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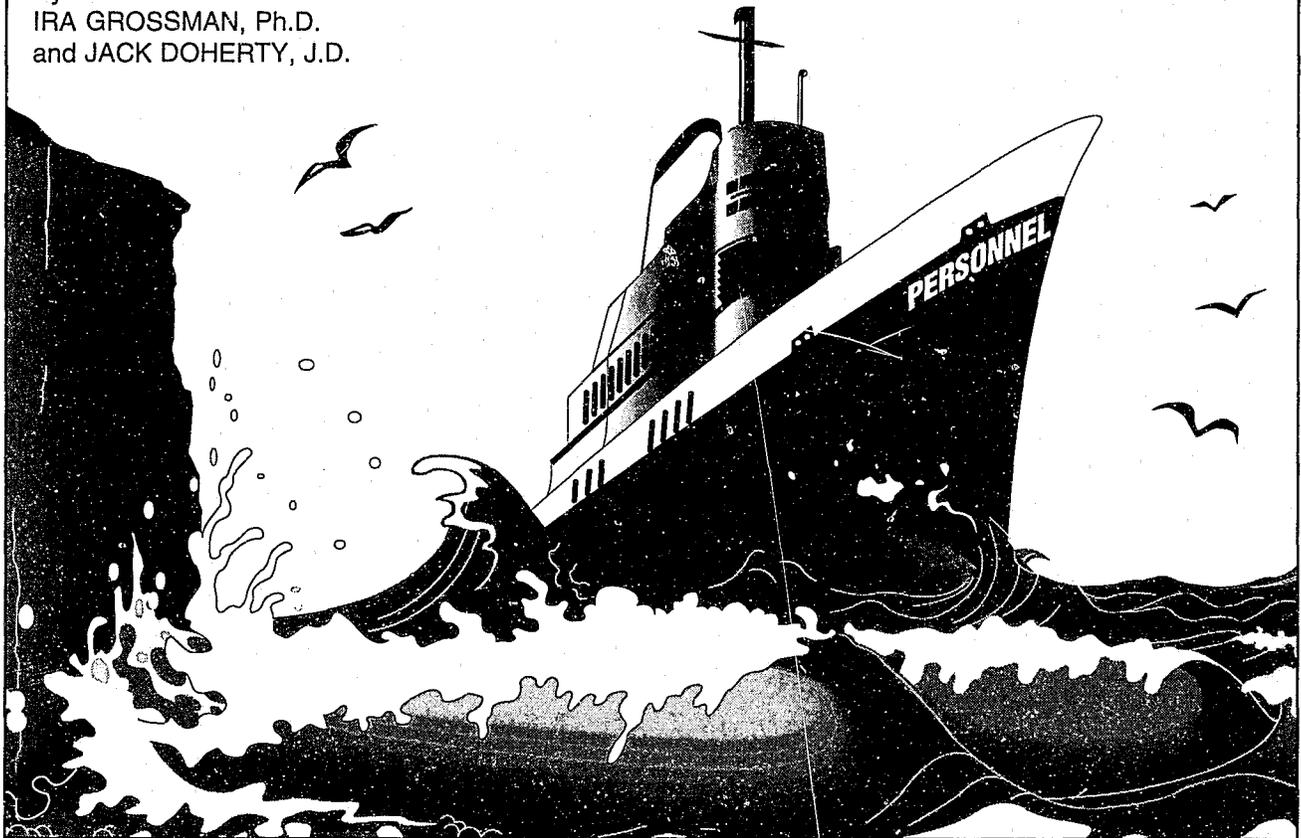
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On Troubled Waters

Promotion and Advancement in the 1990s

By
IRA GROSSMAN, Ph.D.
and JACK DOHERTY, J.D.



From the end of World War II to the mid-1970s, America experienced extensive corporate and governmental growth. The country expanded in unprecedented ways, providing opportunities for promotion in most employment arenas, both to well-qualified and minimally qualified individuals.

The country's need for managers eventually outstripped its supply, resulting in situations where many individuals were promoted to levels beyond their capabilities. By the 1980s, Yuppies—young,

upwardly mobile professionals—epitomized aggressive young workers running in the fast lane of advancement. While the image of the Yuppies was being popularized, however, the reality in America was that the standard of living and the opportunities for promotion were declining.

