, the mayor...”

“Other than my wife and kids, the best thing that ever happened to me was becoming a fire fighter and the top firefighter on this department.”
CHAPTER X. CHIEF JAMESON

Background

Chief Jameson began her professional career as a high school teacher and coach, but eventually decided she wanted a more dynamic and challenging situation and was drawn to the fire service. However, at that time, there were few women in the fire service and physical agility tests were often graded with points, rather than a par of pass or fail. Having always been very athletic, she was confident she could do the job, but also decided to earn her Firefighter II and Paramedic certifications prior to applying for positions in the fire service. When she was hired on her first department in 1983, she was the third woman on the department and the first to promote. Her first promotion was to driver, then to officer, and ultimately Deputy Chief of that department. She earned a Bachelor of Education Degree prior to her teaching career, and later returned to school to earn an Associate’s Degree in fire science and a Master’s Degree in Public Administration. She now has more than 30 years of experience in the fire service in every aspect from line operations to support services, training, and administration. Even as a rookie firefighter she remembered that she had aspirations to someday be a Chief, “I wanted to have the ability to influence and make a difference.”

She applied for several chief positions in large cities and was a finalist, and only female candidate, for several. She soon realized that, even with more experience and education, the positions were consistently being offered to a male candidate. Finally, in a meeting with a city manager during the interview process she said, “You know, it takes a person of courage to name a woman as their Fire Chief,” and she was offered, and accepted the position. She recalled after she was named Chief of the first department, she was immediately approached by several others
and asked to apply. However, she committed to stay five years in her first Chief position, which she did, and was then approached by an executive recruiter to apply for her current position.

**Personal History**

Chief Jameson has a long family history in the fire service. Her great grandfather was a volunteer firefighter in New York when fire apparatus were still pulled by horses. Her grandfather was also the Chief of a volunteer department. As a young person planning her career she initially did not see the fire service as a viable option for women and, instead, became a teacher. However, she ultimately decided to follow her passion and, as a result of her work and accomplishments, has paved the way for the current and future generations of women in the fire service.

**Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences**

Chief Jameson credits her past experience, previous career, and education as important aspects of her development and preparation, “I think several things helped me, but certainly my previous experience. This wasn’t my first job. I’d had another career and I already had a more global perspective. I think my education too, my experience in just getting a degree, having a Master’s degree, and the Harvard experience was a great help in the transition. I’m also a graduate of the Executive Fire Officer program so, again, it is all executive leadership. I think that professional development is really important to broaden peoples’ horizons and perspectives and be able to look beyond your own small world.”

In particular, she said that the John F. Kennedy School of Executive Leadership at Harvard was instrumental in broadening her perspective. “There were all kinds of senior executives and state and local government officials and a few Fire Chiefs. There were some epidemiologists, folks in public health, police, and everything else considered an executive level
position in state and local government. It was really interesting to me. I learned a lot about perspectives, a more global perspective. I gained global reasoning, which is valuable because I think many of us in the fire service tend to be very insular and can’t see the bigger picture.

Chief Jameson recalled that the largest transition coming up through the ranks was that of Captain to Battalion Chief. “It really is a tipping point because before that all of your focus is on a company or smaller group of people. If you’re a company officer, your big concern is taking care of your firefighters. So it is hard to even think globally beyond your station, or sometimes your battalion. But, when you’re a battalion Chief, then you’re over a bureau, whether it is training, or support services, or operations.”

Inspiration and Influences

In addition to being inspired by her family’s history in the fire service, Chief Jameson was supported and inspired by many people throughout her career and emphasized the importance of building external relationships. “I have a lot of mentors outside the department; other Chiefs who are friends and mentors. The Executive Fire Officer program was a great opportunity for me to meet mentors and mentor others. There have been a lot of people along the way who have given me great advice. The IAFC is a great organization and Metro Chiefs group is a great peer group. My city gives me great support to become engaged and involved in outside organizations.”

Experiences as Chief Fire Officer

When asked about her first day as a Chief and what she was thinking, Chief Jameson recalled being in her office, pinning on her bugles and thinking, “Oh my gosh, it is all me. There is no handbook. I don’t have a contract; I’m no longer protected by a collective bargaining unit. Then I thought, well, this is what you wanted to do! I thought of my great grandfather, who was
a volunteer during the horse drawn era and I thought he would be extraordinarily proud of me today.”

She also recalled that she had prepared for this, she was an expert in her field and she was ready for the challenge, “You have to have a command presence and you have to take a position; you’ve got to hold on to that position, and you’ve got to hold people accountable. I don’t care where you are, people appreciate the fact that you hold people accountable.”

At her first Chief position, she came into a situation where several of her command staff had applied for the Chief position and one in particular believed he was the ‘heir apparent’. The department had experienced several short-term and interim Chiefs and was understandably, skeptical about another person coming from the outside to lead the department. She reported that she initially faced some subtle undermining and passive aggressive behavior, but was able to overcome the challenge. “I just got to work figuring out people’s integrity and making some good changes for the benefit of the organization to build consensus.” Conversely, in her current position, none of her command staff applied for her position, and she now had experience and a professional reputation as an effective and successful leader.

Chief Jameson reflected that it is very important to understand the culture of the fire department. She noted that there was a significant change between her previous and current department. While she said that she enjoys it, it can also be challenging, and would especially be if one was not prepared to adapt to a new environment. For example, in her current position the citizens are extremely engaged in the community and demand a completely transparent city government. A group of citizens attends every council meeting. In her previous community, citizen involvement was not a strong part of the culture. Additionally, her current department has a much stronger labor community with very strong union leadership in the fire department.
Typical Day

Chief Jameson described a day as Chief as extremely busy with meetings and community-related events. “Any given day has several meetings. Some scheduled, some not so scheduled, some impromptu. Some days I never even get to my office because I go from meeting to meeting and then represent the department at an event in the evening. You have to have a great assistant. Sometimes it is hard because we barely stop. Once in a while we all joke, we are on the headquarters diet: we don’t eat. I look at my schedule strategically, keep a mental map of what is coming up, what I need to know more about and be prepared for.” She also described and demonstrated the need for a strong command staff and the ability to delegate and trust them. On the day of our first interview the first Ebola case in that state had just been reported in a neighboring city. Although her phone rang and I knew she was being barraged by text messages, she assured me that her Chief of Staff was in charge and fully competent to handle the situation.

Politics

Chief Jameson described the greatest transition and learning curve associated with taking over as Chief was learning the political landscape. “The biggest challenge is to learn the politics of the city and department. It is different for each and every one. I think the biggest challenge for someone going from second in command to the one being in command is dealing with the politics, not just the politics of elected officials, but trying to find a balance between a labor organization, your operations executive (whether it is a city manager or strong mayor), and the elected officials.”

Labor

Chief Jameson said that dealing with conflicts involving labor leadership is the most challenging part of the Chief position, but she also acknowledges that she understands their
perspective. “I understand their point of view, agree with, and advocate for many of the same causes, such as defined pension benefits. They put their life on the line every single day. They take a lot of risks. I know they would never compromise safety and training, but they don’t think as globally, that there’s more than just ‘me’ out there.” Additionally she pointed out that her past experience is very valuable, “I still think it is a big advantage to have had all of the operations experience. I had experience in every single one of the facets I am ultimately in command of. There’s some that did not, but I think sometimes it is easier to understand the issues and challenges. Sometimes there’s not any real validity to the concerns that come up from the labor side about an operations position you’re taking, but at least you can understand it.”

Inner Strength

She also reflected that a certain amount of inner strength and perspective is needed when the attacks on one’s character become personal and public. “You can have the best reputation, but still have a union president who, for political reasons, wants you gone. You can be censured, receive a vote of ‘no-confidence’ and it can be based on things that aren’t true or are taken out of context. The union endorses and financially supports candidates. It’s all good. Their goal is to get what they call a labor friendly council majority.”

And on the paradox between her professional reputation and the conflict with labor leadership, “How we get to where we are? It is a lot of hard work. It just isn’t a cakewalk. The most interesting thing, and it is humbling, is when you hear from people in past organizations or other fire departments that they are hearing good things about me and the job I have done. Then, at the same time, I have a union president who censures me.”

In addition to inner strength and the need to keep things in perspective, Chief Jameson also talked about the sheer amount of time labor negotiations require and the necessity to remain
positive and true to the mission. “You deal with legal issues, labor disputes, consent decrees, contract negotiations and it all takes a tremendous amount of time. They can say that you don’t have standards, integrity, honor, but you have to take the high road. Sometimes it is hard to be positive and upbeat. I had a firefighter ask me how I stay upbeat and positive toward people, no matter how much they are beating me up. Number one, it is easier because I love my job. Number two, sometimes the things they are beating me up about are tough decisions to make but I do them because it is the right thing to do. When you live by and hold steady on what’s right and what is important, it’s much easier than if you waiver.”

On taking the high road the Chief noted, “It gets personal, but I go back to this: at the end of the day, we all want the same thing. We want the best for our firefighters. We have a different perspective, but we should be respectful. I have never spoken despairingly about the union president, but he sees fit to do the opposite. It is difficult because some days it feels like real progress is being made in the department and then it’s, really? We have to fight again?”

When asked how long it takes to gain a certain level of confidence in the Chief position she reflected that, “You gain confidence with time and experience. With all of my external outreach I have travelled and done a lot of public speaking. I have no problem now standing before city council and speaking to them, lobbying for my budget. You have to know the state laws, the collective bargaining agreement, the culture of the organization and the community. I think you should never get too comfortable, but a little unease is good.”

On the importance of guarding one’s personal and professional reputation, “I tell everyone in the organization to remember that somebody could always be watching you, recording what you say, filming what you are doing, so you have to think about those things.”
Most Rewarding

Chief Jameson reflected that, for the most part, she loves her job. She is extremely outgoing and enjoys the community services and social events, more than 100 per year. Whether it is a celebrity fund-raiser, speaking event, Humane Society adoption parade, or serving meals at the holidays, she and members of her department are there. “Being involved in these events is enjoyable, but it is also your civic duty as a Chief. I’m trying to be there as much for them as they are for me and for the community.”

Managing Stress/Maintaining Balance

She also reflected that she has a great life and great balance at and away from work. “I have really good friends, I travel and golf. I have a great command staff and I trust them. I can get away for a few days and I’m comfortable leaving the organization with them. I have a phenomenal Chief of Staff and 4 Assistant Chiefs who are tremendous, as well as great civilian staff support.”

Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts

• “Take every opportunity that you can take advantage of, every experience that you can take advantage of.”

• “Don’t let your whole career be focused only on operations. Do some time in other areas and understand how it all works. The most fun is being on the big red truck and it is a great schedule but, if you want to move up, you have got to have all of the experiences.”

• “Sometimes I very begrudgingly left something I liked doing to learn something new, but I am very fortunate that I was able to do all those things.”
CHAPTER XI. CHIEF LEWIS

Background

Chief Lewis’ original goal was to pursue a career in accounting and recalled that it was his mother who gave him the flier that the fire department distributed to recruit new applicants. He decided that it was time to get serious about a career, so he applied. Over the course of his career, which spans more than thirty years, he promoted up through all ranks to eventually become Chief of the department.

He was hired at the age of 20 and, on his first shift, responded to two fires, the second of which involved the deaths of a mother and her two children. He promoted to Lieutenant after only 4 years, at the age of 24, and soon found himself supervising people with much more experience and who were significantly older. He spent a significant amount of his time as Lieutenant, Captain, and Battalion Chief as a traveler or relief officer. He recalled that studying for each promotion was hectic and demanding because the assigned materials for each level included six or seven books, state codes, and internal materials such as the union contract, department policies, procedures and rules. He said, “You practically had to live at the library if you wanted to study enough to do well.”

After being the relief Battalion Chief for four years, he moved into his first administrative position, in the Internal Affairs Bureau. He recalled that this was a significant transition, from the standpoint of a change from 24/48 shifts to working in an office setting and investigating disciplinary issues. On his first day he was assigned a case for which he had to do a complete review of all components of the case, transcribe all of the reports, and follow the case through the entire process. In addition to being in charge of the fire department’s office of Internal Affairs, which investigates such things as breach of policy or procedure attributed to the fire
department personnel, he also reported to the Operations Chief, who was responsible for everything that happened “on the street.” He was a Battalion Chief, for seven years, then Deputy/Assistant Chief for five years before being named Chief of the department when the previous Chief, retired.

**Personal History**

Chief Lewis was the first in his family to pursue the fire service as a career, although his son has chosen a career in the fire service. He describes family as very important to him and purposely tries to take time away to spend with family and to try to keep boundaries between the two, “Looking back on my career, I very rarely talked about (emergency response) runs when I came home. That was probably somewhat frustrating for my wife, maybe she couldn't understand why I wouldn't do that. My short answer is that I went on those runs once and I didn't want to relive them again at home.”

Chief Lewis has always been actively involved in the community and was an assistant football coach at a local high school for many years. He stated emphatically that it was never his goal to become Chief, of the department and was somewhat reluctant about accepting the position, “I felt that the second in command was a good place for me. I kind of equate it to some of the other things I was associated with. I coached high school football for 26 years. I’ve always been an assistant coach and that's what I kind of equated this to. I enjoyed being part of the think tank and decision-making team, but the buck didn't stop with me. Not that I was trying to shy away from that, it’s just that I've always accepted the role of being on someone's team, not the head of the team.”
Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences

As stated above, Chief Lewis responded to a fatal fire on his first shift. He recalled going back to the fire house and talking with the older and more experienced members to debrief and be ready to go on the next call. He reflected that dealing with the fatalities so immediately left no doubt about the realities of the job.

