Leadership During Challenging Times

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Preparation for the Inevitable

For everyone in this room, it is just a matter of time. For those in the law enforcement business, it is not a matter of “if,” but the reality of “when!”

Nature of Challenging Situations

In addition to contemporary issues, specific issues discussed will include: Excessive force fall-out, explorer sex scandals, police officer burglars, sexual harassment, and troublesome behavior attributed to special enforcement units.

Recognizing the Only Real “Magic Bullet”

While there are obviously a number of actions and strategies considered and employed to address the multiple challenges facing our profession, the true “magic bullet” is that of leadership skills. Our continuous goal must be to arm all of our supervisors, managers, and executives with the skills they need to address the many challenges that lie ahead, many of which are unique and reflect that issues that are hard to predict and to prepare for.

Start Filling Your Credibility Reservoir NOW

A gigantic factor in the ability of a chief to survive, and in the effectiveness of the agency, is the degree of credibility that both have with the political establishment and the business and residential communities. This is a long term and continuous process. Attempting to develop these necessary relationships while in the midst of a troublesome situation will not work; at that point it is likely too late.

Seek To Influence Police Chief Hiring Processes

Those who play a crucial role in the selection of police chiefs are often ill prepared for the task and, with the best of intentions (hopefully), will fail to place a premium
on the qualities that are most important. National and state peace officer organizations who have no agenda other to encourage the selection of the best persons for leadership positions should seek to play a role in educating key elected and appointed officials in the critical process of selecting police chiefs.

History is replete with examples of the disastrous organizational consequences of processes where the primary issue in selecting a chief was something other than leadership skills.

**When Your Times Come (Your Challenge)**

**Developing The Necessary Mindset to Address**

Don’t panic. You can handle it, if you remain calm, and are honest with yourself about your limitations, and work with other chiefs about developing a plan and executing your strategy. If you feel that you are ill prepared, join the club – we have all been there!

**Seek to Be Respected – Not Liked**

Internally and externally, the only type of goodwill and popularity that is valuable and sustainable is that which is a derivative of respect. The effectiveness of warm smiles and firm handshakes quickly evaporate when the going gets tough.

**You're Demeanor and the Environment**

More so than any other person, the demeanor of the top law enforcement executive is the factor that is going to effect the environment. The chief must work hard to radiate confidence and avoid giving the impression of being frantic or unduly influenced by the predictable pressures. In ain’t easy and theatrical acting skills may be helpful, but the chief must appear strong and confident.

**Acknowledgement of Responsibility**

While certainly you are most likely not personally responsible for everything that happens in your department, you are the chief and do bear organizational responsibility for the problems that occur. Be quick to acknowledge this as an essential part of your strategy to address the problematic issue(s).

**Changing A Wing While In Flight**

The fact that you have a major issue to tackle does not eliminate the continuing crucial role of maintaining all of the day-to-day activities that occupy our time. It is not a matter of only addressing one or the other; you have to do both!
Don’t Talk to Much

The human tendency to talk too much when in an uncomfortable situation must be avoided. Giving considerable thought to what you are going to say, and choosing your words very carefully, becomes particularly important during difficult times.

*Being a person of few words and displaying a confident demeanor will serve you well!*

It is well to recall what Confucius allegedly said: “It is best to remain silent and be thought of as a fool than to open one’s mouth and remove all doubt.” Another ancient Greek philosopher, Xenocrates, also had a perspective that is also worthy of serious consideration, “I have often regretted my words, but not silence.”

Have Plan and a Strategy

Develop and plan and a strategy for dealing with your challenge(s). Any plan is better than no plan, so avoid the temptation to fly by the seat of your pants and deal haphazardly with issues as they arise.

Not Likely “Quick Fixes”

Occasional “quick fixes” may be possible, but not likely. Far too often, this type of approach becomes today’s solution and tomorrow’s nightmare. Look “over the horizon” and try to identify the likely multiple consequences of your actions.

Avoid Pre-Conceived Impressions

Key issues to always keep in mind: *Things are seldom as they initially appear, they are almost always multiple sides to every story, and things always look different they next morning!* Preconceived impressions have the tendency to create self-fulfilling prophecies.

If you look for the good, or for the bad, you will find what you are looking for. Look for the truth and objectivity.

Give People the Benefit of the Doubt for Good Intentions

Quickly blaming someone or something is often the symptom of a weak leader and a premature approach. Just as every chief has made mistakes while having the best of intentions, most of our people are the same way. Give people the benefit of the doubt, at least initially, until circumstances dictate differently.