The illusion of increasing wealth was due, in part, to increasing national credit and debt, as well as an increase in the number of two-career families. In the past 2 decades, the number of women contributing to the family income in

order to maintain the lifestyle of their parents has grown steadily.

IMPACT ON LAW ENFORCEMENT

Within the law enforcement community, parallel trends have been observed. Only a few years ago, the opportunity for promotion and for selection to specialty assignments was high. From the time recruits entered the police academy, they expected to receive rapid promotions, as well as assignments to coveted specialty positions, such as SWAT, detectives, and motorcycle

squads. These expectations became part of the belief system of young officers.

However, in the mid-1980s, growth in law enforcement agencies began to stagnate. As with corporate America, the bulge in middle-management law enforcement positions was recognized as a drain on increasingly scarce financial revenues. The terms "flattening" and "downsizing" crept into the vocabulary of many law enforcement administrators who were forced to reduce the size of their departments.

An example of this phenomenon occurred in the San Diego Police Department, which began to flatten its ranks in 1992. Two upper-level management job classifications (commander and deputy chief) were eliminated from the organizational structure. In addition, 15 other management positions (2 captains and 13 lieutenants) were cut from the budget.

Reductions similar to those noted above produce serious repercussions for the current generation of officers. These officers are less likely to benefit from promotions, despite their well-established beliefs equating promotions with their value to the agency and to their own sense of professional competence. Even to those officers who are able to gain perspective about the demographic and economic reasons governing the stagnation of growth and mobility, the emotional impact remains devastating.

Unfortunately, the lack of upward mobility is frequently not viewed as a matter of circumstance in society. To the contrary, it is almost universally perceived as personal failure, a betrayal of a system

that has reneged on its promises, or both.

To make matters worse, the impact of not being promoted within the law enforcement community is literally "worn on the sleeve." The paramilitary structure of law enforcement, with stripes and bars on uniforms denoting rank, makes officers keenly aware, on a daily basis, of their lack of promotion.

Sadly, the opportunity for law enforcement officers to advance will be reduced through the early part of the next century. Those currently in positions of management are relatively young. Combined with the difficult economy and current population demographics, it is unlikely that many current managers will leave their positions for outside opportunities or be promoted to higher positions of authority within the department. The effect of this situation on other officers is profound, particularly because their

expectations for promotion have not, as yet, been altered.

IMPACT ON PERSONNEL

Young police officers often revel in the exhilarating environment of patrol work for the first 2 years of their careers. During this time, they are financially well-rewarded in comparison to others with similar educational backgrounds and experience. Moreover, they are charged with enormous responsibility and authority at the outset of their young careers. Calls are answered with the knowledge and hope that life-saving or crime-stopping activity may occur.

After this initial period, however, young officers begin to search for new ways to be challenged and to recapture the thrill of the job. As soon as a department allows, most seek specialty assignments or promotion. They believe that their hard work and mastery of police skills

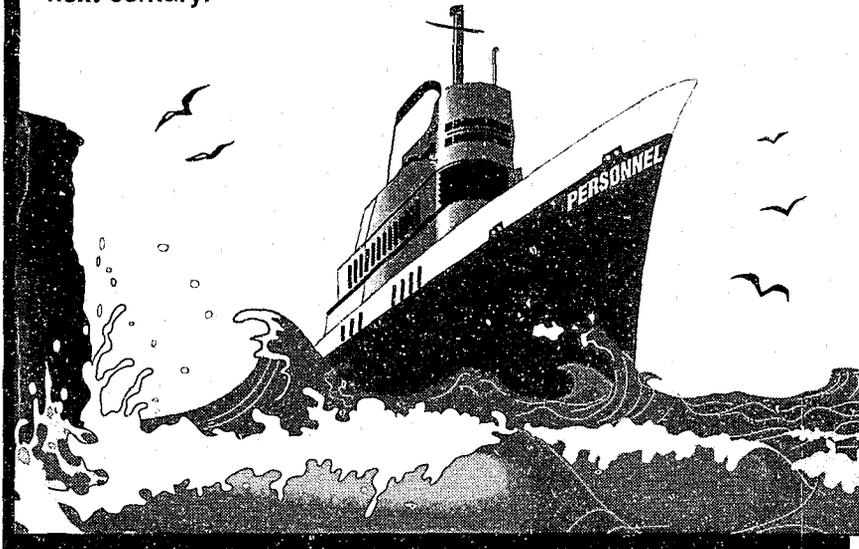


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"...the opportunity for law enforcement officers to advance will be reduced through the early part of the next century."



will launch their careers in new directions.

