

Merging Law Enforcement Operations at a Field Level

Lt. Larry Jourdan, *Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Division of Law Enforcement, Naval Coastal Systems Center, Building 432, Panama City Beach, FL 32407*

Lt. Chip Leavine, *Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Division of Law Enforcement, Naval Coastal Systems Center, Building 432, Panama City Beach, FL 32407*

Abstract: In 1998, over 70% of Florida voters elected to revise the state's Constitution, which, among other things, combined Florida's Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and Marine Fisheries Commission. In July 1999, the merger went into effect creating the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; the largest conservation agency in the nation. This agency is responsible for all wild animal life, fresh water and marine life, and boating safety enforcement in the state of Florida. The largest division in the new agency is the Division of Law Enforcement, which is made up of law enforcement officers of the former Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and the Department of Environmental Protection's Marine Patrol (more than 700 sworn and nearly 200 non-sworn employees). Facilitating the merger of the 2 separate law enforcement entities created many challenges. This paper will discuss some of the challenges facing the field level and how first-line supervisors and officers in 1 geographical area are addressing those challenges.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 55:588-595

In 1998, Florida voters elected to amend the state's Constitution to create a new conservation commission. This amendment created one super agency responsible for managing and overseeing all of Florida's wildlife, fresh water and marine life, and boating safety enforcement. The new agency, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, officially came into existence on 1 July 1999. Although the new Commission had several divisions, the largest was the Division of Law Enforcement. This Division was created by merging the law enforcement divisions of the former Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Marine Patrol. The Division was charged with protecting Florida's resources and enforcing the state's boating safety laws and consisted of 855 personnel including more than 700 sworn law enforcement positions. While some of the previous duties shared by these 2 groups overlapped, each brought their own history and culture to the merger. In addition to their histories, each former agency had its own operational procedures.

Merging the 2 separate law enforcement groups with distinct ways of doing things created challenges. These challenges ranged from obvious differences such as equipment, uniforms, and operational procedures, to more subtle differences such as enforcement priorities and philosophies. One of the first steps taken by the new agency's Division of Law Enforcement was to establish 2 separate bureaus, using the 2 former law enforcement groups, to meet both inland and coastal enforcement needs. These bureaus would allow a stable basis for interim operation while many merger issues were being decided. The 2 bureaus continued to operate, somewhat independently, as they had prior to the merger. As the implementation of the merger progressed, and more interaction occurred, operational differences became more evident. These differences created many questions and genuine concerns regarding the anticipated changes that would occur, as well as how they might impact the officers in the field.

Field level employees are considered the backbone of most agencies' mission. Field personnel handle the essential day-to-day operations as they are often the first and only representative to have contact with the public, which increases their influence on public perception. Many employees questioned how the merger would impact their jobs, setting the stage for resistance to change which often results in a loss of productivity.

While field level employees often do not have much input in major organizational and operational change, they often have a great impact on how efficiently and effectively such changes are implemented. Employees, when faced with change, can choose their level of involvement in facilitating any dictated transition. These choices can impact the agency's overall performance.

Employees who embrace the merger can take advantage of the benefits associated with the change and increase the agency's performance. Becoming positively involved can improve an employee's self-worth and increase one's value as an employee. In conservation law enforcement, such involvement and positive actions are good for both the resources and the constituents for which the agency serves.

In contrast, resistance to a merger can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of an organization and the public's perception of the organization's ability to complete its mission. Employees who take a negative approach to required change stand a good chance of negatively impacting productivity and neutralizing many of the benefits associated with the change.

To capitalize on the benefits of change, personnel must set aside personal fears and embrace the new challenge. Preparing officers in the field for major organizational change offers a great challenge for first-line supervisors. In order to maximize the benefits of the merger at a field level, supervisors have to take employees beyond the survival instincts associated with change and sell employees on the benefits of the merger. By emphasizing the benefits and involving the employees in the process, supervisors increase the likelihood of a smooth transition. Employees who are included and involved often take on a feeling of ownership and pride that is necessary for maximum effectiveness. While agency leaders were busy addressing many issues associ-

ated with the new merger, the field supervisors and officers in 2 of Florida's counties began to take a proactive approach at their level.