Operational Experience

Chief Lewis reflected that promoting early and being a travelling officer presented challenges and opportunities. He compared being a travelling officer to being a substitute teacher and being challenged and tested on a regular basis. The experience of being a traveler also gave him the opportunity to work at every station in the department and develop his operational expertise. “I’ve learned early on this job that, as a leader, one of the things that helps you is legitimacy. You gain legitimacy though your KSAs. If you demonstrative that you have knowledge, skills and abilities on the operational side, then you gain credibility and are at least respected. So, during the first part of my career, I was really concentrating on that.”

First Promotions

He stated that the transition and difference in scope and intensity is not so different between Lieutenant and Captain, but the bigger change comes at the first step, between firefighter and Lieutenant, “There's hardly any difference between Lieutenant and Captain when it comes to the day-to-day operation. The bigger transition is from private to Lieutenant. Some of the struggles I see come from the reality that one day you’re their brother or sister, co-worker and the next day you're in charge of them. That’s tough. That’s why we move a newly promoted person to a new shift, to give them a fresh start and have them establish themselves and identify themselves in a different circle.”
Transition to Administration

Chief Lewis stated that thoroughly understanding the scope of what takes place in Internal Affairs is extremely important, “I think it’s so important that it would be my wish to have every promoted officer go through that bureau just to understand what goes into maintaining the department discipline. It is so challenging. The reputation and good name of our members is very important to me. When anybody threatens that reputation and tarnishes it or brings it into question, I don’t do very well with those people because, the unfortunate thing is, that many members of society will paint all of the fire service with the same brush. If a fire fighter does something against the law, some people in the public will categorize all fire fighters the same way. It is extremely important to me that we maintain discipline and standards to guard against this.”

One of the things that surprised him when he went to the Internal Affairs bureau was the sheer volume of cases, “As you gain perspective, you really come to think about the fire department as a real reflection of our society. It isn’t exempt from any societal issues or problems. Whether they are marriage issues or domestic violence issues or drug issues or financial issues, I mean you name it, it is part of the society. And add to that, we all live together 24 hours at a time.”

On the benefits of working in administration, “Once I came up to the administrative staff, I had more interaction with the Chief himself. I answered directly to the Operations Chief. I was kind of the go between for the fire administration and line and Battalion Chiefs. It was good experience from the standpoint that I was still able to interact with the men and women I used to work with, but I was also learning how to interact with the fire and city administration.”
Promotion to Deputy/Assistant Chief

He reflected that a large part of his professional development and preparation for becoming Chief came from being mentored by the previous Chief, “Well, I was really lucky as far as the preparedness for being a Chief because I worked for a Chief who, philosophically, was very inclusive of me for all decisions that had to be made for the department. At the time I probably was not very cognizant of what he was doing, but looking back, he preparing me to be the Chief. I looked at it more as hey, we're a team and we've got a job to do and together we’re going to do it.”

Importance of Mentoring/Succession Planning

Further to the importance of being mentored, “What best prepared me was a Chief who was committed to include me in just about every activity he did. There is no Chief that has been exposed to being Chief more than me. I had the best benefit of any person that came into the Chief’s office and sat in that chair because Chief understood and actually experienced having not been as included.” He explained that the previous Chief had not been as strongly mentored, partly because his Chief had not anticipated leaving and wanted to shield his Assistant Chiefs, “I think what he was attempting to do was shelter for their own mental health, the Deputy Chiefs and Chiefs just under him from some of the bureaucracy, some of the politics and some of the government challenges. From that standpoint I can understand, but it’s a double-edged sword. They might have been able to focus on what they were expected to do in their areas of responsibility, but when it comes to succession it's a downfall and my Chief recognized that. The four years that he prepared me was more valuable than any four-year degree that I could go through.”
Inspiration and Influences

Chief Lewis reflected that he had many good examples of leadership throughout his career, “Early on in this job I worked for good officers and what I learned is how to treat people: How to treat people who work for you, how to motivate people who work for you and to portray a team concept rather than an autocratic style. I always tried to be inclusive of everybody to have some input and some way of weighing in whether it was trying to manage a patient or what we should do procedurally as far as station duties and things of that nature. I just tried to be inclusive of everybody.” As a Captain he worked for a Battalion Chief who was a mentor and had great people and team building skills. “People where always motivated to work for him just because of the way he carried himself.”

Experiences as Chief Fire Officer

As mentioned previously, the content and intensity of the Chief’s position did not surprise Chief Lewis. The politics didn’t surprise him because he had been exposed to so many people and situations. He already knew the people at the director level in the city and had many contacts in business and beyond. He felt that he was, “Perhaps not fully proficient on day one, but I knew enough to usually avoid problems. If there are problems it is not due to a lack of understanding on my part of the political climate and political system.”

Transitions

He explained that it is important for each of his senior staff to have an area of expertise and to understand that, in upper management, you must be able to manage multiple areas of responsibility, “It is your transition game that is important. You have to be able to transition. If you bring the remnants of one meeting into the next, you're not going to be very effective. I don't care if that meeting was about negotiations, if you’re going to be talking to your medical director
about something else in that next meeting, you can't have the thoughts about negotiations in your head. There are days when I will try to retrace my steps on what I did. Sometimes the variety of subject matter that you engage in during one day is beyond belief.”

**Becoming a Public Figure**

Chief Lewis acknowledged that, a positive and negative part of the job is that one becomes a public figure. He said, while it is enjoyable to meet people and be able to be a positive role model, it comes with a price, “It is tough -it is almost like you have to give up a certain part of your life. My family sometimes says, “Can’t we go anywhere without you being recognized? We sometimes have to drive a bit of a distance to have a private dinner out. Your family definitely experiences this with you.”

This was never as apparent as when Chief Lewis’ department experienced two tragic line of duty deaths at a fire. He, now more than ever, was the face and spokesperson for the fire department, and his family experienced it with him privately and publicly.

**Responsibilities**

He described the responsibilities involved in the Chief's position as very different at different times, “At times it’s pretty neat when you are building new fire stations and training new classes and buying new equipment. But it also feels like a really burdensome level of responsibility that you just can't take lightly because, again, injuries and loss of life on our job, that is huge.”

Chief Lewis talked about how competing for resources is a reality for Chief's everywhere. “We compete for resources with every other director: police, parks and recreation, the water division, you name it. We all work together, but the fact remains that the pie is only so big.”
Additionally, the need for an understanding of responsible business practices is vitally important, “We cannot operate as if we have a guaranteed funding source. Our success, our level of customer service, directly impacts how much money we have. We’ve taken on a business model for how we operate. This is a business called the fire department.”

When asked who he is able to confide in when weighing options for a professional decision and if he has people who are able to challenge him, he replied, “Absolutely, my command staff, my core team of people. I only caution them in their delivery – not public and not sarcastic. I promise then that we will fully discuss all of our options. But, what I expect of you at the end is that we’re all on the same page on the final outcome. Once the final decision is made, it needs to be supported by all.”

**Leading Through Tragedy**

After our first interview, Chief Lewis’ department experienced the traumatic line of duty death of two firefighters. When asked how he and the department was coping, “I just think, you know, just goes without saying. I mean, we’ve suffered a great loss. I think it’s every Chief’s nightmare that they never ever want to think about or have to deal with. But, it happened to us.”

When asked how individuals and the department as a whole is coping he said, “How individuals are coping depends one who they are, their relationship with our fallen. Whether you were a classmate, worked in the same station, or more removed, on a different shift. People are affected in different ways. There are some wounds that haven’t started to heal yet because we have to get through the court case, the trial. We’re in the midst of that but we also have to heal, learn, and move forward.”

On where he draws strength, “What helps me personally get through is the team assembled here, the command staff. I’ve got a very good team. A core group of people whom I
trust immensely and who do great work. We all know that we still have to process information, we still have to make decisions. And we all know that we have to take as much emotion out of the equation as possible if we want it to be a sound decision. We don’t all have the same pace of how we cope with this. As a Chief and leader, it is important to not have a strong reaction to someone else’s reaction. This is very emotionally driven and I have to have good coping mechanisms. At the end of the day, I stand and answer for it.”

On how it changed him as a leader, “The death of two firefighters has put things into perspective, again, of what’s important and what's not so important. It forces you to, again, look at how you do business policies, procedures, and things of that nature. We need to evaluate and engage in self-analysis on a regular basis. These tragedies obviously put things into perspective. When you see how much time disciplinary issues take and, at the time, seem really important…but do not have the weight or impact of a tragedy like this. Don’t get me wrong, they are still are important because that can translate to the overall discipline and good order of your department.”

“This goes all the way to life in general. I mean, life is precious. We don’t know when it’s going to end or be affected in some significant way just like that. Again, that brings things into perspective as far as what’s important.”

**Leading Change**

All Chiefs have to manage change on a daily basis, hour by hour and strategically. A line of duty death intensifies this need. Chief Lewis spoke with pride that they have now committed significant resources and built strong relationships with the legal system as it relates to arson. He explained, “We are handling arson much differently. We've seen its full wrath and potential. Now there is a uniformed presence in every arson case courtroom. We meet with the prosecutor.
The judges see us, and the defendants and defense attorneys see us. We are in the courtroom. We have a vested interest in this. We weigh in on every plea bargain now. Those are discussions we never had before. Now we have them routinely.”

Another area that Chief Lewis, based on his experience, is considering changing is the process that candidates participate in during the promotional process. He believes that there should be some role play/assessment to aid in determining if a candidate is prepared to handle the potential challenges in the next position. “There has to be some simulations that take place to help gauge whether this person is ready to deal with what's going to be expected of them. Whether it’s a customer complaint from an irate citizen to a television interview to an in-basket exercise to managing an emergency incident and so on. There’s more to it than just reading a book and regurgitating information. It's the application of that knowledge and you're just not going to get that with a testing process or promotional process like that. I’ve done a fair amount of assessments and been exposed to a lot of different systems out there and there are some good ones out there. I know the way we do it right now does need to be improved.”

Relationships

Chief reflected that having good relationships with business members, the community and the press is always important but never more so than during a tragedy, “You know, going back to our tragedy. Those relationships really helped, because one of the first things I asked the media is to give us our space and give the family their space. The media respected that. There was never an attempt to get through a side door or try to catch a family member for an interview. They were very, very respectful and we appreciated it.”
Labor/Union

Chief Lewis talked about the most difficult part of his job, “The hardest part of job other than dealing with the line of duty deaths (sigh). It’s been tough dealing with union leadership.”

He explained that he felt that the bad feelings between the union president and the Chief’s office started during the previous contract negotiations, “I was truly trying to act in the best interest of the City and also in the best interests of them. However, when they have a whole different set of standards, whole different set of priorities, a whole different focus that is not consistent or compatible with what we’re trying to achieve, which is really citizen based, that’s tough to navigate through some times. Obviously, they are trying to look for what’s in the best interest of their members. However, I need to also think of the larger community, where is the give and take, what are tax payers getting for their money?”

And further on these challenges with the union, “As much as you'd like to think differently, there are just some bad people we have to deal with. I also think philosophically, as it comes to unions and fire service, some union leaders think if things aren’t stirred up, if some part of the membership isn’t constantly riled up, then they are concerned about their role and value. If everything’s going smoothly, why do we need all this union leadership and why do we need to funnel all this money towards supporting an international union? It’s almost like it’s against their philosophy to work on things together and to have things work smoothly and run smoothly.”

“It’s very political, I know there have been efforts to get me fired. A lot of Chiefs experience a ‘vote of no confidence’ and while we know it is political, it also gets personal. I can tell you that it has jaded me. It’s left some permanent scars in how I view people. But, you know, I am still trying to do the right thing.”
“The membership doesn’t always see the good things that we do. When we had a member who was critically ill a call went out for donations of sick and vacation leave to a pool for him. The twenty members of the Chiefs’ Association collectively donated more time than the entire 500 plus membership of the Local. But they don’t see that. It isn’t an issue where the leadership can pound their fist on the table and be dramatic. It was just a quiet and kind thing to do.”

Chief Lewis explained, while the conflict between fire administration and leadership was partly because of a fundamentally different perspective, the animosity had been significantly increased when the mayor insisted on interest based bargaining rather than the more traditional style where, “You come in high, I come in low, and we hash it out. We call each other names and move along.” In the interest based system, the negotiations are more complex and all negotiating parties are considered equal. This presented an obvious problem when the union president suddenly felt on an equal level in the organization to the Fire Chief. According to Chief Lewis, while this of equality is appropriate at the bargaining table, the union president carried this assumption, with no correction from the mayor, into other areas of managing the department.

**Politics and Culture**

Chief Lewis stressed that understanding and dealing with politics is not an option. “If you can’t, or don’t want to, deal with the politics, then you are not going to last very long. The only way you are going to be good at the game is to learn the game and participate.” Similarly, regarding culture, “You have to understand the culture of the city and the department. If you don’t understand it, you will be travelling in a foreign land.”

**Dealing with Stress**

Without question the line of duty deaths added a level of stress that cannot be understood by someone who has not experienced it. However, prior to the tragedy, Chief Lewis spoke about
general stress associated with the Chief's position, “There can be quite a bit of anxiety within a Chief, there are so many things that could impact what I have to do, based on someone else's decisions, actions that I have no control over. At the end of the day I have to answer to it, which is fine, it is what a Chief does. That doesn't mean it doesn't create a lot of anxiety.”

When I commented that many Chiefs/people would not admit to feeling anxiety he replied, “Well, if you’re never anxious, then you’re just...you’re either in some kind of denial or totally oblivious to what could happen. On the bright side, there are many days I get to answer for great things people do too.”

Chief Lewis described his vacation condominium as a sort of insurance policy to force himself to get away from work and decompress although, he said, with technology, he is never completely disengaged. He answers emails and other correspondence or, “It would be totally unmanageable when I returned. It is a 24 hour a day commitment.” He has also purposefully learned to utilize more of the command staff team that he has, “If you have a greater distribution of responsibilities and burden, they're more doable for everybody.”

**Most Rewarding**

Chief Lewis said that building new fire stations and training new fire fighters are two of his favorite parts of the job. He also said that building relationships in the community, whether universities, businesses, and other directors are a very positive part of his experience.