Failure for these young officers to advance begins a pattern of repeated attempts at promotion or applications for specialty assignments, followed by disappointment. Departmental managers exacerbate the problem by continuing to encourage officers to apply for career-enhancing positions. When they still are not selected, supervisors often advise them to become more qualified candidates through hard work and additional education.

The positive side of this predicament is that officers are forced to work harder to make themselves more marketable in the workplace. This has become evident in the soaring educational levels of patrol officers. Advanced degrees are now common at supervisory and management levels. On the down side, higher education has become so common that it no longer guarantees promotion. Simply said, current economic conditions reduce the

number of opportunities for promotion, no matter how qualified the individual.

That law enforcement executives have not yet heard an outcry from the ranks of peace officers should not come as a surprise. Officers are trained to handle any physical or emotional crisis without being personally affected.¹

However, the calm will not last forever. Repeated attempts at promotion and the cumulative effects of failure in this endeavor will lead to a host of personal and departmental ills. For example, individual officers are likely to begin displaying psychological dysfunction as a result of shame, guilt, anger, and a sense of being betrayed. Family dysfunction can also be expected.

Burnout or stress disability are likely endpoints for some of these officers. From an organizational perspective, administrators should anticipate poor morale, lack of creativity, and lack of commitment to management goals.

THE LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE

Unfortunately, the law enforcement community was not quick to respond to its limited promotional capability. When it did respond, it created specialty positions for the sole purpose of providing advancement opportunities to officers. In fact, there has been an explosion of new specialties, including bicycle squads, K-9 and gang units, and interagency task forces. One major law enforcement agency now has 60 specialty assignments. As one police chief observed, "Specialties are multiplying like rabbits."²

While specialty programs can be extremely valuable, agencies are coming to realize that these programs have limits. All such programs draw resources from the core work of the agency and sometimes survive more on their popularity than on an objective assessment of their worth. This means that agencies that previously had the luxury of holding out promotional and special assignment opportunities to young officers as a means to encourage excellent performance will have to develop other mechanisms for rewards.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

How, then, should law enforcement agencies proceed? First, administrators should level with their officers. Using an organizational chart, they should indicate how many job openings, whether through retirements or the creation of new positions, the agency can expect in the next 5 to 10 years. Police administrators should then calculate officers' probabilities of advancement through promotion

and describe precisely what factors, such as additional education and prior experience, will impact the possibility of promotion.

Second, agencies should be prepared not only to use but also to expand existing psychological services. Dealing with unrealistic expectations and disappointments falls squarely in the discipline of psychology. Psychologists can help younger officers to adjust their expectation levels and to redefine success for officers already affected by this difficult situation. Law enforcement executives should consult with police psychologists to develop agency-wide programs and policies to alter old and ill-fated beliefs about measures of success.

Third, agencies can experiment with new ways to acknowledge officers and provide them with a sense of growth and accomplishment. This is especially important in paramilitary organizations, such as law enforcement, where officers typically have little control over their futures and little say in how their agencies are run. In paramilitary agencies, when ample opportunity for promotion exists, officers' sense of ownership stems from the possibility of being promoted to a position where their ideas and goals might be implemented. Fewer prospects for promotion, however, are likely to breed a cadre of officers who feel alienated within their own departments.

One way to alleviate these feelings of alienation is to create programs that allow officers at all levels to participate in the decisionmaking, growth, development, and operation of their agencies. This, in turn, produces a sense of

ownership, loyalty, and commitment to the agency. It gives officers more authority, more autonomy, and a greater influence in the communities they serve.

POSSIBLE PROGRAMS

There are several programs that positively influence officers' self-worth in this era of declining promotional opportunities. These programs include community-based policing, problem-oriented policing (POP), self-managing work teams, progressive salary schedules, officer-selected assignments, take-home patrol cars, and career counseling.

“

Career counseling programs help officers to understand better their abilities and opportunities....

