

## **Lengthening Tenure by Following Proven Principles**

*By Paul D. Schultz, Chief of Police, Lafayette, Colorado*

To successfully navigate the professional and political landscape, new police chiefs require a detailed map, a quality compass, and often a seasoned guide to help them reach their destination: a long, secure tenure as chief. In addition to acquiring sound advice from an experienced police chief mentor, there are numerous key strategies for anchoring the top law enforcement executive's position. Implicit in these principles are certain qualities that new chiefs must embrace to chart a clear course through uncertain terrain. These include integrity, continual personal and professional growth, superior community service, professionalism, effective communications, work excellence, and vision. Although these principles were developed with smaller-police department chiefs in mind, they are easily adaptable to the environment of larger police departments.

### **Be Honest with Elected Officials**

The relationship between elected officials and police executives is critical to the success and tenure of the latter group. A community's elected officials look to their police chief for the unvarnished and unembellished truth at all times. They should hear information from chiefs first, if at all possible, rather than from the news media or through the "grapevine." Briefing elected officials in a timely manner communicates an important message that chiefs are aware of current events and that they respect the position of these officials and their need to know.

A friendly, professional rapport with elected officials should be cultivated and maintained, but not at the expense of fairness and impartiality; chiefs must be able to politely say no if asked to complete an inappropriate or illegal task. Building long-term, positive relationships with elected officials and maintaining one's integrity are not mutually exclusive goals.

### **Seek Continual Personal and Professional Development**

One of the most demanding jobs in local government is chief of police. The issues, challenges, and demands chiefs face are seldom encountered by other government officials. To be able to address these highly complex problems, chiefs must be lifelong learners. A state-of-the-art response five years ago may be outdated today. Earning additional college degrees, attending advanced training, presenting at conferences, participating in professional associations, and teaching a college course are a few of the ways to keep up with current information and practices.

### **Serve the Community**

Chiefs should be strongly invested in service to the community and should constantly seek new forums for positive community interaction. Keeping a finger on the community's pulse is critical. The importance of seeking out and identifying new challenges facing the community and the ability to develop fresh and innovative solutions cannot be overstated. Maintaining visibility through interaction with service clubs, youth programs, crime prevention efforts, and school programs conveys the important message that chiefs care about their community and are committed to improving the quality of life. Wearing the police uniform at public events reinforces this message. Chiefs who do not stay visible usually do not enjoy a long tenure.

### **Stay Close to the Officers**

The importance of focusing on the needs of officers cannot be overstated. Methodologies to identify and address those needs include but are not limited to attending departmental briefings, developing formal and informal internal communication systems, riding along with officers on occasion, and stopping by after normal office hours to chat with them. These meaningful interactions allow chiefs, in a personal way, to make an in-depth assessment of officers' needs and may lend some clues as to how to address them. In this respect, it pays to actively listen to officers. Acknowledging the sacrifice that officers make by working around the clock and on holidays goes a long way toward gaining their respect. It helps them feel appreciated and makes that time spent away from family a little more palatable. Dropping them a note for a job well done and for their departmental anniversary are but a few ways to stay in touch and strengthen these important relationships.

### **Manage by Walking Around**

The dynamics and demands of their position may entice chiefs to restrict themselves to the physical confines of their office; it is imperative, however, that this draw be resisted and that chiefs make a concerted effort to visit various units, observe operations, and speak directly with police officers, regardless of rank, as well as civilian

personnel. Aside from escaping the proverbial ivory tower, management by walking around (MBWA) accomplishes several objectives. For one, it allows chiefs to move beyond the abstract and concretely measure how well the department accomplishes its stated mission, goals, and objectives. Furthermore, MBWA affords the chief the opportunity to determine if there is any discrepancy between the department's formal policy and procedure on a particular issue and how it is applied in practice. More importantly, MBWA lets officers see their chief. No longer a detached entity, chiefs are personified and become very real and tangible to the officers, allowing them to identify with chiefs as fellow police officers.

### **Be a Role Model**

Chiefs are the ultimate role model for a police department and as such are under constant scrutiny. Every action, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, is examined down to the smallest minutiae. Subsequent reactions may have a profound effect on the entire department with serious consequences. For this reason, it is essential that chiefs follow the strictest guidelines in conduct, demeanor, and work ethic. Conduct while off duty is just as important as when wearing the uniform. Neither a department's officers nor the public draws a distinction between the two—nor should they. Good, bad, or indifferent, officers will model chiefs' observed behavior, including obedience to traffic and criminal law, adherence to policy and procedure, appearance of uniform, quality of work, and treatment of the public. Remembering to serve as a positive role model not only improves departmental efficiency but also increases tenure.