Okaloosa and Walton counties are 2 large coastal counties located in the north-western portion of the state. While diverse, these counties have a large amount of traditional resource use. With close to 500,000 ac of public hunting land and a greater number of private or leased hunting lands, the counties are popular with all types of hunting groups. In addition to hunting, the counties are blessed with many rivers, streams, and bays, as well as access to the Gulf of Mexico, thus, making the area popular with both fresh and saltwater anglers. Included in the area is the fishing community of Destin, which is a home port for many commercial and sport fishing boats. Known for its beautiful beaches, the area has become a popular vacation spot and is a favorite among recreational boaters. This popularity creates a tremendous amount of boating activity and is the source of many of the area's boating-related complaints. At the time of the merger, the area ranked 6th in the state in boating accidents and 2nd in the state in personal watercraft accidents.

After the 1998 constitutional vote, and prior to the merger's effective date, the 2 first-line supervisors in Okaloosa and Walton counties began to meet. These initial meetings allowed both the inland and marine enforcement supervisors to begin to identify the advantages and potential problems that may be associated with the merger. The meetings also allowed them to identify their common objectives and shared values. Two of those common objectives were to facilitate a smooth transition for the officers and to increase productivity in the area by taking advantage of the benefits associated with combined personnel resources.

In identifying the advantages of the merger, the supervisors realized that the merger would create 1 Division of Law Enforcement responsible for protecting all of Florida's wildlife and marine life, thus, increasing the efficiency of operations and service to customers. The Division would also be responsible for enforcing Florida's boating laws, and eliminate many of the previously duplicated services that had occurred in the past. The supervisors decided that by working closely together they could create a more diverse work force, allowing the agency to respond more rapidly to the needs of the resource, as well as the public.

Creating a diverse, merged work force would allow the supervisors to re-evaluate the needs of the area as a whole, based on the Division's objectives and goals. Looking at the area as a whole, rather than distinct inland and coastal sections, would permit the supervisors to assess the allocation of resources. It was obvious that, at times, a re-allocation of resources could improve the agency's effectiveness. An example of this occurs, when, due to natural drought conditions, freshwater recreational activity decreases and displaces the activity to the already heavily used coastal waters. Another example is when winter conditions reduce activity on the coast and inland hunting activities increase.

After identifying the advantages of the impending merger, the supervisors began identifying obstacles that could impact the effectiveness of operations and slow down the area's overall productivity. The obstacles identified were not insurmountable and appeared to revolve around the employees' fear of change. It is quite

natural for people who, when faced with change, tend to gravitate toward what they are familiar with, instead of advancing into the unknown. This fear or hesitation not only occurs at the field level, but also manifests throughout the rank structure, up to and including command staff. When facilitating major change, such fears can become paralyzing and can negatively impact the agency's ability to capitalize on the benefits associated with the transition.

Another solution sought was how to work toward common objectives while working within separate bureaus. The supervisors could see that it could become difficult to conduct merged field operations with each bureau operating under their previous agency's policies and procedures, until new ones could be established. In addition to the need for common guidelines, the fear associated with the merger had created procedures for interaction that somewhat limited field operations.

The supervisors felt that overcoming such obstacles would not only facilitate a smoother transition for employees, but also greatly enhance the agency's mission and benefit both the resource and the constituents. The supervisors agreed to take an active role in meeting the identified objectives and overcoming the obstacles.

Methods

In an effort to overcome obstacles and resistance that could impact the merger's effectiveness, the supervisors decided that it would be beneficial to involve officers as early as possible in the process. They felt the key to completing a smooth transition and increasing productivity at a field level depended on each officer's willingness to cooperate.

Recognizing the importance of communication in making the merger a smooth transition, the supervisors focused on it first. Supervisors continued to meet prior to the scheduled merger date. These meetings were built on honest communication and were concluded with each lieutenant's commitment to use the merger to positively impact field operations. The supervisors focused on improving and maintaining communications between each other. Recognizing that communicating would assist in ensuring that appropriate issues were being addressed and that they were not working against each other. The supervisors tried to apply a new conception management philosophy called "boundarylessness." General Electric's CEO Jack Welch describes "boundarylessness" as "an open, trusting sharing of ideas, a willingness to listen, debate, and then take the best ideas and get on with it." (Tichy 1994). The supervisors' working relationship and confidence in each other's abilities continued to grow.

