

MOTIVATION AS IT APPLIES TO CONSERVATION OFFICERS

CPT. V. J. GARRISON, Law Enforcement Section, Department of Natural Resources, Atlanta, GA
30334

Abstract: The responsibility for the motivation of conservation officers belongs primarily to the agency's management. If the agency is to have well motivated officers, supervisors must be aware of their role and be willing to accept this responsibility.

Proc. Ann. Conf. S.E. Assoc. Fish & Wildl. Agencies 34:649-653

In this paper I have tried to develop the topic of motivation in precise, understandable terms in hopes that it might serve as a future starting point in the development and understanding of motivation—as it applies to conservation officers.

As can be noted from a review of American history, the work force in our United States has progressed from a force that was predominately agricultural to one that became industrial and even today, to one that is to a great degree service oriented.

Along with these changes in the work force, changes have also taken place in management's attitude toward motivation.

During the early 1900's management was able to motivate through a very effective means—firing. However, since then unionization and changes in management attitudes, this threat as a motivating force is no longer as effective as before, especially for governmental agencies which are now covered by Civil Service Acts protecting the employee.

Today the work force, for the most part, has reached a standard of living where they now demand more from their job than merely a means of existence. In addition to having more money added to their weekly paychecks, workers are now demanding more personal satisfaction from their jobs.

To meet these demands, management has been forced to change and to try several new concepts of motivation. Shorter work weeks, varied working hours, incentive programs, group competition and other more subtle forms of incentive have all been tried—with varied degrees of success.

As changes continue to take place within our workforce, we can expect to see the need for innovative techniques for motivation of employees. Development of such new ideas will continue to demand the best management has to offer.

Because we can only reasonably anticipate the future management demands, I suggest that the best long-term approach available is the wise selection and promotion of competent, innovative and energetic supervisors. Those agencies which today concentrate on the recruitment of personnel and the selection, training and promotion of supervisors will be those agencies 10 years hence who are best prepared to meet the demands of management.

Today, if there is a central theme or thought that supervisors are to follow, it is that a law enforcement officer needs to feel good about himself and the job he does. He needs to feel that he belongs, is needed and is appreciated. This results through creating a genuine belief by the officer that his supervisors care about him and that he is an important part of his organization. If this belief can be inspired, the greatest obstacles to motivation can be overcome.

How do you make an officer feel he belongs? That he is important? That management (his supervisors) cares? The answer to that question is complex and multi-faseted; however, I offer 6 suggestions as answers that have proven valuable to me as a supervisor

in dealing with any officer: Ask his opinion, give him responsibility, keep him informed, define his goals, explain “why”, and react to him positively.

Ask Opinion

A supervisor should encourage an officer to participate in making decisions for the organization, especially those decisions that affect the “direction” and “speed” of the organization.

I am not saying that we need to form a democracy; what I am saying is that whenever possible, a supervisor should ask an officer’s opinion on matters that affect the organization. The supervisor should then show a genuine interest in what the officer has to say.

For instance, if you are writing a dress code policy, conduct code or second job policy, get the officer’s opinion while things are in the planning stage.

Oftentimes this opinion will be similar to your own. If not, the officer may have already thought things through from his perspective and have some very innovative ideas to offer. Oftentimes officers will be more critical and demanding of themselves than is management.

If you have asked an officer’s opinion and then are able to implement some of his ideas into policy, you have almost assuredly increased the likelihood of its acceptance by all field personnel.

Responsibility

In your effort to convince the officer he belongs, give an officer some responsibility. I realize he already has a great deal of responsibility, but make an effort to give him more.

What I have noticed in many organizations is that in most instances the more responsibility a decision or task carries, the more closely it is guarded by the supervisor or the upper echelons of management. I have noticed that we often give something its importance by the level at which we assign its authority. If a task was relatively unimportant or without real significance to begin with, we give it credibility by assigning it to middle or upper management.

I assume, in most instances, we fail to delegate important, meaningful responsibility in an attempt to eliminate the risk of failure or perhaps to enhance the quality of the final product.

Though I recognize that every manager needs to be able to identify the level at which a task can be satisfactorily performed, I recommend we consider an alternative approach.

Instead of assigning a responsibility at the highest level possible, assign it to the lowest level possible. From my own experiences I have seen this work. I have taken certain tasks that were traditionally assigned to sergeants and given them to rangers. I found that the rangers rose to the occasion of the new challenge and did an outstanding job. At the same time their self-esteem was considerably enhanced by the more meaningful responsibility.

This is an area to consider carefully; obviously, not all responsibility can be reassigned at a lower level, especially those affecting personnel (i.e., discipline, promotions and work assignments.) A good, 2-way communication flow in this area will help insure success.

Keep Informed

It appears that the general rule of thumb used by many supervisors is—does the officer need this information to do his job? Quite often when using this criterion, the answer is “no.” I suggest the opposite. Is there justification for not informing the officer? If not, then he should know. For example, information about actions affecting personnel within the agency such as promotions, transfers and resignations are of most importance and create the most interest.

At first glance this might seem to be an area which would not need to be “publicized.” However, I can assure you that an officer will learn of these actions—sooner or later.

