

# LEADING THROUGH

By Phil Hansen

No doubt some of you are experiencing frustration or even despair with respect to the current state of your career. Unfortunately, that frustration can negatively impact your level of enthusiasm and effectiveness as a leader. If left unaltered, it can also seriously impact the level of satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that you derive from your career as a whole.

In law enforcement, we are accustomed to conflict with criminals, but we are often unprepared mentally for some of the conflicts and career setbacks we encounter within our very organizations. Despite hard work, loyalty and your best efforts, you may feel that you are being opposed, stifled or somehow treated unfairly within your organization. Unfortunately, this happens to many people at one time or another in their careers. It most certainly will occur at some point during the career of a good leader.

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## LEADERSHIP AND THE CERTAINTY OF CONFLICT

Leadership. The very word implies movement or change. You lead others to a different end state, hopefully to the next level of performance. It also implies that you challenge the status quo — and change is seldom welcomed by everyone. A presenter at a class I once attended put it well when he rhetorically asked, “Who are you upsetting? If you’re not upsetting somebody, you are probably accepting the status quo.”

As an ethical leader operating within a world that is too often dominated by self-interest, you’ll probably find yourself at some point challenging established practices or taking a stand against someone in authority, based upon your values

and ethics. You are likely to be harmed in some way for taking that stand. Or, you may just encounter opposition and career setbacks from those who see themselves as your professional competitors. In any event, these conflicts and the associated damage can be hard to understand and even harder to accept if your primary focus is where it should be, on your personnel and your mission. We all like to think that at some point, the good guys win. When we see ourselves as one of those good guys and we take punches on a professional level, it is difficult to accept.

There was a period of time in my own career when I experienced tremendous frustration and even heartache. I felt undervalued by my organization as a whole, and believed that I was being treated with contempt by a small group of individuals who seemed intent on removing me from an assignment that I dearly loved. As a result, I was pretty dejected and sorely tempted to just pack it in and perhaps take an early retirement.

Fortunately, there were a number of tangible things that helped me to regain my focus, regroup and work through that difficult period, hopefully emerging as a better leader. I would like to share some of those things with you in hopes that my experience can help you to some degree in surviving your own career challenges.

## CONCENTRATE ON YOUR FUNDAMENTAL VALUES

The best leaders are guided by fundamental values, and their effectiveness comes as a result of their ability to align others with those values to achieve organizational goals. Any list of resonating core values is lengthy and will be a little different for each of us, but common themes in our profession include values like service, honor, courage and compassion, among others. If you make your own short list of core values, you will probably note that ego is not one of them, but perhaps humility is.

I believe that humility is a highly desirable if not necessary value for a good leader. The point here is that if you focus your attention on those things that project your best values, there will be less time to focus on your own ego and the disappointment that comes with career slights. In looking back, I believe that in my own most difficult career period, I

# CAREER ADVERSITY

let my ego get the best of me and I began to dwell too much on what I felt I was “owed” by the organization. In contrast, I found that by focusing on our mission and the needs of my personnel, I derived greater career satisfaction and felt much better on a personal level.

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## **PROJECT ENTHUSIASM — YOUR PERSONNEL DESERVE IT**

Some days are tough for all of us, and they are particularly tough if you feel you have been kicked in the teeth from a career perspective. The thing is, that is your problem. It should not be your personnel’s problem too. As a leader, you do not always have to *feel* enthusiastic, but you do always have to be enthusiastic and caring toward your personnel. The ability to project enthusiasm during day-to-day operations is essential for a leader, just as it is essential for a leader to project calm and control during times of crisis. I am not talking about being disingenuous. I am talking about the conscious application of enthusiasm as an important leadership tool. A great side effect is that your personnel will reflect that enthusiasm right back, which will have a buoyant effect on you.

It is important to remember that there are very few secrets in the workplace and most of your fellow employees will know if you have been slighted or suffered some setback in your career. Realize that everyone — superiors, peers and subordinates — will be watching to see how you handle adversity. Act appropriately; serve as a role model for others to emulate during their own career setbacks and make them proud of you.

## **SEEK DIVERSION BY PURSUING SELF-IMPROVEMENT**

The best people always want to get better, and this may be the perfect time for you to focus your attention on some training or educational opportunity that will improve your work performance and competitive edge while providing a much-needed diversion from workplace frustrations. In my case, I returned to school and obtained an advanced degree in a discipline that was directly related to my mission as a leader. The coursework was very taxing when added to my existing responsibilities, but it provided me with a great sense of accomplishment at a time when it was sorely needed. It also provided me with new perspectives and a renewed sense of energy to apply to my work.

Finally, it allowed me an opportunity to seek advice and share experiences with fellow leaders. I found this reassuring because our experiences and challenges were often remarkably similar, regardless of the occupational discipline.

## **WHAT WILL YOU SEEK TO WIN?**

One of the factors that greatly helped me was my coming to realize and accept the fact that leadership invariably leads to conflict, and that at least in the short run or within some dimensions, the good guys do not always win. Good leadership does not always equate to career advancement. In fact, I know many more outstanding leaders and contributors to our discipline who were stymied and marginalized during their careers than those who achieved great success in the form of individual reward or promotional advancement.

Most of us were taught from a young age that the good guys will win in the end, and although we have been hardened by the realities of life, it is something we would still like to believe. I think that in fact, the good guys usually do win, just not necessarily in terms of promotions and coveted assignments. The good guys win in terms of self-respect and being able to look at themselves in the mirror at the end of the day. They win by accomplishing the goal of taking their teams and organizations to a higher level of performance, while earning the respect of those they have cared for and led in a selfless manner. And finally, they win by holding a place of honor among men and women everywhere who choose to do the right things for the right reasons. In the final analysis, what will you seek to win? ■