

Leadership Checklist – Starting the Conversation

Ways Command Staff and Supervisors Can Talk with an Officer Who is Distressed

Although you are used to working with people who are upset or distressed, it can feel different when it's one of your officers. As a supervisor, it is your responsibility to follow up on concerning behaviors you see in your supervisees. Prior to doing so, it is essential to know what the policies and processes are for supporting the officers with whom you are working. These conversations can be challenging. This resource is designed to provide examples of possible language that can be used when you need to discuss your concerns with an officer. Remember that it is not just what you say but also how you say it. Avoid minimizing the situation or being judgmental. Instead, be genuine and supportive.

1. **“I’ve noticed that you have been _____ (add specific behavioral information, such as coming in to work late/snapping at your colleagues/withdrawing and not spending as much time in the community as you would normally), and I am concerned because this isn’t typical for you.”**

Provide specific, objective behavioral information about the change that you are seeing or have seen in the person.

2. **“I may not know exactly what you’re going through, but I know that it’s normal/understandable to be feeling overwhelmed/stressed/at a loss/so many emotions all at once.”**

Take a moment to be empathetic by acknowledging and normalizing what the person might be experiencing. Acknowledging difficulties or struggles can be helpful in a time of distress. This is an opportunity to try to understand what the officer is going through. Don't be afraid to say something like, 'I'd like to know...' or 'I'd like to better understand...'. This will give the officer the opportunity to open up and talk if they want to.

3. **“Let’s make a plan for how we can best support you during this time.”**

Support the person with joint problem-solving and by understanding what the next steps may

look like, if possible. These steps do not have to be dramatic; they can be incremental and small-scale.

4. **“As your supervisor, I’m here to help you however I can. But, it’s good to have additional support outside the chain of command and the department. Who else in your life can you call/reach out to for more support?”**

Help the person connect with others who can provide support. This will allow the officer to name someone they may be most comfortable with, including family members, friends, etc. This can counter their thoughts of feeling alone and isolated. It also reminds the officer that you are not their only source of support.

5. **“I’m glad we talked; I am always here to help however I can. Right now, I think it would be helpful for you to connect with other outlets of support, too. How about you reach out to _____. Do you need my assistance in connecting with them?”**

Providing a resource in the moment can help someone feel supported and problem solve when next steps might feel overwhelming. This may be a family member, friend, faith leader, peer support member, or any other resources you know are available and may be helpful. Ensure the officer understands that you are there for them but respect their comfort level. It may be apparent that the officer is not comfortable opening up to you, that is okay. It is important you both understand the dynamic of your supervisor/officer relationship, and as their supervisor, you should ensure they are connected with a reliable, trusted source.

6. **“You’re not alone/Many have a hard time with this/It’s normal and okay to struggle. That’s why we have (peer support, mental health providers, Employee Assistance Programs, etc..) available for you.”**

Reminding the person that you and/or others have had similar experiences can make them feel less alone and more inclined to seek out help. It can feel isolating when you are

struggling; people often feel like no one else can understand them or what they are going through. Officers may minimize their struggles because they do not visibly see other officers struggling or see other people who they feel are struggling more. It's important to remind officers that the job will affect everyone in different ways; the challenges other people endure do not minimize their individual experiences.

7. “Let’s focus on getting you the support you need right now.”

Remain focused on the present and immediate next steps, as focusing on “bigger picture” issues could cause more stress or anxiety. It may feel tempting for you to try to answer any questions the person has about the future, but it is best to stay focused on the present in a hopeful way without making promises.

As a supervisor, you should understand the impact you can have when you ‘reach in’ to someone that you recognize may be struggling. Often, the burden of reaching out for help is placed on the one who is struggling. Instead, as the person observing another struggle, ‘reach in’ to them to ease the difficulty that often comes with reaching out to ask for help. Recognizing distress and making the effort to check in can be a proactive step in helping your officers stay safe and well. “Reaching in” is a sign of effective leadership. It can help build trust and break down the stigma associated with having these conversations.

If you are feeling suicidal, thinking about hurting yourself, or are concerned that someone you know may be in danger of hurting themselves, dial **9-8-8** or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)**. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and is completely confidential.

Other 24/7 resources are included here:

Hotlines

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

9-8-8

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

COP LINE

1-800-267-5463 (1-800-COPLINE)

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741

Safe Call Now

(206) 459-3020

Cop 2 Cop

1-866-COP-2COP (1-866-267-2267)

Resources

IACP Officer Safety and Wellness Resources

<https://www.theiacp.org/osw>

- **Identifying and Managing Anxiety in Law Enforcement Officers**
- **Addressing Law Enforcement Mental Health – Guidance for Agency Leaders**
- **The National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide Toolkit**



National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide Resource Directory

<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/national-consortium-on-preventing-law-enforcement-suicide-resource-webpage>



National Suicide Awareness for Law Enforcement Officers Program

<https://safleo.org/>

Bureau of Justice Assistance VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Resources

<https://bja.ojp.gov/program/valor/overview>

This project was supported by Grant No. 2018-DP-BX-K001 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

For more officer wellness resources visit: www.theIACP.org/OSW



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[800.THE.IACP](tel:800.THE.IACP)



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