Law Enforcement Session

Prevention and Intervention Strategies for Disgruntled Officers

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Avstract: Maintaining a motivated workforce is a challenge for all organizations. Law enforcement agencies are faced with the apparent contradiction in that the factors and performance we value most in officers can utimately lead to them becoming disgruntled and malcontent. Recognition of the early indications of problems is the responsibility of administration, first-line supervision, and the officers themselves. The goal is to guide officers into a well-rounded and balanced life, which will in turn lead them to being productive and motivated for their entire career.

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To a degree, we all have over-invested in our careers. At some point, someone near to us has pointed a finger and made the accusation that our job comes first. And they are right. We are all guilty. So, most of us take this observation to heart, carefully consider the facts, and redirect our lives. There are others who fail to grasp this concept. They continue to over-invest for a variety of reasons, often with devastating results, both personal and professional. The once productive and motivated officer becomes cynical and bitter toward the agency. These are the officers who challenge new directives, either openly or among their peers, feeling many changes are directed specifically at them.

These over-invested officers' personal lives suffer as well. Divorce rates are high and they tend to insulate and alienate themselves from others.

In this paper, we will examine many of the causative factors that lead to good officers becoming disgruntled or malcontent. Although intervention strategies will be discussed, the primary focus will be on early warning signs of potential problems and preventive measures.

Factors

Social

Becoming a wildlife officer is a difficult task. In 1999, 408 people applied for 18 positions in our 2000 recruit school in North Carolina. The feeling of being "set apart" begins immediately during training. Instructors require the recruits to dress in

a certain manner and behavior is modified through martial training. The recruits are constantly being observed by other law enforcement officers from a variety of departments and agencies while at the academy. It is emphasized that these officers are evaluating not only the recruits, but also the agency as a whole. The recruits are told they are different and are expected to behave and act accordingly.

Much of the recruits' training lends itself to the socialization process. Role-play scenarios are designed to expose them to high stress situations. Many have a degree of doubt concerning their ability to handle these situations and confidence is gained by successfully completing these exercises. The gains in confidence are often exhilarating for the recruits. They can be found during their downtime reliving the day's events. They come to rely on each other in their insulated world. Common mistakes and events bind them together. And they learn to relive the emotional high that accompanies stress.

This need for social contact with others who share the same burdens and experiences is carried over to the field. First duty assignments are often far from home. The trainees align themselves with their field training officers and other field officers. "We will look after you" is a common theme and begins with the most basic need, finding a home. Since the trainees know few people in the area, they rely on other officers for social interactions as well. This socialization process is the precursor for the officer's entire career.

Emotional

Putting on a uniform and buckling up a gun belt for the first time in an official capacity can be quite an emotional event. Law enforcement officers are entrusted with the awesome ability to take away the most cherished aspect of American life: freedom. Society looks to officers to function as problem solvers. They depend on officers to shield them from the forces that threaten to undermine the foundation of our society. Most officers take this responsibility seriously and readily fall into this role.

Listening to hunters using Citizen Band (CB) radios can add to these feelings of empowerment. Even honest, law-abiding hunters will notify their hunting partners that "The Man is over here." Many times when a group of hunters, fishermen, or a gathering on a boating access area is approached, the group falls silent. Again, "The Man" has arrived and officers find themselves identifying more strongly with this role.

Biological

The effects of critical incident stress are becoming more widely known since being noted as a contributing factor in many of the high profile excessive use of force cases in recent years. For this reason, the physiological effects of stress are now included in many tactical lesson plans. The effects of this type of stress, or arousal (Siddle 1996), help officers to deal with threatening situations.

When faced with a threat, the brain immediately begins assessing the level of the threat and formulating a physical response. Pupils dilate, respiration and heart rates increase, and blood is pumped to the extremities in anticipation of physical exertion.

We experience sensory distortion in the form of tunnel vision and auditory exclusion, among others. These changes are put into motion by the autonomic branch of the central nervous system.

