



Lessons in Leadership: Preparing to Pass the Torch

THE CRITICAL NEED FOR SUCCESSION PLANNING

BY PHIL HANSEN

Most of you who make the effort to read this series of articles do so because you've achieved some level of responsibility that demands leadership. As responsible leaders, you've committed yourselves to continuous self-improvement, at times by seeking and evaluating the input and experience of others who themselves have learned valuable lessons. It's an honor that you're willing to lend me your ear for a few minutes and I sincerely

thank you. Unfortunately, looking in the mirror these days, I no longer see the reflection of a young SWAT team leader, nor even a middle-aged SWAT commander. Instead, I see a guy with 42 years in this business he loves, thinking about what he hopes to leave behind. With that in mind, a discussion about succession planning might be appropriate.

Leaders with any amount of tenure probably can all agree that time

passes much too quickly. In what can seem like the blink of an eye, it becomes time to move on to another assignment, to promote, or perhaps even to retire. My former agency once had a chief executive who was a fine man and an effective leader in many ways, but he remained in office for too long and failed to groom suitable successors for his position. Ultimately, he died in office and the resultant vacuum in leadership

contributed to an organizational decline that has lasted for years. It's never too early to prepare for our own replacement or the replacement of other key personnel within the organization. This is particularly true in the case of impactful leaders, whose tenures have been marked by significant organizational progress.

The failure to prepare potential successors for key leadership roles will likely result in a loss of organizational momentum, stagnation and at times, a significant regression. Sadly, there are cases in which selfish, small-minded people seek to inflate their own importance by setting the organization up for decline after they are gone. In contrast, those who take pride in their organization and in their own accomplishments as leaders, work to prepare their successors and their organization to maintain momentum and achieve even higher levels of performance in the wake of their departure.

As we attain greater levels of responsibility, our duties involve fewer technical tasks to master. Instead, we find ourselves more engaged in decision-making and the solving of complex problems, often involving human interactions. Training our potential replacements "how" to do something only scratches the surface. True succession planning also involves the education of our potential successors as to "why" something is done. Going even further, I believe that it should extend beyond training and education, to mentoring aspects of leadership that entail character development, ethics and even organizational philosophy.

MORE THAN JUST HOW AND WHY...

Regardless of the task — from the correct method to deploy a hot gas canister during a tactical deployment to the proper routing of a budget proposal in an administrative setting — the technical aspects of how to accomplish it are the most straightforward to convey and to master. "How" to do something usually is a simple matter of repetitive task training. As we begin to acquire greater decision-making authority, "why" we perform a given task becomes the next critical aspect of knowledge.

Understanding the more complex question of "why" we do something allows us to adapt to differing circumstances and apply the most appropriate methods and tools to achieve our mission. One might see the difference between teaching "how" and "why" as analogous to the difference between training and educating. An understanding of how and why we do something both are essential elements of problem solving at a basic level.

As leaders, our preparation of potential successors must go beyond the most common teaching parameters of how and why. It also requires mentorship and evaluation of the apprentice in fundamental issues relating to character and ethics. Undertaking a conscious effort to impact the character and ethical characteristics of a tenured subordinate can be difficult and at times uncomfortable. Nevertheless, I would assert that it is among the most important roles of a leader. Unfortunately, it's also one of the leadership traits that is most lacking in our society.

How many times have you watched as someone is promoted from within the organization and then everyone holds their breath, waiting to find out what kind of leader he or she will be? Thoughtful succession planning through mentoring and evaluation should resolve most of those questions in advance.

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Mentoring a potential successor entails more than teaching. It involves getting to know how the apprentice thinks and makes decisions. It should entail regular, substantive discussions relating to the essential traits of leadership, the obligation we owe to our personnel, and our role within the organization's mission and objectives. Please note that I used the word "discussions." These are two-way interactions in which the subordinate not only

gains new perspectives, but also demonstrates character and understanding of the principles under discussion. These discussions should be purposeful and if need be, documented. Finally, the apprentice's own decision-making and performance as a leader must be monitored to ensure that actions and relationships are consistent with words.

MAKING THE ETHICAL CHOICE

Chances are, you may have some degree of say about who will succeed you in your leadership position. If so, this is one of your most critical roles as a leader. Your input should be based upon an objective assessment of who is best for the organization and its personnel, not on friendship or unquestioned loyalty to you as a supervisor. In fact, the best replacement for your position may be the person who has displayed the courage to respectfully question your judgement and suggest

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an alternative course of action on previous occasions.

PRACTICING WHAT I PREACH

For some time, I've been in the process of preparing three commanders to assume my role as chief. Each of them share common characteristics in that they are all bright, experienced, caring individuals who are passionate about our work. They also are very different in their own ways and in their comfort levels with the various aspects of our operation. For instance, one is most comfortable in the patrol role, while another is more at home in an investigative setting. Some are more at ease during tactical operations and others during budget meetings. This is to be expected and it is the natural state of things for most agencies. But change is inevitable and we must prepare for it.

I believe that my duty is to one day step away from my position, secure in the knowledge that if they chose to do so, any of these fine men will be able to assume my role, care for our personnel as they should, and advance the organization at large. The plan is pretty straightforward.

With respect to the simple "hows" and "whys," there are many ways to ensure that personnel are capable of performing the essential elements of the position. I see to it that each of these commanders attends the best formal training we can obtain. All have attended or will soon attend an NTOA SWAT Commander's School and each attends department tactical

operations as an incident commander or observer. Each also will attend a California Police Chiefs Association class for newly promoted or aspiring chiefs. All have been rotated between two of the three different command positions within the organization (patrol, investigative or administrative), and a third rotation will take place next year. I also maintain a log of each time one of them appears in my place at an administrative or social function, appears as a public speaker, or serves in my absence as the acting chief of police.

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All that training, education and practical experience is critical, but the more important learning and growth occurs during our individual and group discussions about our people, our values, goals, successes and shortcomings. I try to be particularly open about my own missteps and uncertainties. A continuing theme

during our discussions is a focus on the obligation that we owe to our personnel, and the need to assume responsibility for our failures as well as our successes. Responsible leaders are willing to assume personal risk on behalf of their personnel and their mission. Finally, I closely monitor their work product, decision-making and interaction with others to ensure that their behavior is consistent with our values and objectives.

As a leader, there is no greater legacy and tribute to your service than to put a positive imprint on younger, upcoming personnel who are the

future of your organization. The acquisition of physical things such as buildings, vehicles and equipment are important, but in the long run, they pale to having future leaders perform well and say, "I learned this from my mentor." Knowledge and character are gifts that don't fade with the passage of time.

I am extremely proud of my potential successors and I have great confidence in the future of our organization. In the final analysis, I'm pretty sure that's what succession planning is all about.

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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