DEVELOPING THE LEADERS FOR

MANAGEMENT MUST IDENTIFY, INVOLVE, AND ENCOURAGE POTENTIAL LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

For decades, the public safety communications industry has taken pride in changing the way we look at the positions we hold. We are no longer seen as unskilled labor answering a phone or dispatching a call; we are now true professionals with measurable skills and knowledge needed to drive our industry into the rapidly advancing age of technology. What is lacking is a process for creating and developing management personnel and leaders who will be the force that continues to advance our industry and provide the lifesaving services to our communities. This paper attempts to offer clear ideas to help identify, involve, and encourage those who have the potential so that when the time comes, they seize the opportunity.

Peter Drucker once said that "management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things."[1] For decades, public safety agencies, working with industry organizations, have placed a high priority on improving the professionalism of the industry. The days are long gone where we consider public safety just another job; we have elevated our careers by providing highly trained personnel to tackle the difficult tasks associated with saving lives and protecting property of the communities that we serve. Public safety communications has developed into a highly technical career path, with opportunities for advancement at all levels. Management personnel have included in programs such as the Emergency Number Professional Certification through the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) and the Registered Public Safety Leader program through the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO). While these programs are also offered to frontline personnel with the appropriate level of experience and education, chances are the development of call takers and dispatchers won't pursue the training or certification due to financial constraints or failing to see the possibilities that such options may provide in the future. That leaves one question, what can be done right now to prepare the leaders of tomorrow?

Open Doors and Open Minds

You have heard it thousands of times. Your manager or supervisor tells you that "my door is always open," but is that really the case? Open doors don't always lead to open minds. When developing leaders, the most exciting part of the process is hearing from frontline personnel on how they would shape the communications centers of the future. What is working at ground level, what isn't working, and what can be done to improve? While management usually has a good grasp of the difficulties faced at the console, they are also detached from the positions they are supervising. Listening to the people who are doing the job is critical to continued success. For management, this is what an open door should look like. Brainstorming with employees to determine the best course of action, researching current trends and liability issues, and providing feedback on suggestions has the effect of creating a real open door policy and improving employee morale. If we are truly professionals, then all members of the communications team, from the newly trained dispatcher to the agency director, should have a voice in shaping policies and procedures.

The open door policy can be a negative if not handled properly. Without feedback, those with the ideas won't approach the subject again, or worse, will become frustrated and decide to leave the agency or even the industry because they feel they are only a body in a seat. Leaders should remember that if it were not for the person under the headset taking the calls, they wouldn't have anyone to lead. An effective open door policy can inspire personnel to become more involved in their own career, creating the desire to improve the skills and knowledge that is used on a daily basis. Paraphrasing the philosopher Plutarch, "The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled."[2] Accepting feedback and ideas is the ignition source for creativity

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and critical thinking that can improve communications and leadership at all levels.

Involvement Sparks Creativity

Most agencies have policy and procedural manuals that require constant attention. Updating of these manuals requires time that most management personnel can't afford to lose. With the continual advance to technology available to communications centers, agencies should consider making the process collaborative, not in the sense of "send me your ideas" but actually putting the work in the hands of those who are doing the job. Agencies that allow Internet access for personnel can take advantage of tools such as Google Docs and ZOHO that allow for creation, editing, commenting, saving, and exporting of Office Suite documents, spreadsheets, and presentations. Others such as PBWorks allow users to work together on a wiki format, uploading documents for mark up and/or editing. All of these resources, and more, can be used to involve frontline personnel in the process. Management overseeing a project can appoint a team to work on response guidelines, while another team can work together on policy manuals. Management will have the final draft and can make revisions from that point, but saving the time of combing through pages and pages to determine what is out of date and what needs to be added. With clear direction, personnel become a much more valuable asset to the agency.

A joint work effort is not only effective in creating and editing resources, but also in developing training products for new hires as well as tenured employees. Most agencies using Emergency Medical Dispatch are required to complete Continuing Dispatch Education for re-certification. These usually can take the form of paper-based training, quizzes, and online or out of agency classes or workshops. Taking the limits off of training and

putting some of the responsibility in the hands of those receiving the training will help the agency focus on what skills and knowledge are already mastered and quickly determine what needs work. Allowing personnel to create training together improves skills across the board. Using wikis allows for importing or embedding YouTube videos, and links to podcasts related to 9-1-1 dispatching and call taking. Linking to videos from TED that highlight creativity and innovative ideas can spark something in the leaders of tomorrow, bringing new and fresh perspectives to the workplace. Collaboration has the potential to improve understanding of policies, build interpersonal relationship skills, and advance teamwork to the next level. Management does not have the copyright for success, only the authority and responsibility to oversee it. Teams built to work together are more productive and satisfied.
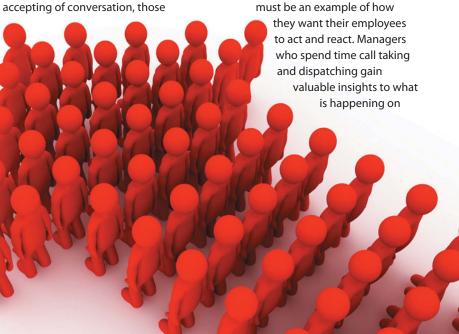
Inclusion, Seclusion, and the Unique

