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Perception and Change in Law Enforcement Leadership

Robert T. Thetford, J.D.

Think about the answers to the following questions:

How has our society changed over the past 20 to 30 years?

How have crimes and criminals changed?

How has law enforcement changed?

What skills do law enforcement supervisors need today?

What new skills will law enforcement supervisors need five years from now?

A changing environment demands that supervisors constantly evaluate their management style against existing conditions, while they must also continuously upgrade their knowledge, skills and techniques. Today's supervisor, especially in criminal justice, will find that there are limited opportunities for official training, and yet training must be obtained if the supervisor is to survive in or advance beyond the first line position. Like it or not, the burden of maintaining and improving proficiency rests squarely on the employee, not on the department. Understanding this truth is a step, but only a first step, in preparing for your future.

People often think of a supervisor as a person in total control over an organizational unit, whose word is law and who enjoys perks commensurate with the responsibility of a supervisor. Perhaps this perception was reality at some time in the past but it is certainly no longer true in today's workplace environment. Just why is it that past methods fail to work in the employment culture of today?

According to Alvin Toffler, there were three distinct stages in the historical evolution of technology. The first was the Agricultural Age, which lasted from the time of Adam to about 1745 in the United States. This stage was characterized by subsistence agriculture and saw few innovative changes in technology. The second stage was the industrial age, which lasted from

1745 to 1955, and witnessed progressive changes such as the steam engine, telegraph, telephone, radio and electric power. The third stage, described by Toffler as the Information Age, began in 1955, the year in which white collar employees first outnumbered blue collar workers in the United States. Perhaps the most accurate one word description for the Information Age would be change.

Today, change permeates the culture of every first world country and certainly affects every aspect of American life, including the workplace. As new technologies have become available they have been rapidly assimilated and embraced by society because of the nature of technology to enhance lifestyles and increase productivity. We now face a bewildering array in choices of competing technologies both in the workplace and the home, all of which promise to make life better or more productive.

At the same time, internal factors have changed in the sense that young workers often seem to be guided by a different moral compass from that which guided their forefathers. The MTV generation has certainly heard the media message that one should live only for the moment, and this theme is played repeatedly in their lack of long-term commitment to either family, profession or employer. This lack of long-term commitment is evidenced by the increased number of career employment changes expected for today's employee (ten or more) as compared to less than five for an employee entering the job market in the 1960s. A booming economy and increased availability of employment opportunities certainly account for some of the increase in job changing. But a generalized lack of commitment toward any profession or employer, coupled with the perception that employers owe no job security to their employees have certainly contributed to the frequent career changes observed today.

Response to a changing environment often determines success or failure in the business world. This is not limited to the business world, however, but also applies equally to law enforcement and law enforcement related professions. An examination of the changes occurring over the last ten years in law enforcement reflects an increasingly varied response to a changing criminal environment as well as the embracing of new technologies to manage criminal justice data, some of which were not even available to law enforcement a decade ago.

Computers have drastically altered workplace methodology in the law enforcement community and related fields and continue to play an ever increasing role throughout the criminal justice field. Computers have made available the implementation of such systems as:

- Community Policing Techniques
- NCIC 2000
- AFIS Fingerprint System
- Vehicle Computers
- GIS Imaging Databases
- Major Case Databases
- DVP Radios
- Fax Machines
- Pagers
- Cellular Telephones

- Internet (e-mail) and Intranet Communications

At the same time, crime and the criminals who commit crimes have changed. As new technologies have become available, criminals have become more sophisticated and, some would argue, more violent. Hacking, a crime unheard of a few short years ago, has become commonplace along with identity theft, credit card billing theft, cyber espionage and exotic schemes such as bitnapping, page jacking, and cyber extortion. In the past, fewer than 10 percent of all criminals used computers. That is certainly no longer true and it has been estimated that 90 percent of all criminals in the United States are now computer literate.

The workplace environment has changed as rapidly as the culture and this is reflected in today's workplace diversity, even in law enforcement. In Alabama, for example, almost 10 percent of the state's police officers are women. Twenty years ago this figure was less than one percent. Twenty-five years ago the FBI had only three black Special Agents. Today there are 640. There are over 1,700 female Special Agents with the FBI today, while in 1971 there were none.

Today's criminal justice supervisor must be gender blind, color blind and aware of the heavy volume of racism and sexism that exists in every organizational structure. The supervisor must have the ability and the training to deal with racism and sexism effectively in the workplace in order to ensure that the mission and goals of the organization will be met.

In order to adequately respond to the demands produced by an ever changing workplace environment, it is necessary for today's supervisor to stay current in his or her field. The ability to remain current in one's chosen field often separates those who are selected for senior management positions from those who remain in first-line supervisory positions throughout their careers. It has been suggested that a supervisor or aspiring supervisor should spend at least three percent of his or her income on books, tapes, films and courses designed to enhance the supervisor's professional ability and credentials.

This education may be formal, such as a college or master's degree program, or it may be obtained informally through professional training programs. In choosing training or educational programs, the law enforcement professional should be careful to select those which provide real world solutions for both the problems existing today and for those situations anticipated in the foreseeable future.

Only through understanding the effect of change in the criminal justice arena as well as the necessity of innovative leadership approaches for today's law enforcement personnel will it be possible to develop a plan to effectively lead the officer of tomorrow.

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