

A Public Service Column for Members: A Look At Wellness



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Creating A Positive Behavioral Climate

Have you ever wondered why people seem to intentionally do things that are harmful, counterproductive or just plain ignorant? Me too. As a supervisor, teacher, wife and parent, I have often made requests that, to me, seemed reasonable and logical, only to be met with resistance. There are several reasons for this.

Communication: Criticism and Dictates

Admit it, none of us is fond of "constructive criticism." Nevertheless, we all have to receive it at one time or another. The way it is delivered can make all the difference. There are two main communication barriers, people do not like criticism and people do not like being told what to do. It is human nature even in paramilitary organizations.

Let's start with the criticism sandwich. Would you rather be greeted with criticism every time your supervisor had a beef, or would you rather hear what you have done right in addition to areas for improvement? My mother always said you attract more flies with honey.

Most of us bristle and become very defensive if we get more criticism than praise, hence the criticism sandwich. Start with a positive statement, "Bob, I noticed that you have really increased your presence in your zone, and that is really making a lot of the business owners and residents happy. . ." Then add the constructive criticism. (You notice I said constructive.) Your comments need to be objective, quantifiable and measurable, such as, "Unfortunately I have noticed that the amount of traffic enforcement you have been doing has gone down, and that is one of the department's stated priorities." Then summarize and tie everything together. "I do not want to discourage you from developing those relationships, as that is how we find out where and what the problems are. Maybe you could talk to some people about where the perceived problem traffic areas are in your zone and work those for 30 minutes per day."

Let's take the criticism sandwich and apply it to criminals. Many good interrogators are already good at this. Starting out an interview by telling the person how you "know they are really a good person" or how you "understand that they felt trapped and were doing this for a good reason. . ." You develop rapport with the person so they feel that you understand their motives and point of view. Then you tell them what the problem is, what you really need them to do to help and how you will help them out if they help you. Finally, reiterate that you know they are really a good person... yadda... yadda... yadda. In this way, you let them save face because you are asking for help instead of forcing a confession.

The second major block is that we do not like being told what to do. Think about it. Are you more inclined to do things when you are told to do them if the only rationale you are given is "Because I told you so" or if the person issues a dictate, but provides a reasonable rationale. The key words here are *reasonable rationale*. A rationale is deemed reasonable the more of the following qualities it meets:

1. It demonstrates that the person issuing the dictate contemplated all direct and indirect effects of this decision (on the person, the person's family, the person's activities outside of work...)
2. It communicates that the person issuing the dictate cares about the other person
3. It communicates how this decision is in the best interest of the person

It also helps if the dictate/order/request is reasonable. Most people can do anything for a short period of time if they know there is an end in sight. Which of the following statements would be better received...

"The south side of the county is out of control. I do not know what you have been doing, but it is certainly not proactive policework. I do not want command staff on my back, so you all will be working rotating shifts and mandatory overtime until it is fixed."

Or

"The west side is out of control. I know you all have been working really hard, but there are still some problems. It is much harder for me to approve leave for schools, and time off with command staff scrutinizing our every move. Therefore, I have come up with a plan to try and fix the problem. I know a few of you are in school and many of you have children and family obligations, so this will not be easy, but if we can push through for the next three months and really make a difference, we should be able to relax a bit after that. This is the time to take all that hard work you have done developing relationships and put it to use. I know you all really need a break, but I cannot give that to you until we satisfy the captain."

The latter has something of a criticism sandwich, acknowledges awareness of your employees as people, gives a time frame (which often goes a long way when trying to de-escalate the wife), explains why this course of action is in their best interest and reiterates your concern and understanding of their point of view. Awww shucks...Ain't that just all warm and fuzzy?

Reinforcement: Make it less painful to do it your way than to stay the same.

We do not do things that are inherently punishing. What does that mean? Well, it means that we weigh the benefits and drawbacks of every thing we do, and only do those things that are beneficial/rewarding/reinforcing. The tricky part is first figuring out what your staff, criminal, spouse or child finds rewarding and then ensuring that the things you ask them to do provide those rewards. Examples...

My son loves his Star Wars video games..actually anything that lets him blow stuff up. In our house, he earns blocks of time on those games for completing different tasks. For example: 30 minutes of video games if he completes his homework, 10 minutes for taking out the trash, 10 minutes for cleaning up the bathroom after his bath. We also found educational video games that let him blow stuff up (like the old alien invaders games we used to play). It is amazing how much math my child will do if he gets to shoot/destroy the correct answer.

Okay, so we are not going to let our employees play video games on duty, although blowing stuff up might be an option for some of them. It is, however, duly noted by your employees when they are afforded down time as a reward for working hard the rest of the time. In my former job, I was the "clean-up" person. I was regularly transferred to failing programs and told to either make them profitable or they would be cut. I could have gone in with a heavy hand and proceeded to regurgitate the litany of things that were wrong. That would have gotten me nowhere. The key, in my opinion, to my success was compassion for my staff. Yes, I raised the bar. I had very high expectations. But I acknowledged what they were doing right, identified the problems, heard their suggestions, explained the rationale behind my decisions and gave them some leeway. As long as my staff's counseling sessions, groups and paperwork were completed in a timely manner, I tended to look the other way when they were

