

## The Problem: Ineffective First Line Supervisors

The role of a police sergeant in a contemporary law enforcement agency is perhaps more significant than any other position within the organization. When a first line supervisor displays a negative attitude, he will likely infect an entire squad of officers causing declining morale and low productivity.

The first line supervisor is in an extremely difficult position because it requires a thorough knowledge of all technical aspects of law enforcement as well as being a trainer, coach, and supervisor. Compounding the situation is the dilemma of walking the tightrope within the organization attempting to satisfy management directives and maintain high esprit de corps of his/her subordinates when their goals conflict. The sergeant has to deal with the public, make complex on-the-spot legal decisions, and is also responsible to train and develop his subordinates in accordance with management expectations. In short, he is expected to be all things to all people.

Most line officers identify with their squad leader and seek to aspire to that position without really understanding the requirements of the job. Once they become supervisors, many do not have the desire or ability to perform the duties of controlling, directing, motivating, and disciplining their subordinates. One of the most frequent criticisms of sergeants by their supervisors is that they are too closely aligned with their officers and are unwilling to invoke discipline when appropriate. Ultimately, the true test of the sergeants' leadership will lie in their ability to foster a work environment which provides for high morale and professional behavior congruent with the values and goals of the organization.

Specific problem areas which have been identified by our command staff concerning first line supervisors are essentially two-fold; either specific to the organization or to the individual first line supervisor. These problems are indicated as follows:

### Organizational Problems:

- Inadequate mechanism to successfully transition from officer to supervisor.
- Failure of mid-managers to lead by example and actively develop the first line supervisor.
- Failure to empower first line supervisors to become involved in policy changes in order to gain their support.
- Failure to provide continual leadership training which builds self-esteem and establishes positive contact with command staff.
- Failure to provide an alternative career path which provides for advancement other than the supervisory tract.

### Individual Problems:

- Failure to connect with department mission statement and core values.
- Failure to objectively evaluate performance.
- Failure to objectively investigate and adjudicate personnel complaints.
- Failure to transmit policy changes to the rank and file in a positive manner.
- Failure to initiate discipline when appropriate.
- Failure to proactively manage daily field operations; hesitancy to make decisions.
- Failure to project a positive attitude to their subordinates.

Clearly, First Line Supervisors and Field Training Officers have the greatest impact on the Organizational Culture of a police department. Despite this, many departments fail to expend any significant effort towards influencing the attitudes of these individuals, thereby managing the culture of their agencies.

This article was devoted to identifying a problem, Ineffective First line supervisors. The solution, while beyond the scope of this article is readily apparent. We need to recognize that the key ingredient in becoming a more value-driven police agency is for management to utilize their First line Supervisors as change agents; By spending more time gaining their support and accepting their feedback, all of the above cited failures will become successful components of positive leadership.