In addition to the meetings, the supervisors began working together. These outings allowed each supervisor to become more familiar with issues and procedures associated with the other's responsibilities, while continuing to handle their traditional supervisory duties. The supervisors shared procedures and paperwork, which contributed to each other's knowledge of the other's responsibilities. By working together, they were able to model cooperation between bureaus to their subordinates. This example of commitment to the merger reassured officers of their supervisor's commitment to making the merger work.

Seeing positive results from their own communication efforts, the supervisors decided to encourage communication among the officers in their area in order to prepare for the fast approaching merger. The first step was to get inland and marine officers together in an informal atmosphere and allow introductions. This was accomplished by holding a fish fry at one of the local wildlife management areas.

In addition to the introductions, the supervisors encouraged the officers to interact and get to know each other and their varying responsibilities as time allowed. The supervisors worked to host marine and inland boating safety details during high activity times involving both agencies. These details gave each side a greater appreciation for what the other did and began to dispel misconceptions and ease fears. Officers participating in the details began to form relationships and develop communication that would help them through the upcoming merger process.

As the actual date of the merger approached, the supervisors had already laid a solid groundwork for a smooth transition. These preliminary attempts to open communication and ease fears laid the groundwork for when the merger went into effect on 1 July 1999.

After the merger, supervisors working under the direction of their respective bureaus continued to meet and discuss ways to increase productivity and facilitate a smooth transition for their officers. All decisions took into account the Division's goals to address resource enforcement and boating safety in conjunction with the activity in the area at any given time.

The supervisors continued to encourage communication between the inland and marine officers in their areas. One way this was accomplished was by including inland officers on the existing marine officer's voice mail system. The system allowed officers to hear and become familiar with issues that each side was dealing with. The system also was a conduit for passing information or arranging meetings between individual officers.

The supervisors continued to encourage employees to meet and discuss individual job responsibilities and get to know each other on both a personal and professional level. These meetings helped further develop a foundation by forming a team that would more efficiently address the agency's mission in the area. By developing a team, the supervisors hoped they could begin to dissolve some of the "us and them" attitudes that existed within the separate agencies and that might arise from working in separate bureaus.

Another step the supervisors took toward encouraging interaction was to open office space in local field offices to both inland and marine officers. This access increased the probability of interaction when officers needed to use a phone, copy machine or computer. Every effort was made to make officers feel welcome in the local offices.

In addition to encouraging routine interaction, the supervisors re-evaluated the needs of the area and organized details to address specific enforcement concerns in the area. These details were numerous and ranged from coordinating efforts in the area of boating safety on high activity weekends, to organizing details to address high priority needs in both inland and marine work environments. These details al-

lowed the supervisors to more adequately address concerns associated with the Division's objectives.

The supervisors also used monthly meetings and special training needs as opportunities to get the officers together to encourage additional communication and learning. At each meeting, various types of cross-training were performed. These training opportunities encouraged uniformity and were open forums for addressing differences and problems.

The supervisors recognized that there was a natural disparity in enforcement philosophies between individual officers and bureaus. The supervisor began seeking input from the officers in an attempt to clarify enforcement guidelines and work toward a uniform application of enforcement. The process began by having officers review and discuss enforcement philosophies in an attempt to develop more consistency.

Continuing to believe interaction would help relieve misconceptions among officers and provide opportunities for constructive input the supervisors began to spend time with each other's officers. These outings allowed officers to see that both supervisors shared the same goals and common commitment to a smooth transition.

Results

Throughout the process, the 2 supervisors worked within the established parameters of their respective former divisions. Their efforts were successful and, with the support and encouragement of their chain of command, they continued to demonstrate an ability to facilitate the merger at their level. They continued to develop their commitment, not only toward surviving the merger, but also capitalizing on the benefits associated with it. Through the process, they identified common issues and began to build on shared values and expectations. Throughout the process, the supervisors had involved their officers in the merger. Officers were encouraged to identify problems and propose positive suggestions for resolving them. By being involved in the process, officers became partners in the plan to merge and the local effort to build a team.

