

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

Playing favorites – the pitfalls of favoritism in the workplace

BY PHIL HANSEN



If you were raised with siblings, you likely experienced the sting of favoritism at some point in your childhood. There probably was at least one uncle, aunt or grandparent who doted on your brother or sister and left you feeling at times as though you were less valued. There's an inherent sense of inequity and a deep resentment that comes from being on the short end of preferentialism. Such feelings are very powerful and particularly damaging in the workplace, where favoritism can affect one's assignment, career advancement and income.

DAMAGE CAN BE EXTENSIVE

Over the 43-year course of my law enforcement career, I've worked for two agencies. One was a mega-sized department with nearly 10,000 sworn personnel, and the other is a smaller department with 140 sworn officers. Both organizations have always been staffed with outstanding rank-and-file personnel, and both departments went through periods of crisis because of destructive failures in leadership that included rampant favoritism.

Favoritism has the potential to undermine fundamental aspects of our daily operations such as the chain of command. In extreme cases, favored employees at lower ranks can feel empowered to minimize or even ignore the directives of their immediate supervisors. During some tough years when favoritism was rife at my former agency, I can remember hearing numerous accounts of insubordinate lieutenants disagreeing with their captains and saying something to the effect of, "I don't work for you, I work for Assistant Sheriff Jones." That type of attitude creates chaos in the workplace. The fact that those lieutenants knew, or

believed they could get away with such conduct indicates a serious leadership dilemma.

Promotions and selections to desirable assignments are always scrutinized by employees for signs of favoritism, and for good reason. If you've been in the workplace for a number of years, you've probably seen at least one promotion or choice assignment go to a person whom you believed to be unqualified, but who was also a golf partner, hunting buddy or something of that nature with the boss.

These types of occurrences devalue the workplace, create hostility between personnel, and are counter-productive to any sort of team building. In worst case scenarios, favoritism can result in depression and anger for employees who feel misused, and who then act out against the best interests of the organization.

WHY FAVORITISM IS (OR APPEARS TO BE) SO PREVALENT IN THE WORKPLACE

As good leaders, we all know that favoritism is wrong. Many of us even feel we've been victimized by favoritism at one time or another. Nonetheless, despite our own attempts to be fair and objective in our decision-making, we can find ourselves accused of playing favorites, too. The problem begins with human nature. We all are naturally drawn to relationships with some people. That's why as leaders we need to be aware of the signals we send and constantly guard against favoritism, or any appearance of it.

I believe that it's normal and healthy to make friends within the workplace. I also believe that this premise extends to friendships with subordinate personnel. You shouldn't have to keep your distance and come

across as a dispassionate, disaffected stuffed shirt to be a good leader. As a chief of police, most of my relationships at work are with subordinate personnel, and they bring significant joy and fulfillment to my life. I can honestly say that I like everyone I work with, and in some cases, I've developed very close relationships with them. It should come as no surprise that I want to see them succeed in their careers. So how do we maintain these relationships while avoiding disruption in the workplace with concerns about favoritism? I believe the answer lies in communication, and in trying to build objective criteria for advancement.

COMMUNICATION IS ALWAYS THE KEY FACTOR

If we're not communicating with our personnel, we're not leading them effectively. Whether we're teaching, sharing our vision for the organization, explaining the need for a change in procedure or thanking them for a job well done, the need to communicate with and listen to our personnel should permeate everything we do as leaders.¹ The same need for communication applies to our setting a tone of objectivity and fair play within our commands.

This type of communication can take place on a large scale, like making it clear to everyone what your expectations are and what performance measures are required for advancement — in other words, openly discussing the process and the rules that will be used to determine assignments and promotions.

Communication should also take place on an individual basis, candidly making it clear to subordinates that irrespective of personal relationships, your official support of anyone's advancement must be merit based.

Finally, consideration should be given to any improvements that can

be made organizationally to improve objectivity in the systems used to determine assignments and promotions. An example of this would be bringing in outsiders to sit on interview boards.

TRYING TO PRACTICE WHAT I PREACH

My agency recently completed a sergeant's promotional exam process and we now have an active candidate list. After we had announced the pending exam and the filing period had closed, I tried something that hadn't been done before in my agency. I sat down with all 15 sergeant applicants to tell them what my expectations were for the position of sergeant, and to explain in great detail how the promotional process works. For many of them, this was their first exam process. I believe that if we fail to provide explanations to our people about why we do things a certain way or how a process works, they'll provide their own explanations, which will seldom be positive.

During our talk, I provided information about reference material for the written exam and told them how the interview boards would be comprised of outside personnel to enhance objectivity. I then explained in detail how the commanders would promulgate the promotional selections for my approval based upon a review of the test scores, performance evaluations and input from supervisors, the candidate's education, experience, time on the department, and even their accrual of sick and vacation time. Some of them looked a little shocked. I don't think they all realized how much thought we actually put into the process.

In closing, I offered to assist any of the candidates with advice on how to approach the interview portion of the process. I'm pleased to say that the majority of them took me up on that offer. Later, I also spoke candid-

ly with a close friend or two on the list, making sure they understood my job was to ensure that the process would be as objective as possible and the chips would fall as they may. These are fine people and I don't believe they had any expectations I would intercede on their behalf, but I felt it needed to be said nonetheless.

When we announced the first promotion, it was met with enthusiasm across the board. Going forward as we work our way through the list, the candidates' scores condense and selections between personnel will become tougher to make. It is my hope and belief that future selections will be met by the remaining candidates with understanding and acceptance, even though they may experience some disappointment along the way. Most of us are mature enough to accept disappointment well, as long as we feel we were treated fairly.

FAVORITISM CAN DESTROY ORGANIZATIONS OF ANY SIZE AND IT IS A PARTICULARLY DAMAGING MALADY TO ANY SENSE OF TEAMWORK.

This is one example of an ongoing and conscious effort I make to project an atmosphere of objectivity and fair play within our workplace. I try hard to see that training opportunities and even social opportunities are equitably divided amongst peers. When selections to coveted positions and promotions are ultimately made, we openly discuss the outstanding performance characteristics of those who are chosen in hopes of projecting the fact that the assignments and promotions are merit based.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

In this article, I've talked about the pitfalls of favoritism and used a promotional process as a vehicle to discuss one small way I tried to approach the issue. It's important to realize that favoritism can destroy organizations of any size and it is a particularly damaging malady to any sense of teamwork.

It's not an issue that just affects chiefs of police. A SWAT sergeant can ruin a team environment by assigning training opportunities or selecting personnel for advancement within the team structure based on relationships rather than on merit.

Self-examination, constant communication with your personnel, and objective appraisal systems are a leader's best tools to avoid or mitigate the problems associated with favoritism. Strive for fairness in all you do and treat your personnel in the same equitable manner you would wish to be treated.

ENDNOTE

1. For more on communication and active listening, please refer to *Leading Through Communication, The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2014, and *Leadership by Design: Tools for Leading, The Tactical Edge*, Spring 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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