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Knowing Your Employees: A Key to Better Supervision

Sgt. Tommy Carswell and Officer William Messerschmidt, Auburn, Alabama Police Department.

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Knowing Your Employees

Many courses for first-line supervisors and police managers teach the value of getting to know the line officers. Instructors provide examples such as knowing officer's birthdays, off-duty interests, and the names of the officers' spouses and children. While these can be helpful starting points, we as supervisors can do better by making an effort to truly understand our employees, rather than superficially getting to know them. The implications of understanding our employees are far-reaching; from successful job assignments to meaningful coaching and correction, individual employees will respond differently to the same stimuli.

Understanding employees can be as difficult as it is valuable, yet the first step is well established: facilitate open communication, or dialogue. As a manager, one can begin with superficial knowledge, gain information through active listening, and develop this information into understanding through a basic awareness of different personality types.

In *Developing and Creating Workplace Communities*, Alan Black, Ph.D., describes four general classifications of personality. These categories apply to ways of thinking, learning, problem-solving, and communicating. He uses the acronym M.I.N.D. to classify people as being meditative, intuitive, negotiative, or directive (24). Understanding these four groups can enhance the first line supervisor's management of his or her staff.

Employees in the "meditative" group are quiet and sometimes abrupt. They use facts to make decisions and tend to have precise, logical thoughts (12). Their co-workers may think of them as "matter of fact," or as loners. To communicate with them effectively, a supervisor should be prepared to avoid rambling or being too talkative (25).

Black's second category involves "intuitives." They are risk takers who are imaginative and inventive. They enjoy experimenting and look toward the future (12). Because of their creative and playful style of communication, intuitives are frequently misunderstood or criticized for not being serious enough. This makes it especially important for supervisors to identify these imaginative thinkers (25). Ignoring them may mean overlooking new and exciting ideas.

The "negotiative" group that Black describes is friendly, loyal, and works well with others. Trustworthy and flexible, but often emotional, they tend to be most content as followers (12). Others value them as good listeners and good team players, but supervisors should recognize that they may not feel comfortable in a leadership role. It is also helpful for a supervisor to understand that personnel in the directive and meditative categories can frustrate negotiative officers.

Black's final group is the "directive" category. They are practical and dependable planners who tend to be neat, organized, and approach problems in a step-by-step manner. They strive to do things the "right" way, and want correct answers from others (12). Although they are good with laws and policies, they are not emotive except when doubted. When questioned, they can become overly firm or stop listening completely. This tendency is especially important for supervisors to anticipate in a coaching, counseling, or disciplinary setting.

Developing an appreciation for the differences among our employees can significantly enrich the workplace and make the first-line supervisor more effective. The simple categorizations provided by Black are not complete, nor are they meant to be. People are individuals, and will frequently display the characteristics of more than one group. This, however, does not invalidate or devalue the research.

Classification schemes such as that developed by Black or the common Myers-Briggs categorizations are effective guidelines from which supervisors may better understand his or her officers. These generalizations--when grounded in a true desire to understand the employee and coupled with open communication--can improve managerial decision-making, increase the supervisor's effectiveness as a coach or mentor, and can help thwart the common personnel problems that stem from inter-personal conflicts.

Works Cited

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About the Authors

Tommy Carswell began his career in law enforcement in 1981 at the Lee County, AL Sheriff's Dept, working in the jail/ communications division, District Attorney's Child Support Division, and patrol division. He is currently serving as a sergeant at the City of Auburn Police Dept, where he began service in 1988. He holds an Associate of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Southern Union State Junior College and a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Faulkner University. Also, he is in a Master of Public Administration program at Columbus State University and is a member of Faulkner University's AΩA chapter of the Alpha Phi Sigma Criminal Justice Honor Society.

Tommy can be reached at tcarswell@auburnalabama.org or 334.887.4907

William Messerschmidt began his career in law enforcement in 1996 with the City of Auburn. He is currently serving as a patrol officer. He holds a Bachelors of Arts degree in Economics from Auburn University and a Master of Public Administration from Columbus State University. He is also studying Emergency Management through the Institute for Emergency Preparedness at Jacksonville State University. Bill is a member of the National Association of Professional Accident Reconstruction Specialists and the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences.

He can be reached at wmesserschmidt@auburnalabama.org or 334.501.3150

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