

Lessons in leadership: Embracing change

By Phil Hansen

I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as a civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.

— Thomas Jefferson¹

Leadership embodies change. After all, our goal as leaders is to take an organization and its members to a different place, to new levels of performance. Perhaps that is an improved state of readiness or competence, or even a new relationship with the community we serve. In addition to the changes we pursue, we must also face inevitable changes in things like law and societal expectations. We should constantly strive to adapt and lead others to a new and better place, and that means change.

While much has been written about leading change in others, we often overlook the fact that to effectively lead others, we must first accept and endure change ourselves. As a profession, law enforcement is notoriously slow or even resistant to change. In fact, most people perceive us as defenders of the status quo, especially with regards to societal change.

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In 1999, I was a team leader at the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB) when we experienced a substantial change in our environment. That year, Sue Burakowski became the first female deputy selected to be a SWAT operator at SEB. The Special Enforcement Bureau has been in existence since 1958, which means that the unit had been in operation for 41 years at that time without

ever having a female deputy assigned. The culture was decidedly male-dominated, and any changes in that regard were not welcome at the line level. In fact, the change was seen by most members as damaging to the unit. Some feared it was the “beginning of the end” of our bureau as we knew it. I was soon notified by our unit commander that Sue was being assigned to me because he believed my team and I would give her a fair opportunity to succeed. This was something I wasn't particularly thrilled about on that day, but which I'm very proud of in retrospect.



Sue Burakowski with members of SEB Red Team, 1999.

I remember meeting with my team that evening to tell them about the pending transfer and assignment of our newest teammate. As expected, my announcement was met with exasperation, much eye-rolling, and several colorful variations on the theme of “Jeez, Phil. Why us?” As the team leader, it was clearly a time for me to embrace this change if I had any hopes of convincing my team to accept it.

Contrary to how it may sound, my team was not a collection of closed-minded, misogynistic hardheads; they were human beings, and human beings naturally resist change, especially when it is forced upon them. As a matter of fact, my teammates were intelligent, dedicated and highly skilled law enforcement professionals who each possessed a keen sense of justice and fair play. It was to these values that I appealed as we discussed the issue.

I talked candidly with them about fairness, about the inevitability of this social change, and about their duty as professionals to help Sue become the very best SWAT deputy she was capable of becoming. In doing so, it was important to assure them that fairness cut both ways, so I also talked about making sure that Sue earned her way, as any other candidate would. She would have

to make or break it on her own merits. My team members knew I was sincere, and I will always be proud of how they responded to the task. They fully accepted her as a teammate and instructed her with the same diligence and respect they would show to any other newly assigned member of the unit. Unfortunately, some of the personnel assigned to other teams weren’t as open-minded.

Sue overcame great challenges in those early days, but proved conclusively that a qualified woman could compete and contribute with her male counterparts. Early in her tenure, I was so impressed with her commitment, I remember telling a fellow sergeant that if she couldn’t do something, she would surely die trying. Sue became an outstanding SWAT operator, and a few years later she went on to become the first female paramedic deputy in SEB’s fabled Emergency Services Detail. She is highly regarded by all who have worked with her at SEB and now serves as one of the bureau’s three lieutenants. I am grateful to say that Sue became a dear friend and someone for whom I will always have great respect. Rather than heralding the “beginning of the end” of our unit’s status as a premier tactical unit, there is no question that her contributions and the further integration of qualified female



personnel into SEB improved the professional state of the bureau as a whole.

As noted earlier, Sue’s initial transfer to SEB took place in 1999, nearly 20 years ago. As such, it probably sounds like ancient history to many of you, who probably now take some degree of integration and gender equality for granted. At the time, however, it was a big deal, just as it was years earlier when the first black deputies arrived at the unit. In hindsight, we tend to take these monumental steps for granted.

Even the best and most appropriate of changes are often uncomfortable in the present moment. They are difficult to absorb, and that difficulty is magnified immensely when leaders fail to properly evaluate the necessity for the change and then support it with their best efforts. As leaders, we must strive to keep an open mind, and listen to arguments, thought processes and the basis for change or alternative positions. We must not evaluate change based on what is comfortable or popular with our personnel, but rather on what comports with our values as a nation, a community, an organization and a team.

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As I age, I find that time is my most precious commodity, and I can't afford to waste it being resentful about the fact that the world around me won't stand still. In youth, we have a greater tendency to question the status quo, but as we age we tend to become static defenders of the norm. Many of my contemporaries spend an inordinate amount of time being resistant and bitter about change. They have become intransigent, constantly grumbling about the conditions, constraints and social environment we now face compared to "the good old days."

I would assert that these are the good old days, and with sound leadership, tomorrow will be even better. Over the course of my career, I have observed and experienced tremendous changes in equipment, tactics and

assimilation to public expectations and social norms. Some changes were tougher to embrace than others, but in the end, most have been proper, needed, and to some degree, inevitable. The results have been overwhelmingly positive. Our law enforcement personnel routinely perform at levels we could only dream of in the past. For the sake of those you lead, keep looking forward and help prepare them for the future and the changes to come. ■

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 criti-

cal 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.

ENDNOTE

1. Jefferson, Thomas. Excerpted from a letter to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816.



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