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LIVING WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT  
by Michael J. Cuttler, Ph.D.

Adjusting to the Changes in Your Agency

The minute "Joe" walked into my office I knew something was wrong. Joe is a 15 year police officer, currently assigned as a corporal in Field Operations. He is also a peer counselor at one of my client agencies so it's not unusual for him to call or show up at my office to discuss a case or an officer he is counseling. On this day, however, Joe was simply not "right."

Joe has a reputation for having a very "cool head" in tight situations. He is a mature officer with a solid family and home life. He is also known as an excellent FTO (field training officer) that other officers just naturally seek out for advice. That's why he was selected for peer counselor training and why I was really surprised to see him so agitated.

Joe paced around the office and finally sat down. His eyes darted around the room and he seemed to have difficulty composing himself. Although it was clear there was something on his mind, he didn't seem to know where to start. He also seemed a little embarrassed but finally he looked me in the eye and said "Doc, would you call me crazy if I told you I think the Chief is out to get me ?"

After many years of working in Law Enforcement, I have learned not to joke about a question like that. The stress of the job, including frequent exposure to agitated people, as well as the constant demand to maintain professional composure, causes many officers to be very sensitive to changes in their own state of mind. Actually, psychologists do a pretty good job screening law enforcement applicants, so very few officers are, or are likely to become, really "crazy". On the other hand, I've learned that when an officer jokes about "going crazy" he/she often needs reassurance, not an off handed remark or a quick diagnosis.

"Sounds like the Chief has done something that has gotten you pretty upset", I said in my best "shrink" voice.

"Yes, and I don't know what I'm going to do about it", said Joe. "They've decided to re-organize the patrol division. The grapevine says that they are going to eliminate one squad in each division and make the patrol sectors larger. They're also talking about putting us on six week rotating 9 hour shifts and cutting back on our overtime. Each squad will be larger but there will be less backup available because the total number of officers on each shift will be reduced. Since we will be working 9 hour shifts instead of 12, we will have fewer days off and less time for extra duty jobs. The whole division is really upset about it and I've been listening to gripes for the past two weeks"!

As Joe continued, I noticed he was starting to calm down. Joe had been listening

to, and supporting, his fellow officers as they reacted to a pending change in their routine. As he tried to maintain his characteristic calm exterior at the Department, he became increasingly upset himself. The act of "ventilating" in my office helped him feel better.

Counseling someone who has a problem in which you are involved is very hard, if not impossible. That's why both professionals and peer counselors are trained to avoid counseling relatives or loved ones. It was clear to me that Joe was as upset by these rumored organizational changes as those he was counseling. Instead of active listening and support, he was reacting emotionally to his peers and to their problems.

As Joe continued to ventilate and relax, I decided it was time to get him thinking about the personal aspects of his problem. "It sounds like the department is really in an uproar about these changes; how will they affect you personally ?", I asked.

"Well for one thing my wife and I have finally coordinated her schedule at the hospital with my hours so that we can care for the kids and still get a little time together. This shift change is really going to mess us up. Also, eliminating one squad in each division means that there will be five less Sergeants slots available for promotion. I really did well on the last promotional process, I know of three supervisors who are retiring next month, and I really had my hopes up for a promotion."

"It sounds like there are some changes in the works that may not fit very well with your plans", I said.

"That's an understatement", said Joe sarcastically. "It seems like every time I get my life in order, someone downtown messes it up with a new schedule or a bunch of new policies. They may think they are improving things but they are actually making things harder for me and everyone else out there".

"What exactly is going to happen, and when are these changes scheduled to take effect", I asked.

"No one is really sure but the grapevine is sure working overtime", said Joe. "It seems to be all anyone talks about anymore. People feel that things are going to happen that they are not going to like and they feel powerless to do anything about it. It's really hard not to take it personally. Sometimes I feel that our top command only cares about making themselves look good and really don't care about us at all."

If you have been in Law Enforcement more than six months, the chances are that Joe's complaints sound familiar to you. It's no secret that things in law enforcement are changing every day in response to social and budgetary pressures. All over the country, law enforcement agencies of all sizes are being asked to "do more with less". Communities are demanding broad and complex services from law enforcement agencies. Officers are called upon to deal with everything from organized crime to community development. At the same time tax money is scarce and government grants

are drying up. Agencies are responding by streamlining, downsizing, and trying to figure out how to provide more services with less money. Reorganizations, elimination of supervisory positions, hiring freezes and even layoffs are becoming more prevalent.

