

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

Coping with Current Events and Changing Times.

Law Enforcement is a "high profile" profession. Turn on the TV or pick up any newspaper and you're bound to hear a story that involves your "chosen profession". Each year when crime rates are published, the population demands that law enforcement respond to everything from organized crime to education of children about drug use. At the same time, Command personnel are usually locked in a battle between rising community demand and dwindling financial resources.

This year, highly publicized events in "distant cities" have focused public awareness on "use of force" and other complex and emotionally charged issues. No matter where you stand on these questions, the chances are that you have reacted to them in a different, and more personal way than most "civilians".

Your loved ones and family members are (mostly) civilians. As I have mentioned in earlier articles, civilians don't really know what to think about the violent and dangerous aspects of police work. Recently, your spouse and/or family have been seeing a lot of "real life" law enforcement, violence, and danger on TV. This can put a lot of pressure on an officer and his/her family.

This climate can effect other personal relationships, as well. Most of you have heard comments about "police brutality" throughout your career and have learned to shrug them off. These days, you may be particularly prone to take them personally. At the station, morale may be getting kind of low. If you are feeling a little "overwhelmed" right now due to all the pressures on your job, agency, and profession here are some things to think about: (Some of them are "borrowed" from my previous articles):

YOUR EXPERIENCE ON THE STREET CAN HELP YOU COPE WITH ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE.

Reflecting their practical nature, and in spite of financial and manpower shortages, many agencies have designed and implemented innovative community based programs which are making an impact on crime. Other agencies have streamlined operations, procedures and organization structures and squeezed more productivity out of existing resources. These programs and changes are the product of practical innovation, a quality that most law enforcement officers learn on the street.

As an individual law enforcement officer you are uniquely qualified to face the challenges of the future. The personal qualities that drove you to seek law enforcement as a profession, and which have been sharpened and developed through your years of experience will serve you well now.

As a practical and potentially innovative person, (most law enforcement officers

are) you have learned to make the best of situations, to think on your feet, and to solve problems in the most efficient and practical manner possible. As an experienced officer you have dealt with a number of tough situations, have survived, and have come out on the other end a stronger person.

In the future you are likely to find yourself in situations where you are being asked to deliver more service with less resources and backup. You will be called upon to innovate and deal with organizational change on a personal basis. As I mentioned in a previous article, coping with organizational change can be quite stressful.(see "Adjusting To Change in Your Agency"; August 1991)

Fortunately, another quality that you develop on the job is the ability to handle stress. Law enforcement officers routinely cope with experiences and situations that would "flatten" the average civilian. Law enforcement as a profession is certainly going to survive, but things are also going to change. Your street experience, as well as your practical and innovative nature, will help you cope with that change.

If you missed my article about coping with organizational change, here's some advice:

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. However, 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.

PUT ON YOUR "THICK SKIN" ON THE STREET AND YOUR "THIN SKIN" AT HOME.

A "thick skin" is often an essential survival tool on the street. The ability to listen, remain calm, and not react personally to the things you hear is a skill that most effective officers develop with experience. In these days of heavy media coverage in regard to "police brutality" and racially oriented issues, this skill is critical. However, a thick skin at home can make your life miserable.

Your spouse and family are probably pretty sensitive to your moods and know when you are feeling stressed out and/or under pressure. They may, or may not know the specifics of what is bothering you, however. If you don't open up, the only thing they will have to go on is what they see in the media. This can make them pretty upset.

Although it is quite natural for you to be reluctant to express your feelings and concerns to your loved ones, this will only make matters worse. You may tell yourself that you don't want to burden your family with things they won't readily understand. The thing to remember is that they are already imagining things and are concerned for your welfare.

Your spouse and family will probably send out indications or "signals" that they are upset and/or concerned about you and/or your job. These may be direct statements or they may take a less obvious form. Put on your "thin skin" and try to be open and sensitive to the concerns of your family.

The reassurance and communication that your spouse and loved ones need includes knowing how and what you are feeling about your life and your family as well as your job. You may be a little out of practice with this kind of emotional expression

since you have tried not to do this at work. Fortunately, like riding a bicycle, you never really forget how. (see "Why Your Spouse Hates Your Job"; November,1990)

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN DO NOT ON WHAT YOU CAN'T

In conclusion, the key to handling the real "day to day" stress in law enforcement is to stay focused on those things you can control rather than get too upset over those things which you can't. It is the natural state of things for field officers and administrators alike to be frustrated and stressed out over their jobs. If there is a department where this is not the case, it is quite rare. In the meantime, it's up to you to adjust to the situation since the situation probably won't change drastically.

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7/09/92

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