Chief Lewis is also very passionate about paramedicine and the advances that continue to be made. “The advancements in paramedicine are amazing. We are doing things on the streets now that were unheard of before. New CPR, better procedures - we're bringing people back that were flat lined. The survival rate used to be 3-5%. Some months we now have a 40% rate for
bringing back people who had no pulse when we got there. Medications are better, equipment, procedures. It's gone way beyond Johnny and Roy.”

Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts

“The fire service has become much more cerebral. Now it is not just strong backs, the way it was described at the beginning of my career. It is still tough physically, but now also mentally. Paramedicine, homeland security, domestic threats, pursuing federal grants. It has changed for everyone not just the Chief.”

“At times I think, I’ve learned many of the burdens of this job. There are times you wonder, why would you suggest doing this to anyone you cared for? Life could be much simpler…one level down, or two levels down and you could still be very productive and still contribute a lot. I get torn at times because I’ve lived many of the burdens of this job.” When asked why he would recommend it to anyone he said, “Because the fire service is bigger than us. It deserves your best shot. It deserves your best people.”
CHAPTER XII. CHIEF MORRIS

Background

Chief Morris spent 36 years of his career at a metropolitan department in his home state. He gained extensive operational and administrative experience as he worked as a fire fighter, then promoted to Lieutenant, Captain, Battalion Chief, Deputy Chief, and Assistant chief. In his operational positions he developed technical experience while responding to emergency runs on the largest fire department in the state. When he became Battalion Chief and was assigned administrative duties, he learned about project management, renovation, change management, budgeting, and technology. In this role he coordinated with other agencies, negotiated vendor and labor contracts, planned and executed large-scale training operations. He ultimately rose through the ranks to Deputy Chief, and then Assistant Chief. He eventually applied for the Chief position, but it was awarded to another candidate. He stayed to support the Chief for several years but, when he decided that being Chief was his ultimate goal, he applied to his current department and was hired as the Chief.

Personal History

His original goal was to be an attorney, and he started college to pursue a law degree. However, when he and his high school sweetheart eloped, he realized that he needed to get a job to support his new family. His wife had grown up next to a fire station and had developed a love of the fire service, so she encouraged him to take the civil service exam. He initially balked at the idea, stating he didn’t think he would like the hours, the shifts, or the work. He visited a few stations to talk to the firefighters and decided he might like it after all. Once he was on the department, he fell in love with it.
He has extremely strong family ties and, in fact, consistently referred to ‘we’ and ‘our’
career, including his wife in every phase of his career. Her love of the fire service has continued
at their current department. She regularly visits fire stations, goes to fires to lend support, and
attends all official events. They also, together, make a point to visit any fire fighters who are
hospitalized. At each recruit class graduation they, together, welcome the newest members of the
fire department to the ‘family’. Chief Morris recalled a time that his wife was out of town and he
somehow missed the recruit graduation date on his calendar. When she returned and they
realized the error, they gathered the group together to address them and apologize. He said, “She
is a special lady, she has my back and people get to know us as a family. She has a genuine love
and interest in the fire service.” He expressed regret that, at the time that she
would have pursued
it, it was not common for women to be in the fire service, “women weren’t allowed then, but it is
something she would have dearly loved to have done.”

**Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences**

Chief Morris recalled, with humor, the first time that he took the promotional exam for
Lieutenant. While he knew that others were studying extensively, he decided that he didn’t need
to study so hard. He recalled that he was so confident that he was actually concerned with being
promoted so early in his career. However, when he was notified that he didn’t pass the exam, he
realized the level of commitment that is required to study for a civil service exam. The next time
he took it he studied all of the books on the list for months as a time, did well and was promoted.
He said that experience taught him first (laughing), “What studying could do for you and second
that I could do well if I stayed in the books.” Later he and his wife returned to school to take
accelerated night classes and each earned a bachelor degree in business administration.
Education

He stated that the business degree has helped him tremendously and that he wouldn’t have met the criteria for his current position without it. Additionally he stated, “The business degree has been a great help to me in the Chief’s position, from knowing the accounting part of it to the political communications. Everything that you can learn that makes you a well-rounded person helps tremendously.” He also reflected that going back to school as an adult was an entirely different experience, “You’re there because you want to be, your parents aren’t paying, and you are actually going to study!” He felt that he benefitted from his education, but was emphatic that people must attend credible schools. He spoke specifically about his confidence about speaking in public and attributed that to education and understanding the political climate, “so I don’t have to be afraid to say the wrong thing. I don’t have to read my speeches. I start with a basic outline, then I adjust as I read my audience.” He said that, if he were ever to decide to pursue a master’s degree, it would be in public administration, and nothing to do with fire science, in order to be in line with what the chief job is. Finally, he explained that he never sold his books after college. Subjects such as statistics and accounting are still useful as reference books in his current position.

Operational/Other Experience

Chief Morris developed the technical/operational experience over the course of 18 years in as he rose through the line ranks at the largest fire department in the state. He asserted that having this level of experience and expertise is critical in order to have credibility in administrative positions. He also said that he never lost his love of operations and always wanted to stay connected to the people on the front line of the fire department.
Another thing that Coach Morris believes contributed to his ability to pull together successful teams is coaching. He explained that coaching requires many skills that can be transferred to any work place, but very much so in the fire service, “You have to be able to get along with and enjoy people; you have to be able to problem solve; you have to be able to pull a team of very different individuals together to get a job done.”

**Transition to Administration**

Chief Morris explained that the transition from operations to administration was very significant but that it was not initially what he wanted to do. When he was promoted to Battalion Chief there were no operational positions open. He had the choice of fire prevention and dispatch. He felt that he knew a bit about dispatch so he chose that, with the idea that he would stay only until an operations position opened up. He recalled that this was fairly standard practice so the administrative office often had “a revolving door of officers.” One day when he was in the office one of the fire fighters asked him if he was the “officer of the month” and he decided right then to stay.

He became immersed in the projects that he was working on and transitioned into management. In retrospect, he said, “moving into administration took me into other worlds in the department which I’d never been to before. “He can now see that this was a turning point in his career. He realized that, “Now I’m having meetings and developing strategies. Now I’m learning a whole new skill set.” He described his revelation about administration, “The big thing that hit me was that what people do on 40-hour jobs impacts everybody on the fire department. Emergency services impact a small portion. If I really wanted to have an effect on the fire service, I needed to stay in administration and follow through.”
As stated previously, in this position he was in charge of the renovation of the dispatch center and the implementation of an entirely new countywide radio system. He was involved in every phase of the project. He was delighted when he sat for the Deputy Chief exam and realized that the main essay question was about project management and all of the steps and aspects of managing large projects. He remembers laughing to himself and thinking, “Did my mom write this?” because it was everything he had been doing as the dispatch center. He also recalled looking around the room and seeing other people, who had strictly been in operations, looking “lost”.

When he received the promotion to Deputy Chief, he went back to operations. This was somewhat of an adjustment, mostly in terms of schedule, but he had continued to work overtime while in administration in order to keep up his technical skills. At this point he said that he figured he would be in this position for the rest of his career because there were several qualified Deputy Chiefs and only one is chosen to serve as Assistant Chief.

**Politics and Relationships**

Over the course of his career, prior to becoming Chief, he was often called upon to repair the culture, procedures, and reputation of divisions that were having problems. One example was when the officer who was in charge of support services, which includes the fleet of apparatus, vehicles, and all facilities, was caught stealing from the department. While the investigation was complete when he arrived, he still had much work to do to pull the remaining team together, implement procedures to prevent future issues, and repair the damage to the reputation of the department. When he was interviewed by the press and asked what he would do to fix the situation, he answered in hischaracteristically calm and straightforward way, “The first thing I am going to do is not ever steal anything.”
Later, when the Chief became dissatisfied with the way the training bureau was being managed, Chief Morris was moved to that position. He recalled that he found instructors who were not certified and standards that were when recruits were trained. He moved people out and brought in a team (from within the department) who were, “Excellent and committed instructors and who had specific areas of expertise.”

When the Chief of the department retired, Chief Morris was invited to apply for the position. He was one of two finalists but the position was ultimately offered to the other finalists. While not bitter about the outcome, he described the process as fraught with communication issues that continued to have an impact long into the new Chief’s tenure. For example, the other applicants, all of whom were internal, were not notified that two finalists had been chosen and interviewed. Additionally, they found out that a Chief had been chosen, and who it was, when they came to work in the morning. Many of the applicants were senior officers who worked for the previous and new Chief and the angst created by being caught off-guard did not make for a smooth transition.

He reflected that, in an effort to smooth hard feelings created by the selection process, the new Chief did not replace the executive officer of the previous Chief. While his intention was likely positive, the inherited executive officer was so bitter about not getting the position himself that he spent the next several months actively undermining the new Chief. Chief Morris reflected, “You can’t ignore politics, it is all about politics.” One the other hand, “you get exposed to the political side, but it is very important to maintain relationship with everybody on the street.”
Chief Morris reflected that he learned a lot from observing other Chiefs over his career, “I was fortunate that I got to watch several Chiefs and learn to emulate the good and try not to repeat the bad examples. One Chief was very popular and everyone loved him, but he always wanted consensus, and couldn’t or wouldn’t, make a decision. Another Chief got into political issues because he was married but had a girlfriend he would visit during the day. Yet another Chief was extremely politically savvy and very good at that side, but he wouldn’t go out and see the firefighters.” Reflecting on those experiences as a whole he said, “Ultimately, I learned about politics and I resolved to stay connected and involved with the department.”

Chief Morris did point out that ‘staying connected’ and loving the fire service does not mean that you don’t have to make a clear transition to administration, “You reach a point in your career where you have to decide if you are going to move up in the union or promote through the ranks. Either you want to move up the ranks or move up in the union, but you can't do both.” And on making decisions, “You have to be willing to make the final decisions, for the right reasons, and your decisions won’t always make everyone happy.”

Inspiration and Influences

In addition to the strong support and strength that he attributes to his wife and family, he recalled several mentors, who were mostly officers in the fire service. He remembered a time when, as a fire fighter, a Battalion Chief came into the station house and said to him and the crew, “He is going to be Chief of the department someday.” He said that he was also mentored and encouraged by this officer throughout his career and, when he was sworn in as Chief at his current department, he invited the (now long since retired) Battalion Chief to attend.
Experiences as Chief Fire Officer

When the Chief position that he currently holds became available, he took the decision about whether to apply and ultimately accept, very seriously. “This was a big change to a new department. It involved moving away from family. My wife and I prayed about the decision. We had to do this together. We had been through our whole career together and this had to be something we could buy into as a team.” There were differences between the two departments that also had to be considered. His previous department was more affluent, with newer facilities, and much more command and support staff for the Chief. He stated though that he quickly came to appreciate the historic old firehouses and the tenacity of the people.

Coming from the Outside

He recalled that the first day was hectic, especially because he was starting at a new department, “I assume it would be much easier going into the position in a department you already know. In this situation I was transitioning to a place where I didn’t know the people, who the players are and how they work together.” The hardest part, initially for him was going to fire scenes and not knowing anyone, “I didn’t know anyone, not the incident commanders or crews. It was unnerving in the beginning to go to fires and not have a clue who was doing what.” He acknowledged that it was likely an adjustment for the personnel too. He recalled with a smile that they had been calling back to his old department to, “Check me out.”

One of the positives coming as an outside candidate is that it provides the opportunity for a clean slate, “with no baggage to carry around.” He reflected that, “From day one, my goal was to build new relationships with everyone and set a new playing field down. We can forget all of the old arguments. Let’s try something new. It took a lot of time but well worth it. They needed time to get to know me and build trust.”
A big part of the trust building was being visible and showing people that they were committed for the long haul, “we go to everything, every retirement party, luncheon, hospital visits and funerals.” One of the first things that Chief Morris did was to set up a schedule to visit each of the fire stations on every unit. A District Chief would pick the Chief up and take him to his or her district. This allowed time to talk with each District Chief and to meet all of the department personnel. It also gave him the opportunity to personally tell people his goals and philosophy, “I am here to take care of them, not the other way around.” As soon as he completed all of the visits to the fire crews, he repeated the same process on the emergency medicine side. He attributes this effort to contributing to his greatly increased comfort level within the first six months, “I was able to learn from the people, the political system, and make important connections.” As stated previously, he continues to make visiting fire and EMS crews a priority, “Visiting fire houses, fires, staying in touch. Eating with them. It is where I get a feel on how the department is going. I don’t want to hear about it from my Chiefs. They’re going to tell me all is rosy or all is terrible in their world. I want to hear from fire fighters about the world I am actually affecting out there.” He also stressed that the commitment for the long run is essential, “It is not just about doing it the first 3 weeks to make a good impression. It is about doing it forever, to stay in touch.”

If there is such thing as a ‘typical’ day, Chief Morris said it starts around 6:15 in the morning. He likes to start early so that he can, when not committed to an evening event, be home in the evenings with family. Most days revolve around internal meetings with command staff and other members of the department and external meetings with, for example, the mayor, city manager, Chiefs in the surrounding county, and members of the media. He said that he tries to keep Mondays and Fridays less scheduled to get his own work done but, “that is a challenge that
seems to be happening less and less.” He emphasized that it is not a job that you can turn off when you go home or go on vacation and that, “we feel an enormous sense of responsibility for the safety of our firefighters and the city. The radio scanner is on 24 hours a day at our house.”

**Culture Change**

Chief Morris was fortunate to be able to start to build his own command staff team right away, due to two retirements. While he said it was somewhat risky because he didn’t know anyone, he is pleased with his choices and, and commented that one in particular is an “exceptional asset.” He reflected that one of the challenges of coming in from the outside is to recognize the current culture and make changes when he feels it necessary. For example, at his previous department, there was a very strong culture that command staff have the authority, and are expected, to make decisions and manage their assigned projects from start to finish. They are expected to submit something to the Chief that is ready to be signed. However, he reflected that the culture in his current department is such that the command staff often seeks more feedback and approval throughout the projects. He expressed that this was frustrating and something he was committed to change, “We have so much talent here. They need to know that they have the authority and take it on.”

