

RESPECT

DUTY

CIVILITY

VALUES

Lessons in leadership:

CIVILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

BY PHIL HANSEN

COURTESY

CHARACTER

Former President George H.W. Bush was recently laid to rest, and as I watched coverage of his funeral, listened to the commentary and recalled my own memories of his presidency, I was struck by the sharp contrast between his consistent gentlemanly conduct, and how members of our political elite conduct themselves today. I watched some old tape of Mr. Bush as he argued powerfully with an adver-

sarial member of the media, while still maintaining his sense of decorum and demonstrating a level of respect for his antagonist.

Today, on all sides of the political spectrum, we seem to live and work in an atmosphere that not only tolerates, but breeds uncivil and disrespectful conduct. I was appalled at the foul language an incoming member of

Congress recently used in a public forum. Politicians, celebrities and members of the media routinely engage in name-calling, intimidation, rudeness and other condescending behavior in their attempts to belittle anyone with an opposing viewpoint.

This state of things does not bode well for civilized conduct in general, nor for the development of future



leaders. I believe that one of the foundational elements of true leadership is character, and that one of the most basic manifestations of our character is how we treat one another. Unfortunately, at one time or another most of us have worked for people who routinely treat peers, subordinates and anyone else who's not on "their team" with condescension and disdain. And because most workplace

behavior is based on what personnel see their leaders do, others down the chain of command emulate them and the cycle continues.

Not only is such behavior contrary to any established standard of professional leadership, it's also just bad for business. As public service leaders, we're concerned with efficiency, effectiveness and the public's perception of our organizations. What some among us may not appreciate is the damage to our agencies in organizational prestige, absenteeism, lack of productivity, medical costs and outright sabotage when our personnel feel disaffected and disrespected due to uncivil behavior in the workplace.

When uncivil behavior is allowed to fester in the managerial ranks, it will inevitably work its way down to the line level where it affects relationships between peers. It then becomes a way of doing business and of treating people outside the organization, and in the communities we're supposed to serve. How can we expect our personnel to treat members of the public with dignity and respect, if as leaders, we fail to display those same values to the people within our own organizations?

In November 2018, the community in which I work approved a substantial city sales tax increase to better fund public safety and specifically, the police department. The measure passed by nearly 75 percent. This is a remarkable occurrence anywhere these days, but particularly so in a state that already is severely burdened by taxes. The police department is the largest, most expensive and most visible agency within our city government. Our personnel have by far the greatest number of daily contacts with the public, and many of

those encounters, such as traffic stops, are negative by nature. So why would the community overwhelmingly vote to give us more money?

There are undoubtedly a number of reasons for the passage of this measure by such a wide margin, but I'm certain that one major influence on the outcome was the culture of respect and civility that we have worked hard to develop within our department. It's something that our leadership team puts conscious and continual effort into modeling and instilling in our personnel at all ranks.

I BELIEVE THAT ONE OF THE FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS OF TRUE LEADERSHIP IS CHARACTER, AND THAT ONE OF THE MOST BASIC MANIFESTATIONS OF OUR CHARACTER IS HOW WE TREAT ONE ANOTHER.

From my position as chief to the newest recruit in training, we treat one another with a high level of courtesy and mutual respect. We conduct ourselves as professionals, with civility, and that conduct extends outward to the people we serve. On the rare occasions that this code of conduct has been violated, it was dealt with firmly. I have high expectations in this regard. I believe that the community at large has recognized the department's culture

of professionalism and responded with their overwhelming support.

One of the greatest miscalculations among would-be leaders in our occupation is that to be effective as a leader, you need to act tough. They put up a façade of toughness, which they manifest by being curt, loud, insensitive, uncaring or sometimes downright rude. Real leaders are tough, but they don't behave like that. Real leaders exude a quiet strength, and their toughness is demonstrated in their will, commitment to duty, their constant adherence to the values we share, and through their strength of character, even under the most difficult of circumstances. All these admirable qualities can be displayed while simultaneously treating others in a helpful, respectful and civil manner.

HOW CAN WE EXPECT OUR PERSONNEL TO TREAT MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT, IF AS LEADERS, WE FAIL TO DISPLAY THOSE SAME VALUES TO THE PEOPLE WITHIN OUR OWN ORGANIZATIONS?

There's a lot of talk these days about how to improve "employee engagement" in the workplace. En-

gagement begins with communication, and an organization's leadership is responsible for fostering an environment in which personnel at all levels feel they have a voice. At best, an open communicative atmosphere in which everyone listens to one another allows leaders to express the importance of an organization's mission and objectives, while line level personnel feel enabled to express concerns and make suggestions about how to best achieve those objectives. That type of communicative environment can never be achieved when incivility goes unchecked.

Leaders develop a professional rapport with their personnel, and they engage those they lead by listening, mentoring and making those they lead feel valued. That's how high-performing teams work, and it has the potential to be incredibly rewarding on a personal level. "Professional engagement with coworkers can and should be the most fulfilling piece of your professional growth program. When viewed from this perspective, it's really not a matter of civility — it's pure professionalism."¹

There's an old but true adage that says: People may not remember what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.

"We live in a world that is increasingly hysterical, with higher anger, lower flashpoints and rants on the media."² As law enforcement professionals, let's set a better example for others to follow, and not make matters worse by making enemies among ourselves, and the people we serve.

ENDNOTES

1. Tony Kern, "Going Pro – The Deliberate Practice of Professionalism" (Pygmy Books LLC, 2011), P. 211
2. Mark Kroeker, Oral presentation, University of Southern California, June 4, 2010

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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