Be Conspicuous – Your Demeanor

There are times when the very last thing we want to do is being conspicuous and interact with others, but as a chief you don’t have that luxury. Your personnel, the public, and public officials need to see a strong and confident person at the helm of
your department. Sometimes this is pretty tough, but is goes with the territory of those stars on your collar.

**Don’t Over-React to Troubling Information**

A key view into a person’s character is how a person performs during challenging times. Avoid actions that send out the impression of being excitable and rash. Remember, things are seldom as they initially appear.

**First Impressions of People Likely Not Accurate**

The likelihood of additional persons coming into your professional life during challenging times is very likely. Persons falling into this category may include politicians, other agency officials, investigators, lawyers, and others representing public and special interests. Without suggesting good or bad, be guarded and remember that many people turn out to be much different persons then their initial impression might indicate. Sharing too much information or too much candor too soon might not be in your best interests.

**Commit to Nothing But an Open Mind and Doing the Best Job Possible**

Statements about fairness, objectivity, thoroughness, and going wherever the evidence points are factors that sends out all the appropriate messages. Remember, that words are cheap, and the sincerity of what you say will be indicated by your actions.

**Don’t Be Deceived By the Stars on Your Collar**

Never forget that a wise person is someone who is very clear in recognizing his or her limitations. Work hard to strike the balance between confidence in what you know and are good at, and those areas where your knowledge and/or skills are lean or non-existent.

**Don’t Fall Under Spell of Single Influence**

We all have a person or persons in whom we have special confidence, but do not permit any single person or group to dominate your mindset. Avail yourself of multiple legitimate perspectives.

**Role of Special Interest Groups & Individuals**

Be prepared for the predictable attempted involvement of special interests and individuals, depending upon the situation. To the extent that such involvement is appropriate and or helpful, remember that our world is full of alleged community leaders who are not, and others who falsely claim to represent a host of
organizations and interests. Our challenges create potential fertile opportunities for others to advance their special interests

**Legal Advice**

*This is such a critical area, and you need to try to get it right from the very start.* Don’t automatically embrace whatever attorney may logically come your way, but try to exert influence with your city attorney to acquire someone who truly has the skills for the challenge that you face. It is also essential to have an understanding of the person who the attorney reports to and takes direction from. The last thing a chief needs is an attorney whose actions and loyalties are divided between the chief, the council, and/or the attorney’s boss. This issues need to be discussed, resolved, and understood by all concerned.

**Liaison With and the Role of Elected Officials**

Most will agree that a very sizable portion of a chief’s skill set is being able to work with and develop credibility with elected officials. Although with the best of intentions (sometimes debatable!), a great many of our elected officials are very lean in terms of the skills required to run a city and understand the complexities and legalities of the law enforcement function. This is just a historic reality and a derivative of our democratic form of government.

The nature of elected officials and the predictable impatience with things they may not understand or appreciate creates a strong need for the chief to develop and maintain an appropriate liaison with concerned elected and appointed officials, and to also seek to educate those persons in areas where additional information and insight might be helpful.

**Encourage Joint Statements**

To the extent possible and reasonable, it is in everyone’s best interest for all concerned to “get on the same page” with respect to information and perspectives. Having separate statements being made by the chief and elected officials is a very bad thing, both from the standpoints of public perception and legal liability.

**Your “Line in the Sand”**

While police chiefs have a responsibility to be appropriately receptive to input from elected and key appointed officials, there can be times when what is being encouraged from those persons is beyond what is legal, ethical, and/or appropriate. Every chief needs to be clear about his or her “line in the sand,” and the circumstances over which they are willing to jeopardize their position.
Although yielding on an unethical issue may temporarily prolong a chief's employment survival, these situations often fall into the category of “today's solution and tomorrow's nightmare.” These are truly situations where the chief needs to look as far as possible “over the horizon” to identify the potential consequences of his or her actions.

**Prosecutorial Involvement**

Although most likely not in a position to make decisions as to involvement and structure, the chief certainly has a strong interest in the professionalism of the prosecutorial process. While some may disagree, multiple prosecutorial agency involvement has its advantages.

**Investigation of Incident(s) – Situation**

Be continuously mindful of the reality that 95% of an effort is most often dictated by the first 5% of the activity. You never get a second chance to get it right the first time. Spend whatever time it takes to get the right people in place and determine the investigative strategy.