Another cultural practice that he immediately sought to change was that the stations had typically been ‘off limits’ to family members. “The stations were closed up and families were not encouraged to visit. We changed that. We encouraged them to bring in families to see what they do, what’s going on and be a part of their lives. It’s a huge part, so the families should know what is happening.”
Responsibilities

On safety, “I'm here to facilitate everything the firefighters need to keep them safe. That can be equipment, training, procedures, but is ultimately my responsibility. Everything I do is geared toward safety, everything we’ve done, since I've been here, is about safety. We added advanced life support officers and safety officers. We stopped browning out the rescue companies.”

Another responsibility of the Chief is to keep pushing people to be their best, “We can't let people get complacent. We have to keep them moving and motivated and on top of their game. This is especially important as we see the transition from all fire call to mostly fire, to a more even ratio of fire and emergency medicine call. Both require specialized skills and we have to stay current.”

Job Satisfaction

The most satisfying part of the job for Chief Morris is staying connected, visiting firehouses, sitting down and talking with the fire fighters. He, and his wife, also enjoy going to fires to show support for the crews. As stated previously, he also enjoys the coaching and team building aspect of project management.

He also stated that it is very satisfying, “To be the last say in something, to make it happen.” One of the examples he gave was having the ability and authority to make the decision to stop the brown out of the heavy rescue companies (a common practice during the tenure of the previous Chief). “To me, my rescues companies are the Green Berets of the fire department. We have great rescues. Our guys are committed and trained and they do a great job.”
**Job Stress**

On the sources of job stress Chief Morris said, “As a Fire Chief, you are always exposed to the push and pull from all sides. For example, the fire fighters may want a new truck and wonder why I don’t just buy it. They have fast personalities and are used to making fast decisions. Sometimes they don’t see it from the Chief’s perspective. I have to find that half million dollars for that one truck, and balance all of the other competing priorities.”

He reported that discipline and conflict with the union cause stress, but that it is also the energy and effort to, “get everyone on the same page while, at the same time, knowing that there is a group who never will.” He reported a feeling of frustration at, “Wasting time on discipline and conflict when the time could be spent moving the department forward.”

He said that his most effective method of managing stress is to try to get home at a reasonable hours and spend time with family, “That’s my safe place. Family is where I can escape.” He also reiterated, “What keeps me sane and happy is going around to the houses and talking to people, recognizing them for things they do well. Now they know we are sincere and it isn’t just a gimmick, we’ve been doing it for years. They know we believe in it.”

Chief Morris said that the council and support from a group of metro Chiefs in the region is invaluable. Once a month, or more as needed, all of the Chiefs participate in a two-hour conference call. They have an agenda, but also open time to discuss any issues one or more may be facing. While each department is unique, there is a commonality of experience among the Chiefs and a level of trust and respect that Chief Morris values.

In terms of next goals for the department, Chief Morris responded that staying on top of technology advances is an ongoing concern. He also mentioned officer training, permanent
staffing for the medic unit, applying for a SAFER grant, recruiting a new class, “Doing all the things we need to do. It is never ending.”
CHAPTER XIII. CHIEF WILLIAMS

Background

Chief Williams served 33 years at the department where he ultimately attained the Chief fire officer position. His ascension included serving as a firefighter for three years, and then promoting to and holding the position of lieutenant for three years. He was a Captain for four years, and Battalion Chief for seven years, before promoting to Deputy Chief and, simultaneously, being appointed as Assistant Chief. He spent four years as Deputy/Assistant Chief before being appointed as interim Chief and, five months later, became Chief of the department. And finally, he served as Chief for four years before retiring.

Personal History

Chief Williams served in the Navy and later became a certified scuba diver and instructor, paramedic, and licensed electrician prior to joining the fire department at the age of 30, in the city where he was born and raised. His original goal was to be a firefighter paramedic, but his plans changed as he advanced. “Once I got into a role, I was able to look ahead and see the next step. From the Captain’s position I looked ahead, and then I looked ahead to Battalion Chief, once I became a Battalion Chief I looked ahead to the Deputy Chief. But, throughout that whole process I never looked to the Chief’s position because the Fire Chief was younger than I was, didn’t have as many years on as I did, and there was never any expectation that he would leave the job before I did.”

Significant Leadership and Developmental Experiences

Chief Williams indicated that his age and prior experiences contributed to his confidence, noting that, “I was 30 when I came on the job so I like to think I was more mature than the average 23 year old recruit. I had been a foreman on several previous jobs so I was accustomed
to being a supervisor.” He also reflected that his prior experience as dive instructor for personnel on the fire department afforded him the opportunity to move into a leadership role very early in his fire service career, “When I came on the fire department I was sort of thrust into the position to be the head of the dive team. That put me in the role of managing dive incidents when I was only a fire fighter. I had to make sure I kept them safe.” Additionally, he was exposed to dealing with the media when he would be interviewed about drownings and rescues, and dealing with the legal system, when he would serve as a witness about, for example, evidence recovery. He shared that, “It put me in front of the camera and it put me in court, I learned what it was like to be deposed, to be on the witness stand, and to run an operation before I was formally trained for those things. I was fortunate, a lot of people don’t get that opportunity.”

He reflected that operational and technical expertise is important, but that it is just the beginning, “I had several years in a line Battalion Chief position and I never had to worry about the technical side of it because I knew that job very well. You prepare for the line Battalion Chief role as you come to work every day, from firefighter on up. You see that part of the job every day. What you don’t see is what happens in administration every day. It wasn’t until I left the line function as a Battalion Chief and went into a staff function, as the Battalion Chief in charge of training, that I became much more aware of the administrative side.”

Regarding the importance of understanding the role of an administrative officer, Chief Williams offered that, “After 9/11 happened, I became the deputy/assistant Chief and was assigned to lead the newly formed office of Homeland Security. In that role and, this is key, I interacted with many agencies beyond the fire service and local government. From that experience I gained very broad exposure to and learned from, for example, business and medical professionals. I learned what it meant to be an executive. Had I not had that exposure, I would
have been less prepared to be Chief. Lacking that and the formal education piece, I could have failed.”

As stated previously, Chief Williams felt strongly about the importance of professional development and networking. He also spoke of the importance of self-assessment. “At each of those I would do a check to make sure that the things I was doing were in line with what others were doing. If I found something that I was doing or a way of thinking that didn’t sound like it was in the mainstream, I would take the opportunity to talk about it with peers and get immediate feedback.”

On the importance of networking with other Chiefs, “Some of the best experiences I had occurred at the national fire academy during resident courses. While the content was good, the time spent with different Chiefs from national and international departments was worth every second I spent out there. I always came back from those experiences energized.” When asked about the value of sharing experiences with other Chiefs and the themes of those conversations he said, “There is a commonality among the problems that you hear when you talk with other Chiefs. For example, if you asked the Chief from Houston what the biggest problems are and then Chicago, pretty soon you could transpose their names and the problems would cross over. There will be some things that are unique – but there will be a lot of commonality. In any of those conversations, you wouldn’t spend any time talking about the technical aspects, the firefighting part. It would be personnel, budget, politics, and media - the things that Chiefs deal with on the job every day.” Chief Williams reflected that he had been exposed to many examples of effective leadership, “I had a lot of good leaders to watch. The previous Fire Chief was one of the best leaders I had ever seen.”
Experiences as Chief Fire Officer

While he described the previous Chief as an excellent example of leadership, he acknowledged challenges due to a lack of succession planning. “I believe if (the previous Chief) knew four years ahead that he was going to retire, he would have managed me, as Assistant Chief, differently than he did. He would have mentored me a lot differently. I think he would have put me in very uncomfortable positions so I could handle them. That didn’t take place because we both thought he would be there until we both retired.”

When Chief Williams chose his Assistant Chief, he also immediately implemented a succession plan, stating that he had learned from his own experience. “I needed to have someone who could step in if something happened to me. If I became ill and couldn’t work anymore, if the mayor decided he didn’t want me anymore, if I got hit by a meteor, someone needed to be able to step in and do the job. So every budget meeting, every policy meeting, any negotiation, anything that I did, if he was available, he did it right alongside of me.”

Chief Williams described that without formal education he felt the need to self-educate quickly when he became Chief indicating, “I wasn’t going to be embarrassed by asking the Chief of staff or the mayor a stupid question.” He reflected that the three main areas in which he focused were labor, finance and budgeting, government, and the laws that applied to each. “In spite of the previous experiences I described, those three areas were huge surprises. Not surprises like I didn’t know they were out there, but that I didn’t know what I didn’t know until I got into the position. So I read textbooks on all of those subjects and I researched answers to the most immediate issues.” He described the impact that this had on his transition to Chief, “I know, early in my position, I would look at what was going on and think, had I been better prepared, I would have gotten through this in one hour rather than 8 hours.”
Chief Williams emphasized that strong communication skills and a comfort level with public speaking are critical in the Chief’s position, “I can’t imagine what it would be like to go into the position of Fire Chief and not be able to get in front of a crowd and talk or not be able to get in front of a camera and sound reasonably intelligent and not be able to get a point across verbally and in writing.”

In terms of the value of networking and having solid professional relationships, “I had a network of people that I identified almost immediately when I took the job, inside and outside the city. A lot of the questions I had were tied to a looming problem and I would run it past someone in my network. I asked intelligent questions of intelligent people. I was fortunate to have exposure to a lot of very intelligent people, professionals in areas other than public safety and I learned an awful lot from them.”

**Dealing with Challenges**

Chief Williams described a level of confidence in his abilities to address difficult situations. “I think, this may sound arrogant, but I felt confident at everything I did. I knew that if I had enough time I could find and the answer for anything and, if I was in a new situation where I didn’t have time to research an answer, I would make the best decision I could and take responsibility for the outcome. At times I felt ill prepared, but in my career, and in my life, I dealt with a lot of very difficult things. Taken, as a whole, I was successful at most of them. So I had developed a level of comfort in dealing with the unknown.”

When asked about the most stressful aspects of being a Fire Chief he responded, “I’m not sure I can identify one thing that caused more stress than other things. The responsibility of being in charge of a metropolitan fire department with 500 plus employees and 300,000 citizens...I think that responsibility raises your base line stress level to begin with. I think that
elevated base line, if you will, is always with you. So you might call it a chronic elevation in stress.”

On sources of more acute levels of stress, “Any time a fire fighter got hurt on the job or anytime you faced a line of duty death the stressors would go way up. Anytime a fire fighter got in trouble, serious trouble, where their career was jeopardized, that created a spike in the stress response. And some days you had one right after the other. We used to call them ‘assessment center’ days. The first thing you have to do is manage the stress so you can appropriately manage the situations you are faced with.”

He illustrated the increased responsibility and intensity in the Chief position, “It is not uncommon for people at several levels within the fire department to go home from the job sick if things don’t go well for them that day, or if they have an argument with their officer, or if they went on a particularly nasty run. The Fire Chief can’t go home because he got yelled at or criticized by the public, or the press, or the mayor. You have to be able to manage the stress so you can manage the problems.”

He further expressed the need for inner strength and self-awareness, “When you become a Chief, you have to appreciate and recognize when the job you are doing is right. You have to know, without someone telling you, that you are doing a good job. You also have to know when you are doing a bad job and change it. You don’t get to hire people or promote people every day, it is the day-to-day part that we look back on and talk about how tough and stressful. You have to know, by yourself, that the job is very rewarding.”

**Most Rewarding**

He identified the rewards of the job as being able to do positive things for others and the intrinsic reward of doing a job well. “Just knowing that people have enough confidence in your
ability to do the job. I think that comes from inside and outside the department. Anytime I could do anything that changed the life of an employee or the public in a positive way was very rewarding. That might be calling a firefighter on the phone to tell him he was going to be promoted to selecting the people who were going to be hired off the civil service test. Speaking to a group of youngsters in their classroom is very rewarding. Mentoring and succession planning is one of the things that has been rewarding for me throughout my entire career.”

**Lessons Learned/Final Thoughts**

Chief Williams reflected,

- “Let me tell you that when people are thrust into stressful situations, the more prepared they are, the less stressful the situation feels. Also, people will always revert back to what they are most comfortable doing.”
- “There is not one single thing that prepares you to become Chief. There were some things that I would have probably actively done differently if my goal throughout my career was to become Fire Chief.”
- “Never stop learning; never think that you know everything. Go to school. Put yourself in uncomfortable positions or situations out of your comfort zone and work through the problems there. If all you ever do is stay in your comfort zone you will never get elevated to that position.”
- “People need to know that they are being watched and evaluated from the time they come on the job until the time they leave the job. If you decide you are going to move up the ladder, someone is always looking at you and evaluating you professionally and personally.”
Transition to Retirement

When asked what he misses the most after retirement, “The best way to describe what I miss the most is sort of an analogy. It would be like a professional athlete who, in whatever sport he plays and excels, has a winning season, and after the last game of the season he is done. So he goes from 100 miles an hour to zero in one instant. So, in the Fire Chief’s world, you’re involved with everything that is going on in public safety, in other departments within the cities, making decisions and policy at the highest level, and then you’re done. So, in my case, I miss all of it. I miss the people that were closest to me.”
CHAPTER XIV. KEY CONCEPTS

Four significant themes emerged from this study, supported by six key concepts related to the experience of ascending to and being a metropolitan Chief Fire Officer. The four significant themes that emerged as a result of this research are the Unique Characteristics of the Chief Fire Officer Position: the Ability to Master and Demonstrate Technical, Human and Conceptual Skills: the Significance of Developmental Leadership Experiences; and the Importance of Self Awareness. These four themes frame the discussion in the next and final chapter. This chapter explores the six key concepts that the researcher believes undergird the essence of leadership experience through the interpretation and understanding of the context, culture, and setting of the participants. To allow the reader to share in the understanding of meaning of the key concepts and thematic interpretation, selected quotes are presented. The quotes presented in this chapter serve as representations illustrating the concepts and are not attributed to any specific individual.

