

FILLING LEADERSHIP VACANCIES
WITH QUALIFIED PERSONNEL

ARTICLE

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Early in August 1945, two large mushroom clouds appeared over Japan. American technology had brought an end to one of the bloodiest conflicts the world had seen. As America disassembled its enormous military machine, millions of servicemen returned to their homes eager for a return to normalcy. These men married, bought homes and quickly started families. In 1946 alone, over three million children were born. This boom in births continued between 1946 and 1964, and over 75 million births were recorded. The individuals born during that period are affectionately referred to as Baby Boomers. (Baby Boomer Headquarters, WWW.BBHQ.COM, 1999).

By 1964 Boomers represented approximately 40 percent of the United States population. As the oldest Boomers graduated from high school, choices were made regarding starting careers or attending college. Many in both groups had their lives disrupted by military service during the Vietnam conflict. By the late 60's or early 70's, with college and/or military service concluded, the Boomers flocked to the workplace. Many chose careers in law enforcement.

Fast forward to the present. Organizations around the country are breathing a collective sigh of relief, having successfully

negotiated the potentially serious problems associated with Y2K. As these organizations began creating strategic plans for the new millennium, a new issue arose. Administrators recognized that a serious management void would be created as a result of upcoming baby boomer retirements.

Private sector businesses, with their reliance on the Social Security system, will not begin to see the first of these retirements until 2008, when the first boomers reach the minimum retirement age of 62. This gives them the luxury of an eight to ten-year window to create succession plans. Public safety organizations, however, have already begun to see the first wave of baby boomer retirements. The oldest boomers have been eligible for retirement for the past four years, but most are preparing to leave in the near future. Many of these individuals are in leadership positions within their organizations. Enhancements to the retirement system, such as the 3% @ 50 formula, which provides retirees with 3% of their base salary for each year of service at age 50, may encourage younger leaders to leave earlier than anticipated. Most law enforcement agencies have done little or no planning and preparation for the leadership void this will create.

The current command structure of the Buena Park Police Department is an excellent example of this issue. Our agency has an authorized strength of 94 sworn police officers. The rank

structure includes an administrative staff comprised of the Chief of Police and two captains. The middle management staff includes six lieutenants and a civilian records manager. The supervisory staff is comprised of 14 sergeants. All of these leaders, with the exception of six younger sergeants, are expected to retire between now and 2005.

There will be no captains to become the Chief of Police, or lieutenants to become captains, as is normally the trend. Even making the unlikely assumption that all six of the remaining sergeants are capable of assuming the duties of a lieutenant, there would still be three vacancies at the very top of the command pyramid. If two of the current sergeants are able to move effectively through the lieutenant position, and become captains, there will still be no candidate for police chief. Of even more concern is the need to prepare several individuals for the role of first-line supervisor, knowing that some of these individuals may have to make a double jump through the rank of sergeant to the rank of lieutenant by 2005. The current requirement, three years as a police officer to test for sergeant, and two years experience as a sergeant to test for lieutenant, only compounds the issue.

While this problem of mass attrition due to baby boomer retirements affects all law enforcement agencies, it can be particularly devastating to small and medium size police

departments. The “Band-Aid” solution of looking for leaders outside your organization is certainly available. A recent article in the Life and Work section of the Orange County Register describes the downsides to that alternative. Dave Murphy, a writer for the San Francisco Examiner, wrote his article after interviewing William C. Byham. Byham is the chief executive of Development Dimensions International in Bridgeville, Pennsylvania. He is currently authoring a book entitled Grow Your Own Leaders. Murphy wrote, “Companies aren’t developing new leaders. Hiring top management from outside can cost more and lead to loyalty problems. So try training from within.” (Murphy, 1999, p. 10). Murphy gave four reasons why companies should do a better job developing leadership from within. Each of these is extremely applicable to a police agency. He stated, “Although organizations have good reasons to bring in people from outside, doing so may lead to four problems:

- Resentment from long-time employees who didn’t get promoted.
- The high cost of recruitment and replacement.
- The possibility of failure.
- Decreased loyalty” (Murphy, 1999, p. 10).

If small and medium size police agencies are to be successful in developing qualified internal candidates, it is essential that they create formal plans to develop the leadership potential of their

employees. The Buena Park Police Department was fortunate to have recognized this issue several years ago. Over the past several years we developed a strategic plan to ensure that leadership vacancies are filled with qualified individuals from within the organization. Our plan deals with the development of future leaders and with the retention of existing personnel. This plan has proven to be successful in Buena Park and will work for other medium size police agencies willing to make the commitment. The plan has three main elements:

- Begin preparing employees to assume leadership roles when they are hired, and continue to mentor and train them throughout their careers.
- Encourage employees to acquire additional formal education.
- Coordinate efforts among existing leaders to stagger their departures, to reduce the impact upon the organization.

New police officers are actively encouraged to find appropriate mentors from among their peers and supervisors from the time they are hired. Staff regularly reinforces the importance of mentoring, and questions regarding the topic routinely show up during promotional orals. We have also developed a formal program called the Leadership Workshop. This 40-hour program covers a variety of topics including: organizational expectations, ethics, the role of a sergeant, effective resumes, and to how to prepare for the various

components of the process. Effective, credible instructors from around the state present the program.

Earlier this year, the Buena Park Police Department administered a supervisory promotional process. The results of that process were analyzed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Leadership Workshop to prepare future leaders for the formal promotional process. Of the 13 competitors, the top 10 candidates were graduates of the workshop. Interviews with the successful candidates indicated that the mentoring they received in the workshop was the best preparation for the process.

Formal education is being encouraged internally and through financial incentive. The current memorandum of understanding pays many of the costs for officers furthering their education. Additionally, educational incentives are paid to degree holders.

Meetings have been held with the Department's current managers, to make them aware of the implications of mass retirements. All have agreed work with administration to plan staggered service retirements to minimize the impact of their departures.

In developing a plan to ensure that leadership vacancies are filled with qualified individuals, from within the organization, there are two primary options to consider. First, the agency can work toward retaining the present leaders. Secondly, the agency can

develop new leaders to assume the vacancies as they occur. The optimum strategic plan will include a little of both of these strategies, and should be customized to meet the individual organization's needs.

Reference List

- - - - (1999, December). Baby Boomer Numbers. Baby Boomer Headquarters, WWW.BBHQ.COM.

Murphy, Dave. (1999, December 13) Life and Work, Business Monday. Orange County Register. 1