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Community-Based Policing

Community-based policing involves police officers working in partnership with the community and other governmental agencies to reduce crime and improve community safety. Agencies using this approach have found officers gain tremendous satisfaction from this type of interaction with community members.

This should come as no surprise to those involved in law

enforcement. Individuals are often drawn to law enforcement careers because of their desire to interact with various kinds of people. In community-based policing, officers have the opportunity to interact with citizens who both appreciate and value their efforts. Recognition for their efforts and successes is realized directly.

Problem-Oriented Policing

Problem-oriented policing—often used in conjunction with other community-based approaches—allows officers to focus on identified community problems and to use a variety of resources to reach solutions. By using POP strategies, patrol officers can become managers and facilitators of community action. They can develop and use a range of skills infrequently employed in conventional police situations.

The POP approach appeals to another personality trait frequently seen in peace officers—solving problems efficiently and witnessing firsthand the results of their efforts. Police officers value the opportunity to use skills and personal attributes that are congruent with their personality styles. Ongoing challenges and opportunities to solve problems serve as energizers and provide a sense of challenge and accomplishment to officers. Levels of personal satisfaction, which is so critical to job satisfaction, are high in these situations.

Self-Managing Work Teams

The concept of self-managing work teams acknowledges officers as professionals capable of managing their own work. “Over the

shoulder" supervision is reduced in this type of work environment, with supervisors more often acting as coaches and advisors rather than as evaluators and disciplinarians. It gives officers much more latitude in their daily work tasks.

Progressive Salary Schedules

In most law enforcement agencies, patrol officers hit their top pay level after 3 to 5 years. The only way to increase their salaries is to be promoted.

Progressive salary schedules acknowledge that highly capable workers are not intrinsically worth less than supervisors. Salary ranges overlap, allowing the pay of certain employees to equal or exceed the pay of some supervisors.

Officer-Selected Assignments

In traditional police settings, calls for service are assigned first by urgency, then by order of receipt. In larger communities, this often results in officers continually responding to radio calls throughout the jurisdiction, rather than spending time on their beats.

An officer-selected assignment program allows officers with computerized dispatching and display terminals in their patrol vehicles to select the radio calls to which they would like to respond. While urgent calls can still be dispatched, the ability of officers to choose their non-urgent assignments enhances their sense of control over work and allows them to continue strengthening their ties with the citizens living in their beat areas.

Take-Home Patrol Cars

Patrol vehicles are notorious for getting hard use and poor treatment. However, agencies that allow officers to take patrol cars home see a remarkable transformation. Because officers take great pride in the vehicles, the vehicles are cleaner and better maintained.

Cars represent a status symbol for officers. Allowing patrol officers with more than 5 years' field experience to take the vehicles home results in an immediate upswing in employee morale.

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...several programs...positively influence officers' self-worth in this era of declining promotional opportunities.
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Career Counseling

Career counseling is designed to help officers focus realistically on their careers. Recruits should receive information about the counseling program at the police academy, and they should have a one-on-one session with a career counselor after they complete field training. All subsequent visits should be voluntary.

Career counseling programs help officers to understand better their abilities and opportunities, as well as what steps they might take to

move their careers in a positive direction. These programs are also helpful in developing a talent inventory for the agency. Most important, career counseling programs can send a message to the officers that they are valued as unique individuals, not just as bodies that walk a beat or answer radio calls.

CONCLUSION

It is incumbent upon law enforcement executives and others who influence both short- and long-term organizational goals to recognize the growing frustration of officers in terms of their inability to be recognized through the promotional process for their skills and hard work. Furthermore, it is critical that law enforcement administrators value the professionalism of their officers. In this context, pride, sense of growth, and feelings of achievement are factors that must be considered.

Officers must not perceive that only promotions equate to success. Rather, they should equate success with meeting challenges, continuing to learn their craft, and making positive contributions to their departments, communities, and families. These values, when fostered by the organization, promote satisfied officers and a sense of well-being in the workforce. ♦

Endnotes

¹ F. Stillman, "The Invisible Victims: Myths and Realities," *Psychological Services for Law Enforcement* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1986), 143-146.

² N. Stamper, *Organizational Audit and Agenda for Reform* (San Diego, California: San Diego Police Department, 1991).