The autonomic system receives the information that a threat is present and puts the above responses into motion. Through direct stimulation of internal organs and glandular secretions, our bodies reach a heightened sense of awareness and ability. The "fight or flight" mechanism is activated. Most recognize these reactions during times of high stress, but officers also experience heightened, though subdued, stress reactions during daily, routine patrol.

The fact that officers are charged with enforcing the law, and often deal with the less desirable elements of the population, forces them to constantly monitor those they come into contact with and assess how these people will react to the officer's mere presence. Tactical training teaches officers to never drop their guard and to be aware of all who are around them. This awareness becomes ingrained, and while on duty it is rarely completely turned off. Put an officer in a restaurant with his/her back to the door and watch him/her grow increasingly uncomfortable throughout the meal. Survival is linked to this high state of awareness.

Law enforcement work has been described as 7 hours and 50 minutes of boredom mingled with 10 minutes of pure adrenaline. Many officers will admit tolerating all the hassles and frustrations of police work just for those 10 minutes of excitement.

Effects

The factors listed are not in and of themselves inherently bad. Officers need to socialize with other officers to build camaraderie and learn from each other's mistakes. They need the affirmation that they are not alone in their experiences. The responsibility they are given dictates the need for an emotional attachment to their role as peacekeeper. And as mentioned, survival is linked to the high state of awareness set in motion by elevated levels of stress. But there are also negative aspects that sometimes take years to fully develop.

Officers leave recruit training eager to get into the field. They feel idealistic and that with enough hard work, dedication, and pure willpower, they will make a difference. This "honeymoon" period can last anywhere from a few weeks to a few years. At some point most come to realize that they are simply a cog in a bigger wheel and that although they definitely contribute to the collective effort of the agency, their individual effort alone is minute (Jetmore 1999). Those officers possessing ascendant traits (self-starters, goal oriented, support the values and mission of the agency, posses a high degree of self-confidence, and need little supervision) (More and Wegener 1996) readily fall into this realist role and will likely remain there throughout their careers.

Those officers with indifferent traits (luckily, they are few in numbers) also fit well, emotionally, into the realist stage. They perform at a minimal level and have a firm idea of how much is required to steer clear of serious disciplinary action. Their primary motivation is monetary, and they seek self-satisfaction away from the job. These officers create a supervisory challenge all to themselves.

The majority of officers posses an ambivalent trait (More and Wegener 1996). Ambivalence is defined as a state of mixed or conflicting feelings and describes these officers well. Ambivalents respond well to praise, are imaginative, intelligent, but easily bored by routine tasks. They are prone to procrastination and can become indecisive as frustration levels increase. Over time, they become less committed to the agency and distrustful of management. In spite of these negative aspects, ambivalent officers can be highly productive employees with proper supervision. They also tend to suffer worse for over-investing in their job role and run the greatest risk of becoming disgruntled, apathetic, and malcontent. They are the focus of the remainder of this discussion.

Distortion of Life

By over-investing in their job roles, officers begin to lose sight of who they are and why they chose wildlife law enforcement as a career; they "lose their shadow" (Jetmore 1999). They are officers 24 hours a day 7 days a week. The socialization with other officers begun in recruit school and carried out into the field can lead to an "us against them" mentality when viewing the general public. Officers find that non-law enforcement friends don't understand the nature of their job, their life. Rotating and odd shifts further this distancing. Common during the early years for most officers, they continue to live the job role off-duty, wearing "cop" clothes and carrying weapons and radios. They cannot make the transition from "The Man" on-duty to a man/woman off-duty.

Furthering the distorted off-duty vision of self are biological factors. The autonomic nervous system ensures that officers' bodies are physically prepared for the stresses of day to day law enforcement work. The autonomic system is made up of 2 complementing branches, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic.

The sympathetic system is responsible for the reactions discussed earlier. It carries information from the brain to the organs and glands of the body, which in turn physically prepares us for the task at hand. Officers experience a state of hypervigilance, an elevated sense of sensory experiences. They feel a sense of exhilaration, increased energy, and an increased feeling of "being alive." Many who leave the field of law enforcement later return describing law enforcement as "something that gets in your blood." This statement is more literal than most realize (Gilmartin and Harris 1996).