It's also no secret that law enforcement officers hate change. In the field, they deal with unpredictable people and unpredictable circumstances on a daily basis. Although trained to be in control at all times and to anticipate all possibilities, most officers know that this is impossible. Instead, they concentrate on being as prepared and under control as possible. Consequently, law enforcement officers react more intensely than most people when faced with an involuntary change in routine.

This sets up what you could call a "psychological dilemma". In order to do the job, and remain psychologically healthy, law enforcement officers must feel "in control" of their lives and activities. At the same time, law enforcement agencies must continue to make organizational changes that effect the lives of their officers. In order to feel good you've got to feel in control. In order to stay employed, you've got to cope with involuntary change.

The organizational symptoms of this "psychological dilemma" are easy to spot. You will notice that the longer the "winds of change" blow through an organization, the more outrageous the rumors become. Typically, rumors start flying around weeks and months before any real change is announced. When facts are scarce and fears are great the grapevine usually contains expressions of everyone's greatest fears rather than the truth.

The personal symptoms of this dilemma are similar to those which I described in my article on "Burnout" (April, 1989). You may find yourself being preoccupied with little things, or maybe even losing sleep by worrying about impending changes. Whatever the symptoms, here are some tips for coping with the psychological effects of change in your agency.

## **AVOID THE RUMOR MILL**

When a group of officers get together and share rumors about pending organizational changes, the result is usually a bunch of unhappy and agitated officers. As I mentioned above, the stories that float around organizations before change occurs are rarely accurate. They reflect everyone's greatest fears and, unfortunately, usually contain enough "grain of truth" to be both believable and terrifying. Listening and participating in rumor mill activities is guaranteed to drive you wild and keep you up at night. If you want to adjust quickly to whatever changes do occur, it's a good idea to avoid the rumor mill and wait for the truth. **LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES**

Changes in job responsibilities, schedules, and organization structures can also open up opportunities for personal and professional growth. When you are put in a situation in which you must do "more with less", the opportunity also exists to be recognized for creative problem solving. When everyone else is feeling stressed out

over a new schedule or other organizational change, try doing something different. If you do, you are sure to be recognized and this can help your career.

In my article "How to Keep Your Career on Track" (January, 1991), I mentioned that receiving favorable recognition is essential if you want to be selected for promotion. When changes occur in an organization, malcontents are very visible and can receive a lot of "negative recognition" from top command. If you maintain a good attitude and cope with change by seeking new and creative ways to do your job, you are bound to get recognized in a positive way.

## **GO WITH THE FLOW**

Whatever changes occur in your organization, the trick is to learn how to adjust, not necessarily how to avoid, the consequences of change. Accepting the inevitability of change is the first step to successful adjustment. All experienced officers know that "stuff happens". When it does, it really doesn't pay to get too upset about things you can't control.

If you are thinking of quitting your department, or putting in for a downward transfer, try "chilling out". Resisting change, or trying to figure out how to avoid it, is very stressful. Although it's not unusual to think about changing jobs, or even leaving law enforcement when the future looks bleak, looking for another job is not a good way to cope with change. The chances are any agency or job you are considering has its own set of problems. Although outside alternatives might, or might not, work out better for you, the stress of changing jobs is usually greater than the stress of adjusting to present circumstances.

By the way, although Joe was right about the schedule changes, he was wrong about the department eliminating 5 supervisory jobs. After the schedule changes, Joe found that the new six week rotation gave him 12 full weeks when he was not working during the late afternoon. This made him available to coach his son's Little League team for the entire season. The new shift alignment also put him in touch with a number of officers for whom Joe had been an FTO in the past. They got together after work one night and sketched out an idea for an Officer Survival refresher course which was warmly received by top command. Although 3 line supervisory jobs were eliminated, a new Sergeant slot was also created for a training coordinator. One of the supervisors whose job was eliminated was placed in that slot. Six months later that supervisor retired. Joe got the job.