The first three of the six concepts- Operational Training and Experience, Discovery of Leadership and Management, and Developing Leadership Skills- are primarily focused on the early career and experiences while promoting through the ranks. The remaining three themes- Responsibility and Accountability, Institutional Complexity, and Motivation and Inspiration- relate to the experiences the participants described during their tenure as the Chief of a metropolitan fire department.

The first key concept, Operational Training and Experience, captures the importance of developing competence and expertise in the technical aspects of fire and emergency services as a foundation for one’s career. The second key concept, Discovery of Leadership and Management, describes the experience of developing a global perspective and the realization that preparing for and serving in promoted positions affords one the ability to have an extensive impact on the
department. The third key concept, Developing Leadership Skills, illuminates the importance of
diligently pursuing experiences, education and professional development that contribute to
success in the position. The fourth key concept, Responsibility and Accountability, describes the
depth, scope and weight of responsibility that is inherent to the Chief position. The fifth key
concept, Institutional Complexity, illustrates the unique features of a fire department that, in
comparison to a more typical business or company, add a significant level of complexity to the
Chief position. The sixth key concept, Motivation and Inspiration, involves the deep conviction
and personal belief systems related to serving in the Chief position. This chapter begins with a
summary of the participants’ background and preparation and is organized and presented by
themes. Particular attention is drawn to themes four, five, and six, which highlight more deeply
the leadership challenges involved in the experiences of being a Fire Chief.

Key Concept One: Operational Training and Experience

All of the Chiefs reflected that their main goal early in their careers was to develop strong
technical skills in order to be safe and to gain credibility among their peers and supervisors. They
expressed that a strong operational foundation and commitment to the profession is the
cornerstone of preparation toward the Chief position.

- “Tactical ability builds respect. When I showed up on the fire ground, I wanted my
  bosses to know I was an asset, not an ass ache.”
- “Operational experience trumps education in the first part of the career.”
- “I’d always worked at very busy places and I think that lends to credibility.”
- “I worked in every station in the city.”
- “I worked in a station that took 5000 calls per year”
• “I worked on ladder and engine companies, in training, HAZMAT, and technical rescue. I took every class and opportunity I could get to learn something new.”

• “My military deployments taught me incident command under extreme circumstances.”

• “You gain legitimacy through your knowledge, skills, and abilities. If you demonstrate that on the operational side, then you are respected. During the first part of my career, I concentrated on that.”

Although all of the Chiefs described the importance of operational expertise and experience as a foundation, they also all expressed the need for broad experience and professional development if one intends to promote above the operational ranks of the fire department.

• “Don’t let your whole career be focused only on operations. Do some time and understand how it all works. The most fun is being on the big red truck and it is a great schedule but, if you want to move up, you have got to have all of the experiences.”

• “I served in every aspect of the fire service, so I knew about prevention, I knew about the logistical side. I know about support services. I know about training. I know about all aspects of the department.”

• “Sometimes I very begrudgingly left something I liked doing to learn something new, but I am very fortunate that I was able to do all those things.”

• ”The fire service has become much more cerebral. Now it is not just strong backs, the way it was described at the beginning of my career. It is still tough physically, but
now also mentally. Paramedicine, homeland security, domestic threats, pursuing federal grants. It has changed for everyone not just the Chief."

- “The Battalion Chief position is really tough. They are straddling the fence between administration and operations. We have to give them the professional development they need.”

- "Once I came up to the administrative staff, I had more interaction with the Chief himself. I answered directly to the Operations Chief. I was kind of the go between for the fire administration and line and Battalion Chiefs. It was good experience from the standpoint that I was still able to interact with the men and women I used to work with, but I was also learning how to interact with the fire and city administration.”

**Key Concept Two: Discovery of Leadership and Management**

Without exception, the Chiefs entered the fire service fully committed to, and excited about, the action-oriented aspect of the fire service. They expressed that responding to emergencies and the camaraderie and satisfaction of mitigating immediate problems was challenging and profoundly satisfying. Several recalled that they initially pursued promotions, in large part, to increase their income and provide for their families, rather than as part of a plan to promote through the ranks. However, at some point, each developed a more global perspective and the discovered the broad impact that one can have in an administrative position.

- "It was in my first administrative position that I had an 'aha moment' and became aware of all the things that had to be done to allow the fire department to perform its core mission."
• “My mentors tried to get me off the line and into administrative positions for years. I fought it and stayed on the line because I wanted my credibility. Had I known better, I would have listened to them sooner. That’s one of the things I’m trying to change, the idea that the administrative work is important and can have a lot of impact.”

• “Every officer should spend at least 2-3 years doing a staff/administrative job if they truly want to understand how a department works.”

• "It is hard for almost everybody in the department to realize, if you don’t like something, the only place that change is going to take place is in the higher levels of the organization. Great ideas come from below but change comes from the top.”

• “The big thing that hit me was that what people do on 40-hour jobs impacts everybody on the fire department. Emergency services impact a small portion. If I really wanted to have an effect on the fire service, I needed to stay in administration and follow through.”

• “You reach a point in your career where you have to decide if you are going to move up in the union or promote through the ranks. Either you want to move up the ranks or move up in the union, but you can't do both.”

• During my first administrative position, I learned that they taught me that you think you're in the fire business but you're really only in that 15 percent of the time. The rest of the time you're in the people business and if you learn to master that, you'll be successful.”

Key Concept Three: Developing Leadership Skills

As stated previously the Chiefs come from a variety of backgrounds and, although there were several common experiences, each had a unique path to the Chief position. These include prior career experience, fire service career experience, higher education, and professional
Experiences External to Fire Service

- “I coached high school football for 26 years. I learned to think strategically, pull a group of individuals together and be part of a decision-making team.”
- “My training in dealing with generals, state senators and congressmen, and all of the experiences in the Army Reserve, gave me an advantage coming into this position.”
- “I think several things helped me, but certainly my previous experience. This wasn’t my first job, I’d had another career, and I already had a more global perspective.”
- “I was 30 when I came on the job. I had been a foreman on several other jobs so I was accustomed to being a supervisor. I had a lot of life experience.
- “I had an advantage when I came into the Chief position because nobody really understood what I had done as a battalion commander in the military. So I took it, I applied it to what we have here and we changed things. That was sort of easy for me. I made some drastic changes that were subtly done. In doing that, I’ve had an opportunity to change not only the mindset of the department, but how we are viewed downtown.”

Experiences Within the Fire Service

- “Early on in this job I worked for good officers and what I learned is how to treat people: How to treat people who work for you, how to motivate people who work for you and to portray a team concept rather than an autocratic style.”
- “I’ve worked for a couple of Assistant Chiefs who were micro managers and I learned a lot from them. I learned that this is not what I want to be like because, when you operate as a Chief, you work at a strategic level. I would say I’m up at 30,000 feet and I don’t
want to get down in the weeds or hitting trees or mountains or whatever. I want to stay up here and manage and let my folks do their jobs.”

• “I had a lot of good leaders to watch. The previous Fire Chief was one of the best leaders I had ever seen.”

• “You have to get out there and bring the energy. You can’t sit with the remote control. I think it's really hard to be a really good leader without building quality relationships with people so that they speak to you. You have to show that you really have concern for them and you care about them.”

• “I engage. I never shy from speaking, I never shy from going to shake a person’s hand or have a conversation with them. But those are things I have always done. You just show people that you care about them and I didn’t read that in a book.”

• “As you come up through the ranks, everyone knows your baggage. People say, I remember when you used to do this or that and I would tell them, yeah I know, I used to crap my pants too, and I learned not to do that also. Now what else are you going to try to hang over my head?”

• “You have to be able to get along with and enjoy people; you have to be able to problem solve; you have to be able to pull a team of very different individuals together to get a job done.”

• “I had to learn to be comfortable in the role as a leader and dealing with conflict, because that is not my nature. Because I’d spent time cooking brunch at a station on a Sunday or hang around to talk, it wasn’t like every time I showed up it was to deliver bad news.”
• “I think ten years as a Deputy Chief of Administration really gives you a bird’s eye view on how the department operates. You’re interacting with all of the elected officials and other administrators in the city. That’s your job, so it prepares you.”

• “What best prepared me was a Chief who was committed to include me in just about every activity he did.”

**Higher Education**

As reported previously, two of the Chiefs reported earning Bachelor and Master degrees, four reported earning a Bachelor degree and the remaining three attended some college. While they often referenced that the preparation for the Chief position is multifaceted, there were many references to the value of education.

• “Promotion is not a birthright, it is a privilege. If you are coming to the party, you have to bring a present. That present is your education.”

• “I call it ‘the Awakening’, when people realize why education is so important.”

• “Nothing stays the same and for us to be flexible you have to be open to other ways. That is what a liberal education gives you. It teaches you to think critically.”

• “Education is not technical training. Education expands your opportunity to understand that there are other ways of doing things out there. We have to get outside our own walls so that we don’t become provincial and inbred.”

• “There are people who have risen to the highest ranks in operations, but they couldn’t put out a can of smoked fish or manage a phone booth, but they were great test takers. The exams can give you some indication, but when they are running a department, they absolutely need education. Education teaches you to think critically.”
• If you look at a budget and all you see is a bunch of letters and numbers and don’t understand them, you’re at someone else’s mercy. When you do understand the budget, you can align it organizationally.”

• “The business degree has been a great help to me in the Chief’s position, from knowing the accounting part of it to the political communications. Everything that you can learn that makes you a well-rounded person helps tremendously.”

• “I went back to college to get a Master’s Degree in Public Administration because I was doing the job and I figured it would give me some tools and training to be a professional manager. Also, it would give me the credibility. I never wanted to be in a situation where I sought a higher position and someone could say that I was not qualified.”

• “There is not one silver bullet single thing that prepares you to become Chief. There are some things I would have actively done differently if my goal throughout my career were to be Chief. For example, I would have finished my college degree because, I believe, that other professionals, whether they realize it or not, show a higher level of respect for those who are formally educated.”

**Professional Development**

The four Chiefs who attended Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, a program for senior executives in state and local government, all reflected that it was an extremely valuable and significant part of their professional development and preparation.

• “I met an exceptional group of people and learned about mindfulness, privilege, and dominance. It blew me away. Once you understand that we all, every one of us, has privilege and dominance over someone else, it allows you to become mindful of where the other party is coming from and to be mindful of their point of view and needs.”
• “It made me a better person, it made me a better manager of people.”
• “The Harvard experience was a great help in the transition. I think that professional development is really important to broaden peoples’ horizons and perspectives and be able to look beyond your own small world.”
• “There were all kinds of senior executives and state and local government and a few Fire Chiefs. I gained global reasoning instead of, I think many of us in the fire service tend to be very insular and can’t see the bigger picture.”

Of the three Chiefs who had completed the EFO program through the National Fire Academy, all reported that it was a positive and significant aspect of their professional development. All of the Chiefs reflected that attending professional development programs is important for both the intellectual growth and for building a professional network.

• “At each conference, I would do a mental check to make sure that the things I was doing were in line with what others were doing. If I found something that I was doing or a way of thinking that didn’t sound like it was in the mainstream, I would take the opportunity to talk about it with peers and get immediate feedback.”

• “Some of the best experiences I had occurred at the National Fire Academy during resident courses. While the content was good, the time spent with different Chiefs from national and international departments was worth every second I spent there.”

• “The EFO was a great opportunity for me to meet mentors and for me to mentor others. The IAFC is a great organization and the Metro Chiefs group is a great peer group.”

• “There is a commonality among the problems among the problems you hear when you talk with other Chiefs. If you had a conversation with the Chief of Houston, for example, and the Chief of Chicago, pretty soon you could transpose their names and many of the
issues would cross over. In none of those conversations would you hear any talk about
the technical, or firefighting aspect. The focus would be on personnel, budgets, politics
and the media. These are the things that we deal with every day.

- “I met other officers who had the same issues I did, but did not have my resources. They
  had to come up with new and different innovative ways to accomplish their mission. And
  it just blew me away how really smart they were. I learned an awful lot from other people
  and it made me a believer that you've got to get outside your walls and learn from other
  people.”

The following three themes relate to the experiences the participants described during
their tenure as the Chief of a metropolitan fire department.

**Key Concept Four: Responsibility and Accountability**

The transition to Chief is typically swift and intense. The minute the swearing-in
ceremony is over, the new Chief is immediately accountable for every aspect of the fire
department, for the actions of each of its members, and for the safety of the citizens. All of the
Chiefs spoke of personal adjustment and an epiphany that took place immediately, no matter
how well prepared they were.

- “I thought, oh my gosh, it is all me. There is no handbook. I don’t have a contract, I’m no
  longer protected by a collective bargaining unit. Then I thought, well, this is what you
  wanted to do! I thought of my great grandfather, who was a volunteer during the horse
drawn era and I thought he would be extraordinarily proud of me today.”

- “There is no safety net as a Chief. You are not going to get sent back to operations if you
  fail. Chiefs are at-will employees.”
• “The acute stress level is on a sliding scale. There are good days and bad days and calamity days and the stress level moves. However, the weight of the responsibility and the extent of the accountability never change. Those are constant for a Chief.”

• “I came to a completely different culture. In (previous department) I was the number two guy, so I had a lot of responsibility, but I wasn’t the Fire Chief. Being the Fire Chief, there are so many other hats that you have to wear, you are responsible for everything.”

• "It looks easy from the outside. I've served under four Chiefs in my career and it is always easy to look in and say, "what is that guy doing, why doesn't he just do that to help us out?" Until you get here and go through the dynamic between the city, the Safety Director, the Mayor..."

• “You cannot simply be autocratic when dealing with adults with different talents, goals, agendas. It is the Chief's job to blend their talents and make them work for the core mission.”