The parasympathetic system is the branch responsible for quieting the body after a stressful event. This is the process of homeostasis during which the body seeks a state of equilibrium (Coon 1994). This is the biological equivalent of the physics law which states "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

Officers' reactions to this heightened arousal from the job are to go home and physically, mentally, and emotionally crash. They park in front of the television and want no interruptions from family members. They appear and feel detached, apathetic, and isolated. After a short time, most officers are ready to resume the evening's activities. But, used to the adrenal rush on-duty, this off-duty state is uncomfortable for the over-invested officer. To combat this listlessness, the officer may seek out other officers for "war stories," listen to scanners, and watch police shows to try to regain the "high" experienced on the job.

As this fusion of on and off-duty roles blend into one, changes to the job role can be considered a personal attack on the officer. It may be something as simple as a change in reporting forms or the manner in which a complaint is handled. Or it may be as major as the refusal of a requested change in assignment. The over-invested officer cannot differentiate between the professional and personal role. Professional decisions are taken personally. The "us against them" mentality expands to include supervision and the administration. Over-invested officers are faced with the realization that they have little actual control over their job and in their distorted view of self, their life as a whole.

Sense of Entitlement

Many ethical indiscretions by senior officers can be traced to over-investment. "They owe me" is their rallying cry. As is the case with most deviant behavior, ethical transgressions tend to begin small, but can grow into serious problems for the officer and the agency.

Acts of omission are generally the first step along the path of ethical breaches. When officers begin to feel victimized, they rationalize and justify behaviors in which they would not normally engage. Their "gray areas" become larger (John Howell, pers. commun.). Selective enforcement acts, superficial investigations, or doing just enough to get by, are all acts of omission (Gilmartin and Harris 1996). Fellow officers often ignore these actions because they may feel victimized themselves from time to time. Acts of commission are the next serious step and consist of administrative and/or criminal acts.

Administrative acts of commission are breaches or violations of policy. Carrying unauthorized equipment and/or weapons, engaging in prohibited activities, romantic interludes on the job, not reporting accidents or firing warning shots are just a few examples of these administrative acts (Gilmartin and Harris 1996). Although the conduct can have serious administrative consequences, it is rare for officers to face criminal prosecution for these activities.

Criminal acts constitute the most serious acts of commission. Misappropriation of assets, serious motor vehicle violations such as driving while impaired, and theft are only a few examples of criminal acts committed by officers. They rationalize committing these acts because of all they have sacrificed or given to the job. The media attention these acts draw, as well as the likelihood of criminal prosecution, indicates the seriousness of these acts and the detrimental effects it has on an agency and the law enforcement community as a whole.

Off-duty Behavior

"When I'm off, I'm off and it's no concern to the agency," is the declaration of disgruntled employees. To an extent, this is true. While there are policies that address off-duty behavior, we, as supervisors, recognize the need for downtime. But, off-duty behavior can be an indication that an officer's priorities and vision of self are out of balance.

Excessive drinking, drug abuse, novelty buys (excessive number of "toys"

purchased impulsively), or sexual promiscuity are but a few methods of short-term relief for detached, depressed officers who try desperately to regain the exhilaration of on-duty arousal. Although they may not understand the dynamics involved, the officers know and feel something is missing while away from the job.

Job Performance

Job performance is the earliest indication that a problem is developing. Often the signs are present for some time, but the shift can be so gradual that supervisors fail to address it, hoping it is only a short-lived change. Or more likely, they miss the indications entirely. Supervisors unconsciously include past positive performance in current evaluations, inflating the results. They are left wondering what happened to the once enthusiastic officer, who may manage to maintain an acceptable level of productivity, but has grown increasingly bitter and resists the smallest changes.

Unfortunately the officer, once considered ideal, that lived the job 24 hours a day and was determined to make a difference, over-invested in that job role and continues to do so. But, it now takes on a negative slant. The officer seems determined to generate as much disruption as possible and is committed to that cause.

This attitude is contagious and though the actual number of officers in this category is usually small, the effect they have on the agency as a whole can be tremendous.

