



Lessons in leadership: A QUESTION OF BALANCE

BY PHIL HANSEN

Each morning on my drive to work, I enjoy a strong cup of black coffee and say my prayers out loud in the car. It's something I've done for years. Back before the days of cell phones and Bluetooth, passing motorists probably thought I was some kind of nut talking to myself in the car. Now I suppose I just look like any other guy engaged in a phone call. The morning drive is a relatively quiet period for me in which I can spend some time in reflection, express gratitude to God for my many blessings, and ask Him for a few things that I really care about.

After seeking His continued blessings for my family, I usually ask for the protection of my personnel, and

for guidance as their leader. I often ask for the wisdom to make good decisions, for the courage and discipline to see them through when the course of action is difficult, and for the compassion to consider how my actions will affect others. Like most of us, I'm not equally gifted in the many attributes needed to be a good leader, so I'm continually seeking a sense of balance in the various traits and skills required for that role.

In some ways I've come to see the art of leadership as a question of perspective and balance, employing what at times may appear to be honorable but somewhat competing values when searching for reasonable solutions to difficult questions. I'll

try to explain what I mean by using a disciplinary issue as an example:

When making a decision on the imposition of discipline, I try to employ wisdom, discipline and compassion by considering more than just the severity of the offense. Among other things, I consider the intent of the employee and the precedent that is being established by my decision. I think about the degree of responsibility I might personally bear for setting (or failing to set) expectations and properly training the employee. And finally, I try to consider the effect the intended discipline will have on the employee and his or her family.

From my point of view, the ultimate goal of discipline in the

workplace is not about punishment, it's about altering future behavior. Good leadership decisions that affect other people don't just happen by chance. They come about as a result of careful deliberation and the application of characteristics like wisdom, experience, character, strength and compassion.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF DISCIPLINE IN THE WORKPLACE IS NOT ABOUT PUNISHMENT, IT'S ABOUT ALTERING FUTURE BEHAVIOR.

DIFFERING OPINIONS PROVIDE PERSPECTIVE

I believe good leaders share common characteristics in that they all are motivated to pursue some worthy purpose, and in the process, they practice values-based leadership with integrity and respect for those they lead. But all leaders are human, possessed with their own weaknesses as well as strengths. Good leaders are aware of their limitations, and the best are capable of overcoming them. One way to overcome your weaknesses is by leveraging the strengths of your followers and by seeking their viewpoints during complex decision-making. Effective leaders

practice the art of looking at issues from different perspectives and designing balanced solutions that may be contrary to their own initial instincts.

History is replete with examples of legendary leaders who weren't afraid to surround themselves with subordinates of equal or greater intellect and differing viewpoints. These leaders leveraged that intellect and perspective to augment their own vision and skill. A classic example of this method is Abraham Lincoln, who surrounded himself with a cabinet consisting of brilliant but at times antagonistic members, some of whom wished to supplant him as president. Lincoln gave his cabinet great autonomy in running their own departments and he often considered their opinions when crafting his own courses of action, while always holding true to his personal vision and beliefs.

At this point of my career, I have the good fortune to work with three exceptional young commanders. Each is intelligent, hard-working and ethical. All three are passionate about our mission, concerned with the well-being of our personnel, and devoted to the betterment of our agency. Yet all three are very different personalities, each uniquely gifted with their own talents and perspectives.

Together, they contribute a mixture of vision, idealism, pragmatism, accountability, introspection, compassion and humor to our conversations about the direction of our department and the policies we employ. I often find myself considering their differing viewpoints when contemplating a difficult decision. As the leader, I bear ultimate responsibility

for the decisions and outcomes that affect my agency, but my aim is to learn from each of these subordinates and use their perspectives to shape my own well-informed decisions. Along the way, I try to teach them what I can from my own experience while helping them to learn from one another.

ENCOURAGING OPEN COMMUNICATION

This free exchange of ideas and perspectives would not be possible if my commanders felt inhibited about speaking their mind to me or in front of one another. A communicative environment is essential for this type of exchange, but it takes time and effort to develop. In the tactical environment, most of us recognize the importance of holding candid debriefings at the conclusion of an operation. Team personnel at all levels must be encouraged to evaluate plans, provide feedback and voice their concerns. In an open and honest debriefing, this holds true even when it means respectfully questioning the actions of a superior officer.¹

SEEKING THE INPUT OF OTHERS AND EMPOWERING THEM TO SPEAK FREELY DOESN'T MAKE YOU WEAK; IT MAKES YOU SMART.

This same dynamic is equally important in an administrative setting or during one-to-one conversation. We often acknowledge the virtue of speaking truth to power, but how many of us really work at cultivating an atmosphere in which our own subordinates feel at ease to express a viewpoint that differs from our own? Open and candid communication doesn't come naturally in a hierarchical system. It's a condition that must be fostered carefully, and it requires constant maintenance. It begins by having respect for your subordinates and their opinions, and hearing them out even when you may disagree.

SEEKING INPUT IS NOT A SIGN OF WEAKNESS

Many people believe that the ideal model of leadership is a tough, independent, strong-willed leader who quickly makes decisions with little or no counsel from others. This ideal is particularly prevalent in hierarchical command and control cultures such as law enforcement. One problem associated with this model is that it assumes the leader in question to be all-knowing. In reality, such a person seldom exists. Leadership without careful consideration and input from subordinates can squander the abundance of talent within the ranks. There are certainly times during crisis when a leader must make rapid decisions based upon his or her own instinct, training and experience, but those times are few and far between. The vast majority of leadership decisions take place in controlled

settings with ample time to seek input from others.

AS YOU GO ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP JOURNEY, CONTINUE TO SEEK BALANCE THROUGH THE WISDOM AND PERSPECTIVES OF OTHERS, THEN RELY ON YOUR CONSCIENCE TO CARRY THE DAY.

It's important to note that my aim in this message is not to advocate leadership by consensus or popular vote. I'm simply pointing out the value of leveraging the wisdom and perspective of others, and including them in the decision-making process whenever possible. Not only does this method broaden your perspective as a leader, it also invests your subordinate personnel in the process and, therefore, in the solutions you select. Seeking the input of others and empowering them to speak freely doesn't make you weak; it makes you smart. The final decisions and ultimate responsibility still remain with you. Based upon your conscience, a final decision may ultimately differ from all the recommendations of your advisers, but you will still benefit from considering their perspectives. In one famous story attributed

to Lincoln, the president put an issue to a vote within his cabinet, and he was out-voted seven to one. Undeterred and convinced of his own course of action, Lincoln's response was, "Seven nays and one aye ... The ayes have it."

As you go about your leadership journey, continue to seek balance through the wisdom and perspectives of others, then rely on your conscience to carry the day. In the end, leadership shouldn't be an exercise of power, but an exercise of character, vision and a sense of responsibility to those we lead.

ENDNOTE

1. For more on the dynamics of communicative leadership, see "Leading Through Communication," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2014.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Hansen is chief of police for the Santa Maria (CA) Police Department. Prior to his service in Santa Maria, he retired as a captain from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department with 36 years of service. Most of his work was in the field of tactical operations and critical incident command, including 13 years as a full-time SWAT sergeant/team leader and six years as the SWAT lieutenant/team commander for SEB. He was an elected member of the NTOA Board of Directors for 20 years and was chairman of the board from 2008 to 2013; he now serves as a director emeritus.



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