### **Develop a Five-Year Plan**

Strategic planning is essential for longterm success. A five-year plan should be researched and developed using departmental committees, task forces, and assigned groups necessary to accomplish this vital task. The number of groups and personnel and the degree to which they are involved in the process might vary according to the size of the department and its organizational attributes. Chiefs of large departments might employ a vast array of personnel and resources, while chiefs of smaller departments might choose to work alone on their strategic plan. Regardless of size, however, the plan should not be developed in a vacuum. Knowing where the chief is taking the department and having input into that process is something every department employee and every community stakeholder want. Gaining their insight, empowering them to participate in the process, and communicating the end result of that effort, the five-year plan, go a long way toward anchoring chiefs' positions in their departments.

### **Maximize Communication Opportunities**

All of the best efforts and greatest accomplishments made by police chiefs may be lost to poor or nonexistent communication. Therefore, to maximize the potential for longevity, chiefs should cast the widest net possible and construct a communications strategy that employs a broad selection of internal and external communication tactics: developing an electronic employee newsletter; creating a community e-mail alert system (easy to set up and maintain); keeping abreast of both internal and external issues and developments; writing articles for the local government's newsletter; serving as the department's public information officer (in smaller departments); implementing a departmental employee advisory committee; and instituting an open-door policy and inviting employees to visit. By employing these and other efforts, new chiefs strive for an optimal communications flow that gathers useful information for analysis while disseminating important data to the department and the community.

### **Wear the Uniform**

New chiefs especially should don their uniforms and wear them in public often. City council sessions, school board meetings, and community events to which chiefs have been invited are excellent opportunities. Frequently appearing in uniform makes a chief's image synonymous with the department. Implicit in this imagery is the statement that chiefs take pride in the conduct and quality of work of their police departments. Members of the department and the community will appreciate and respect their chief for this. In following this strategy, chiefs continually show that they are a part of their departments—not apart from them.

### **Create a Professional and Ethical Climate**

It is important for new chiefs to set the tone from the onset of their administrations that excessive force, lying, sexual harassment, and general incompetence will not be tolerated. By establishing the right professional and ethical tone from the very beginning, chiefs may prevent problems rather than engage in ex post facto remediation.

## **“Play Nice” with Fellow Department Heads**

New chiefs should invoke a strategy that defines them as team players. As part of the city management team, chiefs will be encouraged to compromise and assist in areas into which they may not want to venture. The tenure of chiefs may be influenced by what peers think of them; therefore, they are advised to treat their colleagues with respect and dignity even if there are strong differences between them. Chiefs are encouraged always to provide excellent service while concurrently maintaining the integrity of their position.

## **Have a Professional and Contemporary Policy Manual**

The competence of chiefs is often linked to their department policy manual. Chiefs should devote the time and energy it takes to keep department policies current.

## **Develop Personnel**

Instituting a training program that is well thought out for all employees is fundamental. Employees want to be trained well and will respect chiefs for aiding them in their professional development. Managerial personnel are no exception; chiefs may want to consider a management development plan for supervisors and managers. Better supervisors and better managers are often linked to long-tenured chiefs. A better-trained staff also means fewer mistakes and fewer lawsuits—the opposite of which can be linked to a short tenure.

## **Think Strategically**

New chiefs should always try to develop community partnerships, politically and with allied law enforcement agencies. In addition to expanding the amount of resources available to the department, such allegiances also build a greater foundation of support for the chief as well as for the department's goals and objectives.

## **Always Do More Than Expected**

There is a saying that chiefs are retained at two-week intervals—that is, after every city council meeting. While perhaps a little overstated, this aphorism underscores the importance of the degree to which political leaders have confidence in their police chief. Chiefs are expected to provide input on diverse issues at city council sessions and community meetings, and new chiefs especially have the opportunity to cement a solid reputation by delivering work on time, creating a high-quality product, and giving more than what is expected of them. Not only for the length of tenure but also for the good of the whole department, there is great value for chiefs in cultivating a reputation for thoroughness and dependability.

## **Conclusion**

The recommendations included in this article are the result of feedback from hundreds of experienced chiefs, many of whom also serve as mentor chiefs, providing guidance to new chiefs across the country. Although there is no silver bullet to ensure a long tenure for new chiefs, these lessons learned from chiefs who have enjoyed a long tenure may increase new chiefs' likelihood of success. †

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