• “It is challenging to know you’re never done. It is never good enough.”

• “Once you accomplish one thing, there’s something else you need to scratch for.

• “Nothing surprised me but...There is a different weight of responsibility because, you make the final decision, and the men and women in the department, including staff, they look to you for leadership, and they watch what you do. They also look for you to see how fair you’re going to be, and do you actually have integrity when things are tough? Are you going to take a shortcut or are you going to do something because there are a lot of pressures pushing you in that direction, political and otherwise? There’s nothing like being the Chief, because good or bad, you’re responsible. I embraced that, but I also feel it during tough periods.”
• “In my 30 plus years I have known more than 40 firefighters who kissed their spouses goodbye, made promises to their children, plans for the weekend, and never came home. I cannot guarantee that you’ll go home, but I promise that we will optimize your ability to go home. My staff and I take that very seriously.”

All of the Chiefs talked about the need to hold oneself accountable and to always be cognizant of the perception of others, the potential for abuse of one’s power, and for managing one’s reputation.

• “I think if you are responsible, you must hold yourself accountable. I just lost thirty pounds and got back to running. The gist of it is that the recruits have to pass the physical agility and fitness test and they challenged me on a bet to do it.”

• I realized early on that, as the Chief, I had the power to retaliate against people in the organization. A Chief needs to be able to admit this and have the self-discipline to never be tempted to use that power.

• “We must always stay focused enough to not put ourselves in a situation that makes people disrespect us. It takes a lot of discipline.”

• It’s about being able to check your ego, but also having enough of it to have a command presence. I have a command presence, but I don’t care who gets the credit and the idea doesn’t have to come from me. My previous Chief used to say that egos eat brains.”

• “You have to be willing to make the final decisions, for the right reasons, and your decisions won’t always make everyone happy.”

• “We must prepare all officers and hold them accountable to deal with budget issues and discipline at the source.”
“People look to see how fair you are going to be and do you actually have integrity when things are tough? This applies to staff and the public.”

“People need to know that you are holding yourself and your command staff accountable. The command staff has to be credible and be able to perform.”

“It’s a dangerous business and we accept that. What I tell my officers and my fire fighters is that they get paid to do dangerous things. They do not get paid to do foolish things and there’s a vast difference.”

“You have to have credibility. Of course as soon as the fire fighters knew I was coming here, they called every Tom, Dick, and Harry they knew to find out what I ate for breakfast and what all my failings and strengths were.”

“I brought with me the same doggone philosophy that I had as a captain with six or seven people to a department that's about 2,000. It’s the same thing. If I could go to a community event, if I'm talking to a bunch of firefighters, if I'm talking to staff, if I'm talking to anybody, everybody knows what my expectations are. I always over communicate my expectations of safety and internal customer service.”

**Key Concept Five: Institutional Complexity**

In order to participate in this study, each participant needed to be, or have had been, the Chief Fire Officer at a metropolitan fire department. By definition, a metropolitan employs 400 to 2000 sworn, career members (International Association of Fire Chiefs, 2010) but may have many more civilian employees. The smallest department in this study had 500 members and the largest had 1600. The participants in this study were responsible for operating budgets that ranged from 60 million dollars to well 500 million dollars.
All of the Chiefs compared, either directly or indirectly, the fire department structure to that of a corporation and described the similarities between the position of a Chief Fire Officer and a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). A corporate CEO is the leader responsible for the overall operations of a firm. He or she serves as the link between the board of directors and the various divisions of the business and is solely responsible for the firm’s success or failure. While the board may establish corporate policy, it is the CEO's responsibility to implement the policy. Additionally, the CEO may hold a seat on the board or be the chairperson of the board (Business Dictionary, 2016).

Accordingly the Fire Chiefs noted that their positions included all of the responsibilities and roles outlined in the CEO description, but also included some additional challenges. If, for the sake of illustration, we compare the city council to the board of directors of a corporation, then the Mayor or City Manager, not the Fire Chief, would be chairperson of the board. In the context of a metropolitan fire department, the Chief Fire Officer position is on the same positional level as the Chief of Police or Director of Utilities. While similar to a CEO in that the Chief Fire Officer has all of the responsibility and accountability for his or her organization, the Fire Chief may not, at least organizationally, have the same level of influence with the city administration as would a CEO with a board of directors.

Additionally, while the metropolitan fire department may be similarly structured like a corporation or business, it is not a profit center. The Chief Fire Officer must be able to demonstrate good stewardship of the budget and responsible management to a variety of constituencies. For example, the Fire Chief must be able to demonstrate need and funding source, and be able to communicate to the city council, mayor and city manager that the department is achieving its mission and is fiscally responsible. He or she must be able
to lobby for resources, which often means competing with other city department heads, such as police and public works. In addition, the Chief Officer is accountable to state and federal agencies and to the citizens of the community.

- “We compete for resources with every other director: police, parks and recreation, the water division, you name it. We all work together, but the fact remains that the pie is only so big.”
- “We cannot operate as if we have a guaranteed funding source. Our success, our level of customer service, directly impacts how much money we have. We've taken on a business model for how we operate. This is a business called the fire department.”
- “The higher up you go, the less you have to do with (fire) tactics and strategy, but more with running a corporation. We're a 55 million dollar corporation.”
- “We have a $298 million budget here. This is a business. We are running a $300 million corporation. I don't consider myself a bean counter, my strength is on the operations side, but I've rounded myself out now so I completely understand how much it costs to run this business. You have to be able to understand it, articulate it, and defend it. You have to understand operations and business in order to know where the efficiencies are.”
- “You have to know the state laws, the collective bargaining agreement, the culture of the organization and the community.”

Further, the fire department has a legal mandate to provide service to the community, twenty-four hours a day, 365-days per year. Unlike a manufacturing company, production cannot be slowed and service cannot be arbitrarily changed or stopped. On any given day, a metropolitan fire department must be ready and able to respond to situations that include medical emergencies, residential and commercial fires, hazardous material exposures, natural disasters,
air, auto and rail crashes, infectious epidemics, and mass casualties. As many of the Chiefs mentioned, they are well aware of the inherent risk to their personnel and feel the burden of the responsibility for their safety.

On any given day, the Chief Fire Officer must know that his or her administrative and operations personnel are prepared in the above-mentioned situations so that he or she can lead the department. All of the Chiefs talked about the enormous variety of situations that they handle in a day from meetings with command staff and city government, strategic planning, contract negotiations, community events, disciplinary hearings, mentoring staff public relations, and high level planning with other city, state and federal agencies.

- “You have to be able to transition. If you bring the remnants of one meeting into the next, you're not going to be very effective. I don’t care if that meeting was about negotiations, if you’re going to be talking to your medical director about something else in that next meeting, you can't have the thoughts about negotiations in your head. There are days when I will try to retrace my steps on what I did. Sometimes the variety of subject matter that you engage in during one day is beyond belief.”

- “As a Fire Chief, you are always exposed to the push and pull from all sides. For example, the fire fighters may want a new truck and wonder why I don’t just buy it. They have fast personalities and are used to making fast decisions. Sometimes they don’t see it from the Chief’s perspective. I have to find that half million dollars for that one truck, and balance all of the other competing priorities.”

Finally, the very structure of the department, with employees living and working together on 24-hour shifts, adds a distinct level of complexity to the organization.
• “As you gain perspective, you really come to think about the fire department as a real reflection of our society. It isn’t exempt from any societal issues or problems. Whether they are marriage issues or domestic violence issues or drug issues or financial issues, I mean you name it, it is part of the society. And add to that, we all live together 24 hours at a time.”

• “If you’re not careful with communication, they (each shift or station) can all think and operate like individual operations within themselves and forget they are part of something bigger.”

• “You have to understand the culture of the city and the department. If you don’t understand it, you will be travelling in a foreign land.”

**Politics and Labor**

Many definitions of politics include references to power and influence specifically related to government. For example, Merriam-Webster's simple definition includes activities that relate to influencing the actions and policies of a government or getting and keeping power in a government (Merriam-Webster, 2016). However, included in their more detailed definition is reference to the total complex of relations between people living in society (Merriam-Webster, 2016). In 1936, Political Scientist Harold Lasswell posited that politics should be defined as who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936). Without exception the Chiefs expressed the importance of understanding the role that politics play, and having the skills and ability to effectively work in a political environment at all levels of the organization.

• “You can’t ignore politics, it is all about politics.”
• “If you can’t, or don’t want to, deal with the politics, then you are not going to last very long. The only way you are going to be good at the game is to learn the game and participate.”

• “The biggest challenge is to learn the politics of the city and department. It is different for each and every one. I think the biggest challenge for someone going from second in command to the one being in command is dealing with the politics, not just the politics of elected officials, but trying to find a balance between a labor organization, your operations executive and the elected officials.”

• “It’s visceral, the politics. I feel like a Spartan for surviving. You have to rise above it, even when it gets personal.”

• “The day I was appointed to a management position, I withdrew from the union because you can’t serve two masters. But, just because you don’t belong to something, doesn’t mean you are against it. I never forgot that I was able to get my teeth fixed as a kid because some union guy fought for benefits for my dad. On the other hand, labor talks about enlightened management. What they sometimes fail to realize is that if you really want to get somewhere, you have to have enlightened labor.”

• We have a formalized labor management process. We meet monthly with the union and have prepared agendas. If you only communicate when a grievance is filed, you are operating at a deficit. We don’t always agree, but there is a process for that and it is civil and respectful. We had fluid communication during our budget crisis. I don’t think we could have made it without working closely with the union.”
Key Concept Six: Motivation, Inspiration, and Reflection

Regardless of all of the challenges and complexities and personal sacrifices that can be part of being a Fire Chief, all of the Chiefs talked about the personal and professional satisfaction that they experienced. One Chief referred to the position as more of a calling than a job or career. All talked about deep and profound satisfaction that resulted from being able to help others and a sense of gratitude that they were in this position.

• “I've learned many of the burdens of this job. There are times you wonder, why would you suggest doing this to anyone you cared for? Life could be much simpler…one level down, or two levels down and you could still be very productive and still contribute a lot. I get torn at times because I’ve lived many of the burdens of this job. In the end, the fire service is bigger than us. It deserves your best shot. It deserves your best people.”

• “The job’s been great to me. It is my turn to give back.”

• “I'm proud to be doing this because sometimes people want to do things or they dream about doing something and they don't get a chance to do it. And I’ve had a chance to do it for a long time. I couldn’t be happier with the career that I've been blessed with and I never take it for granted because somebody else could be sitting here and I might not have ever gotten a chance to really do what I want to do.”

• “I’ve learned, and I don’t mean for this to sound arrogant, my expectation of others is not as high as I hold for myself. If anything has changed for me, it’s that I have probably been more tolerant of people not meeting my expectations. I used to be one that, if you didn’t do it this way, then you are a slug and I didn’t have a lot of respect for you. But I’ve learned not everyone is going to be 50 years old and up at 3:00 am thinking about
how to fix this issue or that problem. I don’t hold them to my standard. People work at different pace. If anything, it has made me a little bit softer.”

• “I’m very conventional, I have read all the leadership books from Colin Powell to Jack Welch. I am also very unconventional. I’ll tell you I love you and respect you. I teach this at our officer development program. It is okay to be an unconventional leader, but no book teaches you that.”

• “Other than my wife and kids, the best thing that ever happened to me was becoming a firefighter and the top firefighter on this department.”

• “It has been an interesting career for me. To be in this position. To be able to make some changes, I hope for the positive. It is rewarding to be able to open doors for women and minorities and deal with some of the issues we dealt with in the past.”

• "Even with all of the things that we go through in management, you know, working with politicians and working through difficult budgets. It’s all about that truck rolling down the street. When the citizens call, we show up very quickly. We’re well equipped, well trained. Our SOPs are tight, and we do a good job. So the most exciting part is being a part of a system that really makes a difference.”

This chapter describes the key concepts that emerged from the qualitative interviews with nine Chief Fire Officers of metropolitan departments. While each Chief’s experience and perspective was unique, several collective commonalities were revealed during the telling of their individual experiences. The rich diversity of their experiences and perspectives is vital to the ultimate goal of providing a rich and meaningful description of the phenomenological experience of preparing for and being a Chief Fire Officer. A more detailed discussion of the
four significant themes in relation to implications for leadership, practice and future research is presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER XV. EMERGENT THEMES AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore, through the first hand experiences of metropolitan Chief Fire Officers, the scope, complexity, and challenges of the ascension to an experiences in this position. The goal was twofold: (1) to contribute to the academic body of knowledge related to fire administration; (2) inform policy and practice related to preparation, professional development, education, recruitment, retention, and succession planning for the Chief Fire Officer Position. The guiding questions were designed to gain a more thorough understanding of the nature of the position and developmental leadership experiences that the Chiefs described as exemplary, appropriate, and effective.

Four major themes surrounding the experiences of metropolitan Fire Chiefs were identified as a result of this research: The Unique Characteristics of the Position, The Ability to Master and Demonstrate Technical, Human and Conceptual Skills, Significant Developmental Leadership Experiences, and The Importance of Self Awareness. The following section will discuss these themes and implications for practice with support from the literature review.

**The Unique Characteristics of the Chief Fire Officer Position**

The first theme that emerged from the condensation and analysis of data interviews and was the institutional complexity of the metropolitan fire department. This is especially significant because the literature review identified a need for additional research studies that focus on understanding the experiences of individuals who are promoted beyond the operational ranks of the fire department and into high-level administrative positions (Kramer, 1995; Coleman, 2003; Fleming, 2010; Fleming & Zhu, 2009).

