

Small Unit Leadership for Airborne Law Enforcement

Airborne law enforcement officers must manage tasks well, but they also must understand how to lead people.

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Chevrons on a sleeve or bars on a collar are simple uniform items but stand for something much greater. They identify who is responsible for getting tasks done in a law enforcement unit, and also who is responsible for taking care of the people that do them.

The goal of many public service executives is to prepare their organizations for the future; therefore, higher levels of management must take a broader, strategic view of what their organizations need. Law enforcement aviation units exist within the wider context of public safety organizations and have more narrowly defined goals. Thus, organizational leadership, which focuses on the larger concept of the entire organization, is not an effective means of leading an aviation unit.

Leadership at the unit level must use proven tactics of small units to be effective. Leadership is different at various levels of organizations and aviation units need to be lead rather than just managed.

Department executives must be considerate of the overarching strategic goals and management of their respective departments, and should not be worried about the performance or how to motivate the employees in their aviation units. That is the responsibility of the unit's leader. Leadership of this type requires communication and contact with subordinates.

The need for crew resource management and the dependence of members of aviation units upon one another necessitates the use of small unit leadership tactics and concepts to build motivation, initiative and cohesion.

LEADERSHIP

Colonel Dandridge Malone writes that "machines and programs and budgets" are managed, while people are lead. He adds that "managers work with things and numbers. Leaders work with people and feelings." Managing is a very important part of the work done in aviation units; however, managing the resources and procedures in aviation units is only part of the responsibility. Leadership is able to affect those intangible things we cannot count, such as motivation, inspiration, teamwork, initiative and the desire to succeed.

Every organization has imperfections, and leadership reduces the turbulence caused by management issues. Managing is important for air units, but leadership deals with the interaction between leaders and followers.

James MacGregor Burns, author of *Leadership*, defines leadership as "leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations - the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations - of both leaders and followers." The key to this definition is that the wants and needs of both the leader and the follower are accounted for. The follower, therefore, is just as important as the leader,

since followers complete the tasks for which the leader is held responsible.

RESPONSIBILITY TO FOLLOWERS

Leadership is made of two basic units: leaders and followers. True leaders tend to give up some of their self-interests and realize that they have a responsibility to their followers. Thus, leaders are not only responsible for making sure tasks are completed; they are also responsible for the welfare of their followers whose job it is to complete the tasks.

Leaders have a responsibility to their chain of command; however they are also responsible to their followers. Followers expect certain things from their leaders. First, followers expect that their needs will be met. Second, followers expect to receive open and honest information. Leaders should communicate with followers so that the entire unit is informed on what has happened in the past, what is happening and what may happen in the future. Finally, leaders should share experiences with followers, including adversity and peril.

LEADERS MEET THE NEEDS OF FOLLOWERS

Meeting the needs of followers is one of the greatest responsibilities of a leader. Abraham Maslow, in his work *A Theory of Human Motivation*, believed that "human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of prepotency," where the "appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need." In essence, those needs lower on the hierarchy, such as shelter, must be met before higher ranked needs, such as esteem, can be met.

The needs of followers are directly related to the leader's ability to motivate employees to reach higher performance. For example, safety is a paramount need of followers, and if a leader does not ensure safety needs are met (especially with respect to equipment, crew rest and training) the leader may not be able to successfully meet other needs of followers that lead to increased performance, such as feelings of confidence and self-worth.

Motivating employees can be ineffective without understanding certain needs must be met, and those needs are the responsibility of leaders. Aircrews are the ones who complete the jobs that define the existence of public safety agencies, and leaders should recognize the importance of taking care of unit members. The best leaders are the ones that truly care about their followers.

LEADERS COMMUNICATE

In addition to meeting the needs of followers, communication is paramount to being an effective small unit leader. As mentioned earlier, leadership requires a leader and a follower. Similarly, communication requires a communicator and a listener. Unit performance can suffer if communication is a monologue rather than a dialogue. Being a good communicator is extremely important to being a good leader, because good communication can be essential to daily operations, in addition to being critical to flight safety.

Being a good communicator requires the ability to listen. Good leaders should pay attention to what is being said rather than thinking about what they will say next. Effective communication does not necessarily ensure success, nor does inept communication always result in failure. However, communication is crucial.

Most public safety organizations have a hierarchical chain of command, and one of the leader's responsibilities is to pass information up and down the chain of command. Leaders cannot simply wait for information to be

given to them. If information is needed, a good leader goes and gets the information. The best way to accomplish this task is to think about what information superiors will need in addition to what information followers will need.

There is no reason why a task passed down from superiors to followers should be unclear. A leader must make sure that tasks are clear and should articulate the tasks in a way that followers have no question as to what a successful outcome will be. There may be cases where the leader knows a particular order or task will not be looked upon favorably, but the leader's responsibility is to accurately pass on the information that followers need rather than sugar coating information to make it more palatable. Unpopular orders are easier for employees to follow when the leader consistently shares both good and bad experiences with aircrews.

LEADERS BUILD COHESIVE UNITS

Sharing experiences is directly linked to being part of a team. The supervisor of an air unit must be part of the air unit, not just a coach that watches from the sidelines without experiencing what is happening on the field.

In James Q. Wilson's book Bureaucracy, he notes that "Soldiers fight when the men next to them expect them to fight. Soldiers fight well when they are members of cohesive small groups and led by officers they trust; they fight poorly when the group lacks cohesion and the officers cannot inspire trust." The leadership tactic of being part of the unit motivates, inspires, builds cohesion and forges trust.

WHY SMALL UNIT LEADERSHIP?

Small unit leadership can impact the everyday performance of aviation units. Leadership is more of an art than a science, and even if you follow tips in the bestselling leadership book you find in your local bookstore (there are plenty of them), it does not guarantee success. Managing aviation units is necessary and must be done well. Leadership is the intangible that allows aviation units to sustain their performance during trying events. The fact that the unit's paperwork is in order and all the logbooks are filled out correctly is important, but by itself does not sustain unit performance.

Leadership and leadership's influence on motivation, initiative and cohesion is at least as important as good management to the unit's performance and safety.