**Remove Contentious Issues – Individuals**

While sometimes unfair to certain persons, the key consideration has to be the best interests of the organizations. Where appropriate, consider options such as reassignments and administrative leave. In such situations, be sensitive to the human toll and carnage that frequently occurs, and be as considerate and sensitive as possible. Treat concerned employees as you would hope to be treated under similar circumstances.

**Continued Development of Leadership Skills**

There is a pretty good chance that not all of your folks in positions of leadership will have the skills needed to address the challenges that will be on your plate during difficult times. Accept that, understand that, and do something about that. Don't torture them for not exhibiting the skills that they don’t possess, but accelerate the process of their development, and only torture them if they don't get on board with the development process. Losing them to training is tough, but a necessary investment that is essential. Work hard to determine the very best training so that their absence turns out to be a truly wise investment. Beyond sending people to training, consider bring people in. While not often done, also consider routine in-house workshops as part of the duty day. To the extent possible, try to train and energize all your people simultaneously so that newly re-energized people will not return to people whose leadership rebirth has yet to occur!
The pace of necessary change, more so than any other factor, will be determined by the skills and strength of your supervisory personnel.

Internal Communications

The essential need to ensure that all of what you want communicated gets out accurately and to all portions of your organization is even more critical during challenging times. There are only three ways to ensure quality communications: Your personal delivery to all personnel, videotaped message, or in writing. Be continuously mindful that distortion will occur in the absence of extraordinary measures to ensure accuracy. Information is that one substance that does not flow down hill without a conscious effort.

Media Relations

This is such a critical area, and one that many of us are ill prepared for during especially challenging times. Without suggesting ill intentions, During challenging times the press will respond with a theme or concern in mind, and will often seek information and statements that support that theme, and may well not be all that interested in the overall message that you would hope to have communicated to the public. Additionally, what you might say to a reporter in person will most likely be subjected to an editor who may well pick and chose what he or she thinks is best, with the result being a message that does not reflect what you intended to communicate.

To the extent possible, try to have a credible rapport with editorial personnel, encourage quality coverage, and a mutual commitment to ensure accuracy and balance. In the final analysis, it will be them and not you who determine what the public is going to be told. Give strong consideration when possible to written statements, well thought out and prepared in a manner that might discourage things being taken out of context.

Avoid permitting your personnel (or you!) to be “star struck” by your newfound public platform. Your fame will be short-lived and will not have a happy ending.

Role of Immaturity

We hire fine young men and women, but the reality of life is that many of them (like most of us!) still have some growing up to do. Recognize this and take it into strong consideration in assignments and supervisory training. The only thing worse that an immature officer is two of them working together.
Delegate  Delegate  Delegate

This cannot be said enough times! You must delegate in order to be effective! Rid yourself and your department of the expression that “sometimes it is easier to just do it yourself.” Every bit of time and energy you and your subordinate supervisor spend doing someone else’s job detracts from the critical tasks that you need to be performing, including your command presence throughout the organization. Instead of failing to delegate, work hard and decisively to provide the training and direction to ensure that people perform the tasks expected of their position. While it will likely cause more time to be spent initially on training and direction, it is the best investment that you can make. Doing it yourself is today’s solution and tomorrow’s nightmare.

Like the little Dutch boy, you do not have enough fingers to plug every hole in the leaking dike!

**A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy That Must Be Shattered**

Must of us have long been told and unfortunately accepted the adage that leaders end up sending 90% of their time of 10% on their people. This is non-sense, and something that we must not permit to become a routine reality. Again – Delegate!

**Disciplinary Actions & Penalties**

At the end of the day, you and your department will be judged in large part by the manner in which discipline and corrected actions were taken. Being fair, balanced, and objective will always be at the top of the list. In disciplinary situations, be surgical and address the real problems without damaging the surrounding tissue, and avoid being influenced by outside considerations. Do what is right and not what might be popular with certain people or certain interests. At the end of the day, is it likely that the overall public will see your actions as fair, balanced, and objective?

**Personnel & Organizational Changes**

Challenging situations always cause some change to occur. Avoid over-reacting and catering to special interests. Recognize the likely need to educate the public and elected officials with respect to the changes you believe to be appropriate.

Our profession has many unfortunate examples of good and worthwhile programs that were eliminated, instead of being modified and/or strengthened (gang units, explorer programs, violent criminal apprehension details, multi-agency task forces, etc.), as the consequence of challenging situations.