If, 6 months later, an officer learns that an old acquaintance on the other end of the state has been promoted, he is likely to feel that he doesn't really know what is going on in the organization. Even worse, suppose he finds out from someone outside his agency (the public) information he should have received on the job. This presents an embarrassing situation for the officer.

Other significant actions and programs are constantly taking place within a conservation law enforcement agency about which the officer needs to know. For instance, a proposal may be introduced in the state legislature which will affect the sporting/recreating public, such as a recommendation being made to increase the deer bag limit or the P.F.D. requirement for boats may change.

In these instances, if the officer is questioned by the public and knows nothing of the proposal, or if he learns about it from reading the local newspapers, he will more than likely feel embarrassed or "left out." His self-esteem suffers. His feelings of belonging and being important to the organization diminish.

While addressing "keeping an officer informed", mention of the "rumor mill" and "grapevine" is of paramount importance. Not only do supervisors need to tell officers what is going on in the organization but officers also need to know what isn't going on.

In spite of a supervisor's best efforts, he will quite often find himself preempted by the "grapevine." If a supervisor is to diminish the effects of the grapevine, he will have to work to inform his officers himself.

In contending with the "grapevine" a rule of thumb to use is to tell the man first who needs to know the worst. The supervisor must also be sure the information reaches the officer through proper channels—his immediate supervisor. Don't circumvent the chain of command, otherwise you can contend with motivating your supervisor, too.

Goals

The fifth suggestion considers probably the most elusive of all motivating factors—the definition of realistic goals for an officer.

In very broad terms which should have applicability across statelines, I recommend that an officer be given goals which are obtainable, but still make his work challenging. Whether the goals be as definable as in numbers of public speaking engagements, newspaper articles written or performing a minimal amount of law enforcement activity, the officer needs to know what is expected of him.

In not all instances will a supervisor be able to assign a standard of performance in terms of numbers, but the better the officer understands what is expected of him the better he can be expected to perform.

I recognize there may be arguments to the contrary concerning the establishment of exact goals (minimum standards of performance) but in your evaluation don't overlook the psychological benefit an officer experiences by knowing that he has achieved what was expected of him. He consequently obtains a feeling of security by knowing better where he stands in the eyes of his department.

The "Why" Theory

From my experience I have found that a very important part of keeping officers informed is to initiate an answer to the question "why?" before the question is asked. Therefore, I offer this fifth suggestion as a motivating technique.

A change in the attitude of the department, a significant change in policy or law or an action directly affecting the officers should be followed by a detailed explanation so that the "why" response may be avoided.

Quite often supervisors feel that having to answer "why" something has to be done, or "why" something is the way it is, challenges their authority or infringes on the "rights" as

supervisors to disseminate what they feel an officer needs to know. Even though this attitude on the part of supervisors prevails in many instances, I believe it is the wrong approach.

On occasion I have learned of things that were to take place within my own organization—with no “why” explanation. My first reaction was that higher management had made an obvious mistake. However, once I was given reasons for the decision, 2 things happened.

First, I felt better about myself because I was considered important enough to be on the “informed” list. Therefore, my self-esteem was enhanced. Secondly, I was able to view the exact rationale for the decision and understand why management had selected this course of action.

Keep in mind that the farther from the decision making process an officer is, the more likely he is to wonder “why.” The difficult part in managing this aspect of motivation lies with being able to anticipate and recognize those things that need an explanation and being able to find a quick, effective way to inform your officers.

I know of no better guide to follow than that supervisors remember that curiosity is natural and therefore they must make a conscious effort to recognize instances when an explanation is needed.

Positive Attitude

One last area for consideration in improving motivation is what I call “the positive attitude theory.”

People often make unnecessary negative remarks without meaning to. Even in informal situations people use complaints about work, health or the weather as conversation boosters. Couldn't one just as easily boost a conversation with a positive comment?

I believe that being positive in small ways contributes a considerable amount of motivation. A positive attitude is like confidence—you need it for success.

Being positive, like explaining “why”, requires a conscious effort. You must constantly remind yourself that it is just as easy to be positive as negative, yet being positive has some very good side effects. Positive remarks tend to motivate people—a positive attitude is also contagious!

The greatest opportunity for an organization to benefit from positive thinking is for its management and supervisors to consciously promote a positive attitude. I honestly believe an organization has the right to expect its supervisors to be positive—to talk, think and act positively. I believe this is as much a part of a supervisor's job as is decision making.

I don't suggest that a supervisor be superfluous in his attempt to be positive. Nothing could be more obvious and therefore damaging to the morale of his men. What I am saying is, he has an obligation to be positive—whenever possible.

If a supervisor honestly practices positive thinking, his entire organization will think more positively—the end results are obvious

CONCLUSION

In concluding I would like to make an analogy using a maxim you've often heard: “A chain is no stronger than its weakest link.” In many instances I believe that the weak link in the conservation law enforcement chain is the supervisor.

Supervisors, no doubt, make the difference between a fair job and a good job, between a mediocre organization and a professional organization. The responsibility to motivate lies directly on the shoulders of the supervisor and his management team.

In determining how well your organization is motivated, consider the ability of your

supervisors in asking opinions, giving responsibility, dispersing information, defining work goals, explaining job changes, and reacting positively to the total work environment.

Conservation departments must focus on the supervisor's ability to motivate it's officers—it may determine the future success or failure of our law enforcement agencies.