Response

Any successful strategies, especially those aimed at prevention and early intervention, for dealing with disgruntled employees must come from 3 fronts; the officer, first-line supervision, and administration. Each has responsibilities that overlap and their importance is based largely on the officer traits discussed earlier. Accountability and responsibility are key issues for each party.

Supervisory

In keeping with a proactive mindset, it is important for those closest to the officers in the field, first-line supervisors, to be vigilant and attentive for behavior that indicates over-investment and can ultimately lead to officers becoming disgruntled.

First-line supervisors tend to base performance solely on production in the form of checks and arrests and various administrative responsibilities placed on officers. In fact, many performance evaluations, hoping to remove subjectivity, fuel this notion. The highly motivated officers who live to work and work to live can be a joy to supervise, because they require so little actual supervision. Supervising these officers is more a matter of running interference for the complaints that follow their vigorous enforcement efforts. Supervisors tend to consider that acceptable and some actually revel in it. High numbers of arrests equal a good officer by this measure of performance.

"Where's the problem?" is a valid question. Our selection process is actually geared toward this highly motivated and hard-driving type of individual. The problem is again one of excess. Supervisory affirmation and performance evaluations linked only to numbers can lead these officers to feel their total worth to the agency is

tied to output. Does the supervisor recognize the need for a well-rounded officer and offer opportunities to pursue off-duty interests, accepting this as a win-win arrangement for both the officer and the agency? Are other job accomplishments acknowledged, both good and bad? I once heard a lieutenant, when asked about an officer's poor administrative skills, say he would do the officer's reports for him as long as he was writing 500 tickets a year.

By the time actual intervention becomes necessary, serious problems have developed. Negativity spreads rapidly and failure to address it quickly and properly can be disastrous for the work unit. Intervention may be difficult because of the close relationship many supervisors have with their officers and the reluctance to confront them about sensitive issues. It is much easier to take the path of least resistance and "write the officer off," wait for the actions to become serious enough to apply harsh disciplinary action, or simply ride out the storm until the supervisor promotes or the problem officer retires. In spite of these factors, supervisors must step in and assume responsibility.

Identifying the problem is the first step in intervention. The problem is sometimes quite apparent, but has been ignored for so long that the supervisor becomes subjective when evaluating the situation. Objectivity is of the utmost importance. Facts must be documented, compiled, and maintained.

Analyzing the problem is step 2. Supervisors must ask themselves, "What am I able to do?" Sanctions available are only limited to the creativity of the supervisor. Work assignments, scheduling of work hours, and approval of leave all fall under the authority of first-line supervisors in most agencies. The threat of sanctions is not effective if the supervisor lacks the authority to follow through.

Tied to this step is another question the supervisor must also ask, "What am I willing to do?" Supervisors easily identify problem employees, but fail to address the central issues until the behavior is significant enough to warrant disciplinary action, which is sometimes quite rare (Gilmartin and Harris 1996). Without the willingness to address the core problems, supervisors become ineffective and contribute as much, maybe more, to the problem as the officer.

Next is the step that is often the most uncomfortable for the supervisor, discussion with the officer. The problem must be discussed and described clearly and specifically. Officers are given an opportunity to discuss their side of the issue. Expectations should be discussed and stated clearly. The supervisor should refrain from interpreting the motivation for the behaviors discussed and instead remain objective and deal solely with the facts. Active listening skills should be used to ensure there is an understanding between the parties.

It is during this step that an officer's primary trait will become apparent. The ascendant officer will likely take the evaluation to heart and make the necessary changes. The indifferent officer will pay lip service to the evaluation and quickly slip back into old habits, but try to steer clear of further trouble. The ambivalent officer will become defensive, certain this is a purely personal attack and further proof "they" are out to get him.

Documentation of the conversation is crucial and again the facts and actual discussion are important, not the supervisor's interpretation of the discussion.

Follow-up and follow through are the final steps. Tactical training stresses that officers never threaten or say they will do something without following through with action. Parents are familiar with this dilemma; if the phrase "I'm only going to tell you this one more time" is repeated over and over without consequences, it quickly loses its effectiveness.