One of the battles that many agencies face is creating a workplace that is the definition of inclusion while maintaining a professional environment for all involved. Several types of people work in our dispatch centers: those who are open and accepting of conversation, those

who are self-maintained and don't need a great deal of social interaction, and those who fall somewhere in the middle. If the industry is going to succeed in developing a pool of candidates to lead public safety communications in the future, inclusion must be a top priority. From a human resources perspective, following the letter of the law is not enough. Anti-discrimination legislation has been on the books for decades, but there are still areas where we can improve. The close knit "family" in our communications center benefits from an environment that doesn't discriminate on any level. Whether personnel are passionate about issues facing the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgendered Community (LGBT), or deeply involved in the work that they do at their place of worship in their off time, leaders must be proactive in ensuring all voices are equal and all personnel are treated the same. This same level of non-discrimination must apply to offering projects and opportunities. Personal feelings should never come in to play when creating an environment that yields leaders instead of followers; you never know where the next great idea may come from.

Where Does Leadership Begin and End?

Leadership begins at the top. Whether an agency director, board member, or elected official has the responsibility of managing the day-to-day operations of the communications center, leadership must be an example of how they want their employees to act and react. Managers who spend time call taking and dispatching gain valuable insights to what is happening on

the floor, while the frontline personnel see a manager who isn't afraid to get their hands dirty and do the job. That describes my view of where leadership begins, but where does it end? I argue that it doesn't. A new hire walking in the door on the first day, with an attitude of confidence and a zeal for learning everything they can about the job can be more of a leader than the 20-year employee who only does enough to get by. The 10-year employee who isn't afraid to ask questions but also takes command of an incident in absence of management is a leader in that they realize the importance of making sure all bases are covered.

While leadership never ends, attitude in a communications center can be a direct reflection of lack of leadership skills in upper management. Management personnel who fail to realize the importance and potential of frontline personnel are setting themselves up for failure. Decreased job satisfaction, low employee morale, and bad attitudes are frequently the result of a distant management team that lacks credibility and fails to meet the needs of the agency. Managers like to think that they know everything and have the solution to all of the problems. If that is the case, why is turnover so high and morale low? Managers ask their subordinates to take responsibility for their actions on a daily basis, but they must be willing to do the same. If you make a decision and it turns out to be wrong, admit it. If you are asked a question and don't know the answer, don't just brush it off, find the answer. If you don't know something, say so. If you fail at taking responsibility, then you will fail at creating a stable environment that is cohesive and effective.
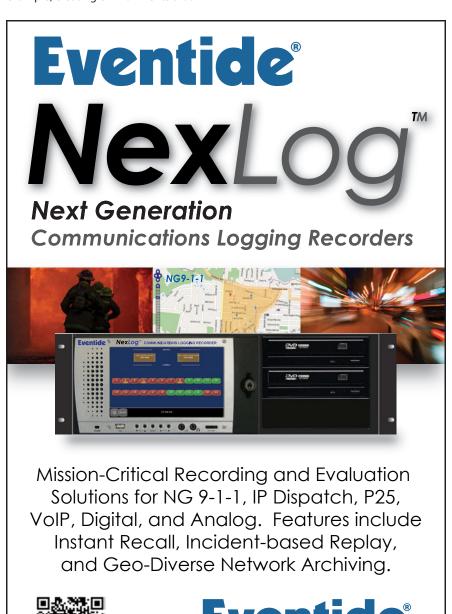
Conclusion

Leaders come in many forms, frontline personnel, training coordinators, supervisors, and directors all have the potential to be informed and creative pioneers in the rapidly advancing digital age of public safety communications. If one thing sums up what leadership should look like, it's this: have a dream, have a purpose, keep

the focus on saving lives and protecting the community that you serve, all while understanding the roles that each position plays in your organization. If someone stands out as a leader, encourage them; nurture that passion for excellence and creativity. If someone lacks the drive to be considered leadership material, give them every opportunity to succeed by involving them in projects that may interest them. The days of ruling by dictatorship behind us, we are now in the age of leading by example, creating environments that

allow ideas to flow and processes to improve by teamwork and collaboration. The leaders of the future are working now; take the time to build them up, exploit their strengths, and improve their weaknesses. If we don't, then why did we work so hard to make this a profession instead of just a job? ●

References
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(2) Duff, Timothy E. (2002) Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice. Oxford University Press