The Chief Fire Officer has all of the responsibility and accountability for the fire department as a CEO does for a corporation, but has the additional responsibility of answering to
multiple constituencies. However as leaders of a 24-hour, 365 day per year, legally mandated public service, the role does not appear to carry similar status to that of other Chief Executive Officers. As the literature illustrated metropolitan fire service leadership is as complex as any organization and the lack of top-level training suggests that it may not be perceived as multi-tiered and intricate as other similar institutions. However, as corroborated by the participants, a metropolitan Fire Chief must be an accomplished technical expert who can transition into a position that requires, at a minimum, knowledge of budgets, finance, law, policy, public relations, disaster management, and strategic planning. More specifically, a successful Chief must be able to think globally and understand the impact of each decision on the rest of the department.

The elevation of the status of the Chief Fire Officer has many implications, not the least of which is solidly placing the Chief in the position to play an integral role in the development of public policy governing the improvement of structural processes commensurate with their accountability and responsibility for public safety. This has historically presented a challenge because, even Chief Fire Officers possessing a strong understanding of the robust nature of public policy development, are challenged by what Wodicka (2013) characterized as punctuated equilibrium. Dr. Reid Wodicka, public policy expert and eleven-year fire service veteran, asserted a theoretical perspective that public policy shaped by fire service and other related agencies is “characterized by punctuations of significant change brought about by crisis” (para. 7). In the current crisis driven national climate this symptomatically reactionary perspective further illustrates the need to ensure the fire service garners a significant role in not just the reaction, but the development of policies for crisis prevention as well. Moreover, Wodicka asserted that the effort to restore equilibrium in times of crisis requires that “fire service leaders
must have a clear understanding of the expectations of the system and the skills necessary to identify problems with implementing existing policy.” (para. 10).

**The Ability to Master and Demonstrate Technical, Human and Conceptual Skills**

The Chiefs and the literature (Argyris, 1985; Katz, 1995) suggest that distinct skills are necessary at all stages, but the intensity of the need for specific skills changes throughout one’s career. According to Katz (1995), technical skills are the understanding of and proficiency in a specific kind of activity, particularly one involving methods, processes, procedures or techniques. The technical skills required for a firefighter are well documented by federal agencies such as the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) and the United States Fire Administration (USFA). Additionally, individual state agencies, such as offices of the Fire Marshal and Public Safety, create curriculum and are granted legal authority to oversee the content and delivery of firefighter training.

As is supported by literature (Beaton, Murphy, Johnson, Pike, & Corneil, 1999; Bacharach, Bamberger, & Doveh, 2008; Superko, 2009; Kimbrel et al., 2011) and the Chiefs, the early part of one’s career in the fire service is spent developing technical and human skills to respond to emergencies, be a functional and valuable part of a group, and to interact with the public. Even at this stage an individual’s reputation is building. Their level of energy, commitment to training, competency, dependability, and human interaction skills are all noticed by the other members of the department. While this is likely true in most organizations, the need to develop and demonstrate strong human skills is intensified by the fact that crew members in the fire service essentially live together 24 or 48 hours at a time.

At the first levels of promotion, lieutenant and captain, the primary need for technical and human skills remains very immediate. For example, a lieutenant will typically supervise a single
shift of 6-8 people, live with them on 24-hour shifts and bear the responsibility for the training and safety of that single group. A Captain, in the other hand, would typically be responsible for all three shifts in a single station house. While still in close contact with their subordinates, the Captain cannot physically be present 24 hours a day, every day. Therefore at this and higher promoted levels, the Captain must rely on another, in this case the Lieutenant, to communicate with the front line staff. At these levels technical and human skills are still the primary focus and can be demonstrated by modeling of technical and human skills for others to see, which, in turn, builds credibility.

To add to the complexity, Argyris (1985) posited that the very structure of many organizations creates a gap between operations and administration. As stated previously, the organizational structure that Argyris described are not only present, but in the case of structure, following orders, and structure on the fire ground, they are necessary. The transition from structure, order and followership at the operational levels to higher independence, self-awareness and a more global perspective at the higher administrative levels speak to the need for education and professional development.

Many of the Chiefs described the Battalion Chief position as a pivotal turning point in their careers. This position typically places a person in charge of several station houses within the department, and also denotes a greater shift toward administration. In all cases, according to the Chiefs, the position is the bridge between operations and administration and where the shift to adaptive and conceptual skills is essential. Conceptual skills are defined as:

The ability to see the enterprise as a whole; it includes recognizing how the various functions of the organization depend on one another, and how any changes in any part affect all the others; and it extends to visualizing the relationship of the individual
business to the industry, the community, and the political, social, and economic forces of the nation as a whole. (Katz, 1995, pp. 35-36)

As an individual is exposed to different divisions within the fire department, such as special operations, inspections, and internal affairs, their perspective must become more global. Similarly, the way in which he or she communicates and interacts with others must change. For example, on an active scene such as a fire, there is little or no room for debate when orders are given. However, as a person moves into higher administrative positions, it is imperative that they be able to effectively communicate long-term goals and broad concepts to larger and more diverse audiences. Chief Craith illustrated this necessary shift in style noting, “You simply cannot be autocratic when dealing with adults with different talents, goals and agendas. It is the Chief’s job to blend their talents and make them work for the core mission.”

Perhaps an additional complexity of the fire service and preparation for the position of Chief Fire Officer is that an individual must first develop a high level of technical proficiency in operational firefighting and emergency medicine, develop human and conceptual skills and develop an entirely new set of technical skills that was not required in previous positions. The interviews with these Chiefs illustrated an extraordinary array required skills and knowledge in, for example, finance, accounting, budgeting, labor law, public law, and public relations. The successful Chief Fire Officer must be able to model skills in these and many additional subjects and demonstrate a full grasp of the internal and external interaction of the entire department and the broader community. Thus, the Chief needs to build an entirely new level of legitimacy in technical, human, and adaptive skills.

Fortunately, according to Katz (1995), technical, human, and conceptual skills can be learned and developed, and are not bestowed upon a chosen few at birth. At each level of the
organization the impact of effective technical, human or conceptual skills varies, but at all times the individual must be aware of their strengths and deficiencies. While this concept is further discussed as it specifically relates to the Chief Officer position, it is imperative for individuals to recognize the need to build one’s competency, credibility, and legitimacy throughout one’s entire career.

**Significant Developmental Leadership Experiences**

As supported by the literature (Kramer, 1995; Coleman, 2003; Onieal, 2004; United States Fire Administration, 2016) it was not a surprise to find that the road to the Chief position varied greatly among the participants. In fact, the variety of experiences is a common denominator. All of these Chiefs seized opportunities to learn about different divisions within their department, purposely sought mentors, attended professional develop programs and pursued higher education at the undergraduate or graduate level. As previously noted, many brought with them experience, maturity, and skills developed through a separate profession. For example, one had been a teacher and coach, another an electrician, and one had an extensive military career in the Army Reserves. Regardless of their specific prior experience, all clearly articulated the significance of being able to take the knowledge, skills, and abilities developed in one situation and transfer them to another.

The concept of the value of recognizing the need for and developing specific skills, as well as exposure to many experiences is supported by Katz (1955) who suggested that, rather than looking for an executive with ideal traits or a perfect executive ‘type’, it is more effective to focus on what a person can accomplish and what skills they possess. “One has only to look at the successful managers in any company to see how enormously their particular qualities vary from any ideal list of executive virtues” (p. 33).
As stated above, the development of technical skills is the focus in the early career and critical to building one’s credibility. All of the Chiefs talked about their drive to become technical experts in the operational aspects of the fire department and the absolute necessity to demonstrate and model these skills during ascension toward the Chief position. They also all reflected on the value of working in multiple station houses in their departments and accepting challenging assignments that no one else wanted to develop their ability to perform effectively in a variety of situations (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2007).

Further supported by literature (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2007; Katz, 1995), the Chiefs’ willingness to take risks and learn about different divisions of the department appeared to be a key factor in their development of situational leadership strength. As they recalled moving from operations to, for example, prevention, inspections, communication, special operations, internal affairs and other administrative positions, they spoke of developing an understanding of the complexity of the entire department and how each component impacts the other.

**The Importance of Self-Awareness**

It is clearly important to develop and demonstrate strong human skills throughout one’s career and at all levels. However, all of the Chiefs reflected that when occupying the most senior administrative position in the fire service, it is critical to be aware of the associated demands and to be honest and self-aware of their skills and aptitude. In support, Katz (1995) identified a person with highly developed human skill as “one who is aware of his own attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs about other individuals and groups; he is able to see the usefulness and limitations of those feelings” (p. 34). The need for self-knowledge and self-awareness, particularly at this high level of leadership, is critical.
Several Chiefs spoke of the need to recognize the power and privilege that comes with the position and the ethical mandate to not abuse that power. As Chief Craith said, “Once you understand that we all, every one of us, have privilege and dominance over someone else, it allows you to become mindful of where the other party is coming from and to be mindful of their point of view and needs.” This concept was also supported by Chief Daniels who reflected, “I realized early on that, as a Chief, I had the power to retaliate against people in the organization. A Chief needs to be able to admit this and have the self-discipline to never be tempted to use that power.”

In addition to developing self-awareness, the Chiefs individually and collectively identified several key points for consideration in preparation for the inter-relational skills required for this position.

- Do I enjoy being a public figure?
- Do I have the energy and stamina to be ‘on’ everyday?
- Do I genuinely enjoy being around people?
- Do I enjoy public speaking?
- Am I an effective communicator?
- Am I willing to be fully accountable for the actions of others?
- Do I have the temperament to effectively deal with conflict?
- Do I have the fortitude to deal with (sometimes very public) criticism?
- Am I prepared to stand alone in defense of difficult decisions?
- Do I have a stellar personal and professional reputation?
- Am I able to recognize what I don’t know and seek appropriate counsel?
- Do I have a support network (friends, family, partner, colleagues) in place?
Neither the Chiefs, nor literature, nor this researcher would suggest that the above list is all-inclusive or that strengths or deficits in any one area could predict success or failure. However, the combination of the experiences of these Chiefs, the skills they identified as being important, and means of preparation may be of value to those seeking this position as well as those who seek to prepare the next generation of leaders in the fire service.

**Implications for Leadership and Practice**

The concept of the importance of credibility is woven throughout every interview, key concept, and emergent theme in this study. This was not necessarily a surprise, since the need for credibility in leadership is well documented (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, 2010; Katz, 1955), however, this study provided a deeper perspective on the significance of credibility. The findings reflected that the structure and culture of the fire service demands the demonstration of competence at all operational levels during the ascension to a higher positions of leadership.

The fire service, as a vital societal organization, must continually develop and evolve as a profession to effectively meet the needs of a dynamic society. Many authors and researchers (Fleming, 2010; Fleming & Zhu, 2009; Coleman, 2003; Onieal, 2004; Rivenbark & McCall, 2000) have written about the need for a better understanding of the internal and external roles of the Chief and the vastly different knowledge and skills required for operations versus administration. Whereas promotion in the fire service in the past may have been largely based on seniority, the modern fire service demands more. According to Kouzes and Posner (2010):

> Leadership is not a birthright. It’s not about position or title. It’s not about power or authority. It’s not about celebrity or wealth. It’s not about being a CEO or president, general, or prime minister. It’s not about being a superstar. And it’s most assuredly not about some charismatic gift (p. 7).
Based on decades of research in the field of leadership, Kouzes and Posner (2010) concluded that while the content of leadership has not drastically changed, the context continuously changes. This is certainly true in the fire service as evidenced by the changes in homeland security that resulted after the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and, during the time that this study was conducted, the onslaught of opiate addiction and overdose in rural and urban areas across the country has added significant strain to budgets and drastically increasing the numbers of emergency medical responses that are called for in any given 24-hour period. Although the context changes, the need for competence and credibility in leadership does not.

**Competence Equals Credibility**

While the long-standing debate about the relative importance of technical training versus formal education among members of the fire service is still alive and well, the results of this study are clear in that to earn internal credibility a Chief must have demonstrated prior mastery of and competence in the context of the technical/operational and human aspects of the fire service. However, in order to also gain external credibility, he or she must be able to demonstrate competence within the context of all of the components involved in reaching the highest leadership position in a fire department, as described in the key concepts and emergent themes.

The results of this study show that quality preparation that leads to competence may emanate from a variety of sources and as a result of a variety of career paths. The Chiefs described gaining significant professional development from a variety of experiences in prior professions, in the military, and within the fire service. Similarly, the Chiefs described a broad spectrum of educational preparation, from degree earned to discipline studied. There are many paths of preparation and development that lead to the Chief Fire Officer position. However, one
point is clear, competence demonstrated in all of the many contexts that exist in the fire service, leads to credibility.

**Conceptual Framework: Competence in Context**

This study relied, rather than on anecdotes, on empirical data about the operational, educational, personal and professional demands on individuals who aspire to this position. The resulting data do not provide a simple answer to the complex question about the experiences of the metropolitan Fire Chief, nor does it provide a step-by-step check off list for individuals who aspire to prepare for the top leadership position. However, the combined experiences of the Chiefs in this study and the resulting data provide a conceptual framework for developing Competence in Context (CiC) throughout the organization and throughout an individual’s career. The term ‘competence’ is purposefully used instead of ‘competency’ because competence describes a mastery of skills and concepts that apply to a broad range of situations, whereas competency is more typically associated with the ability to perform a skill for a specific task (Infed, 2016). Further, the results of this study in no way reduce the position of Fire Chief to a series of tasks, but instead reveal the multi layered and nuanced complexity of the position. The context of the position includes such items as rank, operations, administration, external versus internal roles, and emergency versus non-emergency situations.

The four pillars of the Competence in Context framework represent significant structural components and experiences that emerged as significant in the Chiefs’ collective experiences. The details within each are drawn from the Key Concepts and Emergent Themes in the previous two chapters. The pillars are not weighted relative to any subjective level of importance. In fact, the prominence of each may, and likely will, shift throughout an individual’s career. Moreover, there is no implied rigid linear progression beyond the initial recruit fire training. In fact, when
context changes, the need for additional competence will also change. For example, a Chief may find him or herself in need of operational training relative to upper administration. The Competence in Context framework represents a broad overview of the major salient components of the fire service that impact everyone who serves, but particularly impact those who aspire to top leadership positions.

