

LIVING WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

SUPERVISORS ARE PEOPLE TOO... OR LEARNING TO LOVE YOUR BOSS

You can't please everyone. Those of you who have been following my articles in recent issues of this journal, recall that I have had quite a lot to say about how stress affects law enforcement officers. I have tried to write these articles from the point of view of the line officer, the one in the street answering calls, chasing suspects, etc. Recently, I heard from some other officers, those who supervise and administrate agencies. Since every agency has fewer supervisors than it does "rank and file", this facet of law enforcement stress is often glossed over, and sometimes even ignored.

We all know that supervisors and administrators in law enforcement agencies are often just as stressed out as the rank and file. Even though they may have eight to five daytime hours and/or have more latitude in determining their day to day activities, very few supervisors and administrators report that their jobs are "a piece of cake". They lose sleep, fight with their spouses, get tension headaches and think about career changes just like the rest of us.

When we talk about stress in law enforcement supervision, we are talking about the same symptoms and the same problems from a different perspective. Whether you are a supervisor, or just trying to get along with one, it will help to understand that perspective. To do so, we must be aware of both the differences and the similarities between the job of supervisor/administrator and the officer on the street. We should also consider the nature of the organization in which supervisors, managers and administrators operate.

Unlike many organizations, most law enforcement supervisors and administrators were once "street troops" themselves. On the street, an officer is primarily responsible only for his own actions. Although he/she is concerned with the welfare and safety of citizens as well as his fellow officers, he/she will be judged on, and held accountable for, his/her own behavior and performance. Most officers who become supervisors have learned to perform fairly well in this singularly responsible role. Once they get promoted, however, they are held to a different standard of performance.

Supervisors are responsible for the actions of a group of people as well as for enforcing the rules and policies of their agencies. First line supervisors (e.g. Sergeants) must enforce rules and policies which they probably had very little role in formulating. In addition they must make decisions affecting the lives of officers who are often their friends. Being responsible for a group is quite a bit different than being concerned about individuals. Although the supervisor may empathize with an individual officer's point of view, the relationship with his/her fellow officers must now be secondary to the overall performance of the unit. As such, distance typically develops between the supervisor and the "rank and file". Although necessary, it is also stressful for supervisors.

Even at the divisional and command levels of an agency, there is

often little latitude in regard to formulating and interpreting policy. What is more important, and more stressful, is the fact that managers and administrators must learn to operate in a totally different mode than what is required on the street. Unlike civilian or business organizations, the people who enter law enforcement rarely do so because they want to manage or administer. Psychologically, they are practical, action oriented people who want to serve society and help others. In other words, their personalities are basically similar to everyone else in the agency.

Like most officers, supervisors are most comfortable when faced with situations that must be dealt with quickly and practically. This sort of situation typically occurs on the tactical or "operational" side of the organization. Tactical decision making calls for good independent judgment and the ability to react to events rather than to plan or predict. Unfortunately, this set of skills is rarely helpful when performing administrative tasks.

On the supervisory/management side of law enforcement, an entirely different set of behaviors and talents are required. The situations that come up are not as concrete or practical as tactical situations. The policy decisions a supervisor makes must be consistent and applicable to a number of similar situations rather than a single individual circumstance. Supervisors and managers must think in terms of groups and policies rather than rely on their flexibility, street smarts and "feel" for people.

The cornerstone of administration is planning and control. The administrator must gather data, analyze it, and plan for future events. Usually, this is not a set of skills which he/she has had a chance to develop in the field. In some ways, the job requires the exact opposite of what most officers like to do. Add to this a high degree of political pressure, community visibility, and second guessing by the media, and you've got a formula for a lot of sleepless nights and other stress symptoms.

Just like the officer in the field, supervisors get stressed out by the administrative demands of the job, not the tactical ones. Obviously, being on the "giving end" of an administrative policy does not make you immune to its effects. Most supervisors I know do not enjoy doing performance appraisals or working out vacation schedules any more than the officers who must live with these decisions.

If you find yourself getting annoyed at your supervisor, it will help to understand that he/she could be just as stressed out as you are. New supervisors are often struggling to make the adjustment which their new responsibilities demand. Experienced supervisors and managers can experience the same problems and symptoms of "burnout" as anyone else. Whether you have recently been promoted, are thinking about being promoted, or are closer to retirement than promotion, here are some things that may help.

NEW SUPERVISORS...LOOK FOR A ROLE MODEL

Although virtually all law enforcement agencies provide field coaches for rookies, very few do the same for new supervisors. Obviously, there are some people who do a better job at supervision than others. Just like rookie school, there are certain things about

supervision that you won't learn in a classroom. If you are a new supervisor, there is nothing stopping you from finding your own training coach.

Get to know someone whose supervisory style is similar to yours or whose effectiveness as a supervisor you admire. You might even reach back in your past and identify a past supervisor who made a positive impact on you. Most good supervisors (just like most good officers) are helpful by nature. Seek one out, use him/her as a sounding board for your problem cases.

EXPERIENCED SUPERVISORS...FIND A CONFIDANTE

Leadership responsibility can be lonely. Most people in law enforcement derive support through relationships with fellow officers they respect and trust. Don't let your job alienate you from your sources of support.

No matter what your job or level of responsibility, it will be helpful to have someone with whom to share your ideas and frustrations. Although spouses and close civilian friends are important, there are some problems that it takes a badge to understand. Obviously, you must choose wisely. If you've been around awhile you have probably learned who you can trust. Very few good leaders are able to go it alone.

YOU'RE NEVER TOO EXPERIENCED TO LEARN ABOUT YOUR JOB

Although some agencies provide extensive training for first line supervisors, most do not. This is because there are very few truly comprehensive supervisory training programs exclusively for law enforcement officers. There are, however, quite a few other sources of valuable information available to you.

Check the management science section of the library for books about general supervision. A lot of what is written about supervision in the business environment is applicable to law enforcement, as well. You might also consider attending a "principles of management" seminar offered by your local community college or university. There are also a number of articles published in both law enforcement, government and general business magazines.

In addition to reading about supervision and management, there is a lot you can learn from speaking to others in the law enforcement field. Attend meetings of law enforcement associations and, of course, don't be ashamed to ask questions in your own agency.

NO MATTER WHAT YOUR RANK...BE REALISTIC ABOUT YOUR JOB

There are a lot of different ways to say "lighten up". In my previous articles, I have made some suggestions to that effect. They all have to do with being realistic and adjusting, to the unique demands of your job rather than worrying about things you can't change. Make sure that your expectations are in line with both your ability and the reality of the situation.