This intervention process is time consuming and mentally exhausting for all parties. Addressing concerns before they blossom into problems is much more effeective and can hopefully keep the officer pointed in the right direction.

Officers

Many malcontent officers realize that something is wrong, but are unsure how to make the necessary changes. They lament that they wish the job were once again fun. Awareness through education and training are imperative to help break the cycle.

Training that identifies the biological and social factors unique to law enforcement work must be discussed along with coping strategies. It is vital that officers accept the fact that there are many job issues over which they have little, if any, control. Virtually all aspects of the job are, or can be, controlled by someone other than the officer. Duty assignments, work schedules, and even the color of socks to wear with dress shoes are all out of their control. With that in mind, it is vitally important that officers gain and exercise control over those parts of their lives they can control and that they strive to seek balance in their lives.

Covey (1991) discusses the importance of balance and priority. He refers to this as the law of nature and uses the analogy of the farmer.

On the farm, every activity has a season and in most cases a sequential chain of equally important events that has to be followed to successfully harvest the crop. Plowing precedes planting. Too much fertilizer or rain can be as disastrous as none at all. The farmer cannot harvest the crop before it is planted or spend all of his time plowing. He cannot procrastinate and plant in September if he hopes to harvest in October; the laws of nature prevent it from happening.

The importance of balance and priority in our lives cannot be overemphasized. We, as officers and supervisors, tend to forget this simple fact. Officers who have lost their vision of self, their shadow, can trace this to a lack of balance in their life.

Physical activity, especially aerobic exercise, can bring about many of the biological and neurological "rushes" received during the high stress of law enforcement work. The physiological benefits of exercise are well known. The sense of control one has over their body also has a tremendous psychological benefit that may equal, or actually exceed, the physical benefits for officers.

The mental and emotional facets of life must be addressed. The body constantly seeks a state of balance. Solitude and a quiet time to unwind are important to mental and emotional well being. We see this in the form of hunters and fisherman who are in the field simply to "get away."

"Misery loves company" describes the social interactions of officers whose lives are out of balance. As discussed earlier, officers tend to socialize with other officers, people who understand the nature of the job and the frustrations that accompany it. It

is important for officers to seek out solid role models or mentors who have faced those struggles and came out on top, steering clear of those who will keep them down. Civilian relationships are equally important. These relationships, along with community involvement, remind officers that not all of "them" are against us.

Spirituality, or a faith system, plays an important role in the physical survival by reminding officers they are part of something bigger. Siddle (1996) discusses the need for a faith system. He says that when, "training fails and reason is insufficient to save the day, the warrior reaches deep within, where his fundamental vision of self, God, or the universe, provides the winning edge." This "winning edge" goes beyond mere physical survival and encompasses mental and emotional aspects as well (also see Alexander et al. 1990).

And finally, officers should focus on why they chose wildlife law enforcement as a career. While preparing for this paper, I interviewed 2 officers who had faced incidents during their careers that led them to being demoted. They said the key to surviving these incidents emotionally was for them to focus on why they became wildlife officers. Both went on to serve in an outstanding capacity. As part of a service-oriented profession, if officers fail to realize they are providing a service, they run the risk of losing their shadow. In fact, at that point, their shadow is likely already gone.

The analogy of losing one's shadow is very appropriate for those of us fortunate enough to be in a profession that allows us to work outdoors. We realize that if our shadow isn't visible, often all that is required to see it again is to simply turn around. And so it is for those officers who have lost their vision of self; they may be simply traveling in the wrong direction.

Administration

Finally, what is upper management's role in this complex puzzle of maintaining a motivated workforce?

In 1994, an internal study found that in the borough of Queens, New York, 28% of the officers on the street failed to make a single arrest during the first 6 months of that year. An even more disturbing fact was that when questioned about this revelation, precinct patrol leaders had little knowledge of the patrol officers' arrest activities. The media fueled the fire by reporting numerous high profile ethical breaches throughout the department. The public's trust was eroding and morale was low within the department.