**Pillar One: Operational Experience**

As a fire fighter, the individual must demonstrate competence first in the required technical skills and also prove that they are someone on which others can depend. The technical and human skills pave the way to the first level of credibility. The individual, even in the early stages of career, should understand his or her role in supporting the mission of the fire department, even if not wholly aware of its complexity.

Throughout a person’s career their willingness to move beyond basic skills and to strive for specialized expertise in aspects such as technical rescue, inspection, and emergency medicine also indicate a level of commitment and passion. With additional experience and, perhaps, first level promotion, the individual must also be able to analyze a myriad of emergent and non-emergent situations related to crew and resource management, and safety of self, crew, other department members, and the citizens of the community. Since there are operational components at every rank and position, the person who strives for continuous improvement and growth may revisit this pillar many times. For example, implementing a new communication system, changes in emergency medicine or emergency management protocol, and responding to previously unknown threats all have operational components that require a level of competence by all personnel, regardless of rank, position, or tenure.
Pillar Two: Leadership and Global Perspective

Without exception the Chiefs discussed their love of operations, their commitment to their own technical expertise, their reluctance to leave operations, and the necessity of eventually doing so in order to gain new knowledge, experiences, and perspective. Several Chiefs reflected on an ‘aha’ moment or an ‘awakening’ as they gained perspective on the scope and complexity and interdependence of all of the divisions within a department. The development of the ability to display competence in the individual divisions of the department and also see the entire department as a whole and part of the larger community is essential.

Pillar Three: Institutional Complexity

Based on the data, I believe that the most salient information shared by the Chiefs was related to the sheer complexity of their positions and of their departments. Indeed, the collective experiences of the Chiefs and the resulting Emergent Themes and Key Concepts revealed the true complexity of this profession, which operates a 24/7, 365 day per year operation and is responsible for the safety of its members and its citizens.

Clearly Chief Fire Officers must be able to demonstrate competence in a myriad of roles in many different contexts. As described by the Chiefs, on any given day they may, for example, be involved in lobbying for resources, contract and labor negotiations, public relations, personnel promotion and/or discipline, and/or responding to inquiries from citizens, all while remaining vigilant to and prepared for the possibility of large scale disasters, epidemics, and other threats to the community.

For individuals who aspire to achieve the level of Chief Officer, this study provides critically important research-based information on the content and complexity of a metropolitan fire department and its top leadership position and the crucial areas of competence.
profession as a whole, the data reveal a level of complexity that should be strategically used to elevate the status of the Chief position and to prepare future officers for the transition to the milestones of Lieutenant, Battalion Chief, and initial assignments to administrative positions, as identified by the Chiefs.

**Pillar Four: Answering the Call**

Several of the Chiefs referred to this position as a ‘calling’. This term was sometimes used to describe the honor and privilege of being a Chief. At other times, and often in the same conversation, it relayed a feeling that this can be such a difficult and demanding profession that one has to have a strong sense of passion and commitment in order to maintain strength, stamina, and effectiveness. In addition to all of the preparation, education, and professional development, in the context of the mental, emotional, and physical demands of the position, the following were identified by the Chiefs as crucial:

- Radical self-awareness: Knowing one’s strengths and weaknesses, temperament, energy level, ego, core beliefs and attitudes, faith, privilege and power, and sense of self.
- Personal accountability: Managing one’s own behavior and mentoring those in command staff positions.
- Willingness to seek council when needed.
- Deep and abiding respect for fellow human beings.
- Motivation, energy (sometimes called charisma) and a genuine interest in others.
- Generosity of self: A desire to lead, mentor, and provide opportunities for the success and advancement of others.
- Support system: Friends, family, peers, and professional groups.
- Recognition that family and significant others are also impacted.
• Inner strength: The ability to separate criticism from self and respond appropriately to conflict.

As Creswell (2013) emphasized, “The validity of the conclusions of a case study depend on their internal generalizability to the case as a whole” (p. 137) and may not be externally generalizable in the same sense as is quantitative research. However, the findings of this study provide significant insight into the unique and shared experiences of the members of this group. This in-depth inquiry provides valuable research-based information on the realities of, and relevant and valuable preparation for, the metropolitan Chief Fire Officer position. The culmination of this research leads to several recommendations for practice that, if undertaken at local, state, and national levels would provide clarity at the individual and organizational levels.

Recommendations for Practice

A Call for Collaboration

In 2013, the USFA (2013) website stated that no single national system of fire and emergency services existed and, at that time, there were 50 state systems and varying degrees of cooperation and coordination between training, certification, and higher education. Since 2013, some progress in the development of nationally recognized professional development has been made, as evidenced by the creation of the Managing Officer Development Program (United States Fire Administration, 2015) and the Fire Service Executive Fire Service Institute (IAFC, 2016). Additionally, great strides have been made by institutions of higher education in the recognition that such things as high quality professional development, certifications and military experience can translate into academic credit. However, there is still much opportunity for improved collaboration and clarity. Many states still do not recognize other state’s fire certifications and require recertification for employment. The integration of portability and
transferability between appropriate higher education, professional development, and certification would greatly assist in providing a clear, flexible, and efficient path for students and aspiring officers.

Specifically related to higher education, the fire service as a profession must demand high quality, relevant curriculum, both undergraduate and graduate, to support the development of the knowledge, skills and abilities of graduates who pursue a career in the fire service. As supported by the literature and by the data from this study, fire science and fire administration are not the same discipline and should not be treated as such. While fire science represents the operational foundation of a person’s knowledge and skills, simply adding, for example, a management class to the curriculum does not transform a fire science degree into a fire administration degree. Curriculum to prepare upper level officers and Chiefs should be based on the demands and challenges and actual components of the position, as evidenced by this study. However, this is in no means suggests that only degrees in fire science or fire administration are relevant. Many of the Chiefs in this study demonstrated that higher education and professional development, whether related to fire, business, public administration, law, or science were significant developmental leadership experiences.

**Elevation of Status**

The creation of strategic marketing campaigns, deployed in a positive and noninvasive manner, will elevate the executive level role of the Chief for the constituencies internal and external to the fire service. Consistent and informative community communication on the role and activities of the Chief Fire Officer and the various departments is an initial step in building a solid and recognized understanding of their pivotal role in not only public safety, but as proactive policy shapers.
Finally, again related to higher education, the data garnered from the study acknowledges the fire service as an emerging discipline with current concrete contributions to the academy, and every expectation for more in the future. While the study and application of leadership theory to the fire service is not currently commonplace, the findings in this inquiry may provide opportunities for dialogue relative to the recruitment, preparation, retention, and succession planning. The Competence in Context framework recognizes and honors the history and heroic culture of the fire service. Yet, in this framework, sentimentality does not obfuscate the complexity, magnitude, intensity and significance of the profession.

**Direction for Future Research**

Throughout the process of conducting this study, several topics emerged that could make valuable contributions for future research.

- Use the themes identified in this study to create a quantitative tool to distribute to the entire population of metropolitan Fire Chiefs to determine if these themes are consistent for a larger sample size.

- Replicate this study with a different demographic of Chief Fire Officers, such as paid, volunteer or combination departments of up to 400 employees, Chiefs of departments with more than 2000 employees, female Chiefs, and/or Chiefs of a specific ethnic group.

- Study the relationship between and impact of the Chief Fire Officer versus the Union President on the leadership of the fire department.

- Conduct case study of best practices in officer development, public relations, and other key concepts identified by Chiefs.
Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study, and all phenomenological/qualitative studies, which must be addressed. First, while the sample size of nine was sufficient for the study of the perceptions and experiences of these individuals, one cannot definitively say that these experiences are typical or make generalizations about all Fire Chiefs, or even all metropolitan Fire Chiefs.

Second, while care was taken to include as much diversity as possible, eight of the participants were male and only one was female. This ratio is not necessarily surprising given that, of the 71 metropolitan fire departments that met the size and structure requirements for this study, only five were led by female Chiefs.

Third, the participants of this study were all either known or recommended to this researcher as highly functioning Chiefs of metropolitan departments and were willing to devote time to this study. While all were engaged and open, it was impossible to gauge each individual’s level of willingness and ability to discuss personal and professional experiences. Additionally, my familiarity with some Chiefs may have altered the levels of rapport. Finally, the phenomenological design and the use of interviews in this study resulted in a tome of extensive data that were condensed through the work of this researcher. While member checking and external validation were conscientiously engaged, it would be impossible and irresponsible to guarantee the pure bracketing of the researcher’s bias and perspective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comprehensive literature review, qualitative interviews, and detailed data analysis provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of metropolitan Fire Chiefs. This study focused on significant leadership development experiences of nine
metropolitan Fire Chiefs during ascension to and within the Chief Fire Officer position. The specific purpose of this study was to contribute to the academic body of knowledge related to fire administration and to inform policy and practice related to preparation, professional development, education, experience, recruitment, retention, and succession planning for the Chief Fire Officer position. Through the process of identifying and explaining the major emergent themes, it is my sincere hope that I have validated the experiences within and complexity of the metropolitan Chief Fire Officer position and accurately represented the Chiefs who so graciously participated in this research.
REFERENCES


Christiansen, J. L. (2000). *Is there a relationship between the fire chief's professional image with the city manager and the acceptance of a fire department's strategic plan or annual budget requests?* (Executive fire officer research project). National Fire Academy
Executive Fire Officer Program, Emmitsburg.


Fire Museum Network (2011). *Firefighter heroism quotes from history*. Retrieved April 13,


Herald, R. (2001). *Job satisfaction in the fire service: Thoughts on preparing tomorrow's leaders* (Executive fire officer research project). National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer
Program, Emmitsburg.


International Association of Women in Fire & Emergency Services (2011). *History of women in


Perrysburg: RTG Publishing.


http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fire%20service


Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education*


Yoder, J. D., & Berendsen, L. L. (2001). "Outsider within" the firehouse: African American and


APPENDIX A. CONSENT FORM

School of Educational Foundations, Leadership & Policy

Dear <Title><Last Name>,

Thank you for considering participation in my dissertation research on the professional experiences of metropolitan chief fire officers. As you know, I am pursuing my doctorate in Leadership Studies and the working title of my dissertation is: An examination of the ascension to and experiences in the metropolitan chief fire officer position: Implications for leadership, policy and practice. To ensure clarity, I have outlined the details of the study below.

The purpose of this study is to examine the professional experiences of metropolitan chief fire officers of departments with 400-2000 uniformed personnel. The first goal is to contribute to the limited academic body of literature related to fire administration. The second goal is to inform policy and practice related to preparation, professional development, education, retention and succession planning for chief officers. As a leader in the fire service, your participation will benefit current and future chief officers by providing a better understanding of your role and experiences. While there are no expected benefits to you personally, I hope you will gain insight and satisfaction through reflecting and contributing to a study that can be used to contribute to a better understanding of your profession and help
prepare future leaders prepare for the transition to the chief officer position. The risks of this study are no greater than in everyday life.

As this endeavor involves complex and thoughtful discourse, the study is structured around two interviews (60-90 minutes each), ideally face-to-face and audio recorded. The first interview will focus on your life history as it relates to your career path to your first chief officer position. The second will focus on your experiences in the chief officer position. Following the interviews, I will provide and individual summary and a collective profile of the experiences of all participants for your review. My final dissertation will examine individual profiles and the overall experiences of the metropolitan fire chief.

I am very respectful of the time commitment, particularly due to the demands you already have on your time. I hope that you will find it time well spent, but please know that your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time and/or decline to discuss specific topics. While there is the possibility that someone reading the final dissertation could infer your participation, the focus of the interviews will be on your professional experiences and your name and the name of your department will be changed in your individual profile and in the collective profile that will be part of my final dissertation. Additionally, you will have the opportunity to review the interview summary for accuracy and authenticity.

Given the status of your position, I am keenly aware of the need for confidentiality and security of your information. At no time will the content of transcripts or any audio recordings be shared. Ideally we will meet in person at a location most convenient for you. However, due to distance and time, we may need to use the telephone or Skype. I assure you that interviews via phone or Skype will be conducted from my private office. Any electronic
versions of recordings or transcripts will be password protected and any physical printouts will be held in a locked and secure file cabinet in my office. The recordings and transcripts will be maintained for five years after my final dissertation is approved, at which time they will be destroyed.

My dissertation advisor is Dr. Judith Jackson May and she can be reached at judyjac@bgsu.edu or office phone (419-372-7373). I can be reached by email at abetts@bgsu.edu, office phone (419-372-7895) or cell phone (419-308-2367). Additionally, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can also contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716) or email hsrb@bgsu.edu. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ann Light

Bowling Green State University

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all of my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

________________________________________
Participant Signature

________________________________________
Printed Name

________________________________________
Date

550 Education Phone: 419-372-7377
Bowling Green, OH 43403-0250 Fax: 419-372-844
APPENDIX B. SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview 1

Focus on Career Path

- Was it your goal to become a Fire Chief? If not, did you have a different goal?
- What were your professional experiences prior to becoming Chief?
- At what point did you know you were moving toward the Chief position? Were you actively preparing? Were you mentored?
- What were some of the most memorable experiences during your career?
- How did those experiences influence your decision to become a Chief?
- How did you prepare personally and professionally for the Chief Officer position?

Interview 2

Details of the Experience and Reflection

- Can you describe your first day as the Chief?
- What was the most challenging part of the transition?
- How has your preparation impacted your experience as a Chief? What best prepared you for the Chief position?
- Were there things about becoming the Chief that surprised you, even with your prior experience?
- How would you describe the experience of being a Chief Fire Officer?
- What do you find most challenging?
- What do you find most rewarding?
- How do you manage stress?
- Who do you confide in/seek feedback from? Do you have a mentor? Peer group?
- What advice would you give others who want to pursue this career?
- What have you learned?