These initial steps prepared supervisors and officers for many of the changes that followed. Included in these changes were the dissolving of separate bureaus, personnel redistribution, and scheduled work periods.

The results of their work to facilitate a smooth merger and improve productivity are now becoming more apparent. According to statewide statistics, local boating accident numbers appear to be decreasing (Edwards 1999). The supervisors feel their increased enforcement efforts may be having a positive impact. In addition to information on boating, complaints in problem areas addressed by specific joint details have decreased. As a result of the effort to address specific problems in the area with more resources, the agency has been getting positive feedback from members of the public who have taken notice.

While boating statistics, complaint numbers, and public feedback may be measurable results, the supervisors feel that the most impressive results are not. The re-

sults lie in the area's overall ability to address and accomplish the Division's mission efficiently. These results are also seen in an investment in the Division's most appreciable asset, the officer. These results are and will continue to benefit the constituents, the officer, and the agency.

For constituents, the results include an improved law enforcement capability that can more efficiently address the needs of the area, and an enforcement group that can readily adapt, protect the resources and promote safe boating. With the improvements in communication and deployment the public could expect a more efficient use of manpower, resulting in more confidence in the agency as a whole.

For officers, the results include a greater capacity to understand and enforce all conservation laws. Accompanying that knowledge is a sense of confidence that he or she is capable of doing the job that is expected. Successfully adapting to the merger makes the officer better equipped to deal with future changes and increases individual efficiency. With increased efficiency comes a pride that is essential for productive employees.

For the agency, an increase in employee job knowledge and pride means a more professional and productive work force. A better workforce means happier constituents. Happier constituents result in greater public support.

Discussion

The agency is well on its way to completing the merger. The creation of a new agency of this size is not something that can be done overnight. Those who question the speed must understand that merging is a process. The speed at which it occurs and its ability to occur relies heavily on how its employees perceive and react to such a change.

When dealing with such a large organizational change, it is important to prepare the employees for the transition. Supervisors should prepare their employees for change by involving them in the process, promoting communication, and overcome barriers that prevent cooperation. Supervisors should focus on the advantages associated with the change and display a commitment to overcome obstacles.

Recently, the Division of Law Enforcement began preparing officers for future roles as supervisors in this new agency. In doing so, the Division created a new bibliography of books to help potential supervisors prepare for the role of supervision. The Division wisely added a new book to the list entitled, "Control Your Own Destiny or Someone Else Will," by authors Noel Tichy and Stratford Sherman (1994). The book tells the story of General Electric's CEO Jack Welch and how he made necessary changes while leading General Electric to new heights of productivity. In the book, Welch emphasizes the importance of getting the lowest level employees involved in order to obtain productivity. He says, "The only way I see to get more productivity is by getting people involved and excited about their jobs. You can't afford to have someone walk through the gate of a factory or into an office who's not giving 120%. I don't mean running and sweating, but working smarter. It's a matter of understanding the customer's needs instead of just making something and putting it into

a box. It's a matter of seeing the importance of your role in the total process" (Sherman and Tichy 1994).

Whether in corporate America or in state government, the person who is most likely to be plugged into the needs of the customer is the employee who deals with them on a daily basis. In conservation law enforcement that is the officer. As more states look at ways to avoid the duplication of services and streamline government, the chances of mergers, such as the one Florida is going through, become greater. When considering the changes associated with a merger, it is imperative that agencies prepare their employees to embrace the change and make it a success. In the words of Charles Darwin, "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change."

Literature Cited

- Edwards, R. L. 1999. 1999 Vessel registration and accidents by county, 1999 personal watercraft accidents and registered PWCs by county. Fla. Boating Accident Stat. Rep. Fla. Fish and Wildl. Conserv. Comm., Tallahassee. Pages 9 and 47.
- Tichy, N. M. 1994. Control your own destiny or someone else will. Harper Collins, New York. Pages 294–304.