To combat the ballooning crime rate, morale and ethical problems, and the apparent lack of leadership, a vigorous initiative was undertaken that expressed top-down accountability and a blending of resources within the agency. In the years 1993–1998, the City of New York experienced a 50.5% drop in major crime. Former NYPD commissioner William Bratton credits the drop in crime rate to "fundamental changes in management philosophy and operating principles. We have gone from a micro-managed organization with very little strategic direction to a decentralized management style with strong strategic guidance at the top" (Silverman 1999).

Coupled with this change in management philosophy, the NYPD recognized and rewarded initiative an innovation. There are few groups more creative than wildlife

officers. When field officers feel their ideas are finding their way to the top and given serious consideration, morale soars. But to receive those ideas, the administration has to create an environment that is tolerant of those ideas that fail. Growth for both individuals and organizations comes when those that make up the organization can step outside their comfort zones and try new things.

Top management often views its function in an organization as getting bottom-line results. To achieve this objective requires the maturity to make difficult decisions that affect many people. Covey (1991) quotes Hrand Saxenian as defining maturity as "the balance between courage and consideration." Covey furthers the definition: "While courage may focus on bottom-line results, consideration deals more with the long-term welfare of the stake holders. In fact, the basic mission of mature management is to increase the standard of living and the quality of life for all stake holders." Too often, officers have been viewed as equipment that could be used up in a relatively short period of time and then replaced by newer and better "equipment."

Instead, upper management must view officers as individuals. And as individuals, officers can get bogged down in the myriad of bureaucracy that makes up a law enforcement agency. The lack of clarity in an agency's goals and the officer's individual role in achieving them is found to be a leading task stressor for law enforcement officers (Coon 1994). Leaders must step out and lead from the front, providing a sense of direction and pointing the way to the goals and objectives set by the agency and the individual officer's role in achieving them (Int. Assoc. Police Chiefs 1990).

Finally, law enforcement officers' personalities are such that they require clear concise directives. During the NCWRC's 1999 Service Excellence training conducted by Stephen Strauss, all officers in our agency were tested using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. While reviewing the results with the class, Strauss stated that law enforcement officers overwhelmingly rate as Sensers as opposed to Intuitives. Sensers tend to be more fact oriented, process information in a sequential fashion and prefer the specific to the general (Kroeger and Thursen 1988). Strauss found that roughly 90% of our officers posses this Sensing trait. Therefore, directives should be fact filled, orderly, and issued with the specific, desired results stated. And to combat the disgruntled officers' "us against them" mindset, the origin of the directives and their reason should be identified whenever possible.

With these things in mind, administration's role is to provide top-down accountability, guidance, and direction. Keeping in mind the dominant Sensing trait, directives should be direct, with a stated specific goal in mind, and steps to achieve them outlined in sequential fashion. Most importantly, management should view officers as shareholders, people whose standard of living and quality of life is important to the overall health of the organization.

Summary

The 3 factors contributing to an officer becoming disgruntled, social, emotional, and biological, are largely unavoidable in the law enforcement field. The effect may be more pronounced for a wildlife agency. The limited amount of personnel, the large

geographic areas those few officers must patrol, and the constantly expanding list of responsibilities reinforce the factors tying the officer's sense of self to the job role.

The long-term effects of working 60-hour weeks can be seen in many veteran officers. Divorce rates are high and children who are now grown complain of never seeing that parent while growing up. In the past year, our agency has dealt with several officers caught up in ethical indiscretions. It is probably no coincidence that these officers' average lengths of service were in the 8 to 12-year range and most were considered, at least at some point, to be above average officers. As their bitterness over real or perceived slights grew, ethical problems followed.

The response must come from three fronts, the officer, the first-line supervisor, and the administration. Addressing incidents before they get to problem levels and recognizing all aspects of the officers' lives is of the utmost importance. Officers should receive training that explains the physical, mental, and emotional implications linked to over-investment in their job roles. This training should also include coping strategies and emphasize their importance. Administration must insist on top-down accountability throughout the ranks, encourage innovation, issue clear directives, and most importantly, provide strong, strategic guidance that will lead all officers toward the goals and objectives of the agency.

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