



*Nobody cares how much
you know, until they know
how much you care.*

— THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Lessons in Leadership:

Leading from the Here and Now

BY PHIL HANSEN

I recently had a conversation with a friend who serves as an executive-level officer for a mid-sized law enforcement agency. He was expressing frustration because he sees his department heading toward a major breakdown in the relationship between the office of the chief and the line officers.

His department has a relatively new chief of police who was appointed after serving many years with a much larger metropolitan agency that we'll call Gotham City. The chief is a nice enough guy and he appears sincere in his desire to do a good job, but rather than trying to understand or relate to the customs, culture and temperament of his new department, the chief makes constant verbal references and policy changes based on how things were done in Gotham City. At the same time, he apparently fails to recognize the importance of interacting with his people. He appears to be more consumed with external issues and relationships than the internal workings of his agency. My guess is that this chief patterns his behavior after chiefs he worked for in Gotham City, who were heavily involved with the political picture and seldom took time to interact with line officers in their large department. The

result on my friend's department is a workforce that is feeling increasingly devalued and disenfranchised from their leadership.

It's not uncommon for a new leader to come in from another agency, or from some other unit within a large agency. Similarly, it's not unusual for a new leader to return to a unit or team where they had previously served at a lesser rank. When stepping into a leadership role in a new environment, or even a familiar environment at a different period of time, it is important to understand that your new surroundings are unique to their time and place.

Each department, unit or team has its own history, culture and current challenges it must face with your help. This is true even if you are returning to a unit where you served previously. Substantial changes may have taken place over a short period of time. Think of the changes that have occurred in most agencies as a result of the challenging events we faced in 2020. Although your prior experience will certainly be crucial to your success going forward, a cookie cutter approach and constant references to how things were done at another time or place will only serve to cause resentment or resistance.

It is essential to embrace and adapt to your new surroundings, display commitment to your new personnel, and project leadership from the here and now.

It is completely appropriate for a leader to be proud of their own professional history and experience, but constant verbal references to one's past service at a different agency or unit, or how things were done "back in the day," can be perceived as a sign of arrogance, indifference, or dissatisfaction with the current circumstance. It conveys a message that the leader was happier elsewhere or that this new posting and its personnel are somehow less worthy or professional than what he was accustomed to.

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More often than not, a leader's constant reference to their prior assignments or experience is a sign of insecurity. They feel the need to validate their current position by reminding others of their own background and success. Such references are both damaging and unnecessary. The people we are charged with leading have usually done their homework. They already know who we are and what we've done elsewhere. What they want and deserve to know is that our hearts and minds are with them now. They want to hear that we care about them, and how we intend to lead them through the challenges they face today.

My job as a leader required that I be prepared to change myself, and that I adapt to my new surroundings. In doing so, I came to love my new department and the people I served with.

As leaders, we are expected to institute change for the better, and many of those better ideas will naturally spring from our past experience. Nevertheless, it's important to remember that how we introduce and incorporate those changes can make all the difference in the world when it comes to how our personnel accept and implement them. Time permitting, the most effective methods of policy development and change are always inclusive, and the reasoning for change should be clearly communicated to the affected personnel. In cases of very significant change, the communication should come directly from the most senior leader.

I recently retired as the chief of a mid-sized police department of approximately 200 personnel. Prior to that, I served for 36 years in a very large law enforcement agency of nearly 18,000 personnel. While my experience and record of service with the large agency was the basis for my later employment with the smaller agency, my new position required that I learn how to operate in a very different environment. I was recruited as part of a new leadership team to act as an agent of change. But to be effective, my job as a leader required that I be prepared to change myself, and that I adapt to my new surroundings. In doing so, I came to love my new department and the people I served with. They in turn were wonderful about embracing and implementing the changes we developed. I believe that's because we worked on them together, and the changes we made were tailored to what was best for our department at that place and time. Throughout my tenure there, I tried to be judicious about making too many references to my prior employment. I believe the worst thing I could have done would be to unilaterally institute wholesale changes to the department with the tagline, "This is how we did it in the big city."

In addition to providing direction and managing the department, my task as a leader required learning about my new organization, getting to know and understand the people I was charged with leading, and projecting the message that I cared about them and our mission.

Leadership is a deliberate art. As good leaders, we should routinely ask ourselves, "What have I done lately to show my people that I care about them and our mission?" The answer may be something as simple as attending a debriefing, a unit meeting or having lunch with the members of

a specialized unit to thank them for their work. But if we fail to ask ourselves that question regularly, those things can fall by the wayside and we begin to lose touch, and credibility.

Like tactical operations, leadership is about the present, and we're only as good as our last performance. More than ever, our personnel need to know that our heads are in the game and we're behind them in today's struggle to perform this crucial and challenging job. Let's lead from the here and now, and save the tales of how it used to be for those get-togethers when we all retire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Hansen retired as 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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