

Understanding the Opportunities & Challenges, While Avoiding the Pitfalls

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So you want to be a supervisor. Receiving a promotion is a good thing; it presents many opportunities for personal and professional growth. A promotion also brings its share of problems and trials. Whether you've recently been promoted to a supervisory position or are hoping to become a supervisor, you'll face many transitional challenges for which you may not be prepared. To ensure a smooth transition, you should examine your opportunities, understand the challenges and learn how to avoid the pitfalls.

EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES IN YOUR OWN AGENCY

First, let's examine the opportunities. Almost any agency can present opportunities for advancement, although some may be harder to find than others. You may have to wait for an opening, or you may have to create your own position. You might also have to look beyond your agency to find an opportunity that's right for you.

No matter how large or small, public safety agencies have certain common factors that govern promotions. High turnover, budget constraints and even the corporate desire for expansion or exclusivity are a few commonalities. Either turnover or expansion can result in the creation of supervisor positions and present opportunities for advancement.

The first objective for you as an aspiring supervisor is to know and perform your current job well. If you don't have a firm grasp on your existing position, you most likely won't have the necessary base of knowledge, skills and abilities to be promoted.

Second, learn everything you can about the position you're seeking. Read the job description in your agency's "Rules and Regulations" or other employee information guide. Some agencies publish job descriptions online, which can be a valuable resource. This also gives you the opportunity to see what other agencies expect of the position. If you can't locate a job description, consult your human resources department. You can also find out more by speaking with those who already hold the position and with their subordinates.

After you've learned as much as you can about the position you're seeking, take a good look at the required knowledge, skills and abilities and see how you measure up. Make a checklist with three categories: *meet*, *exceed* and *need improvement*. Then, grade yourself to get a good indication of what you have to offer and what you need to work on. This process can also help you when it comes time to fill out an application and/or update your résumé. The better you prepare before you apply, the better your chance for success.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

If your agency has no current opportunities, you still have options. You can wait for an opening, create your own opportunity or look beyond your own agency. If the turnover rate at your agency is low or there's little possibility of expansion, start investigating what unmet needs your agency may have. This requires taking a look at every job description to see what is *supposed* to be done by that position and comparing it with what *is* being done. What duties are not delineated?

What duties are not being performed because other duties take up too much time? Is the training division a shambles? Is there a need for a full-time computer (or information technology) person?

Once you determine what your agency really needs, take another look at your abilities and see what you have to offer. This can be difficult and time-consuming, but it has the possibility of culminating in a job tailor-made for you and your agency!

If—after examining the possibilities within your own agency—you don't find a good match, don't be afraid to branch out. Is there an affiliated agency with more opportunities? Is there another agency that might be hiring from the outside for a supervisory or management position? *One cautionary note:* The grass is *not* always greener elsewhere.

Determine your best course of action, whether it's leaving the familiar, continuing to learn all you can about your current agency, waiting for an opportunity or creating your own.

DEVELOPING YOUR PROFESSIONAL CAREER

You may be in the process of researching a position, be waiting for a position to open up or already have applied for a position, so what do you do while you're waiting? Regardless of whether or not a promotion is on your horizon, developing your professional and personal life is important. Seeking out courses and informative seminars is an excellent way to bolster your qualifications.

Knowledge is power, so be assertive in your quest.

THE NEXT STEPS

Let's say you've done your research, continued your professional development and succeeded in earning a promotion. You've outshined the competition, and now the position is yours. You're a supervisor. Congratulations!

Now comes the hard part. Your relationships and your responsibilities will change. In addition to all that, you'll be walking a fine line while you attempt to "prove" you were the right choice. These changes can lead to trials and tribulations, but if you learn the common pitfalls and how to avoid them, you'll be ahead of the game.

Relationship changes: With any change in title comes inevitable changes in relationships. You leave your familiar set of peers and join a new set. This may be one of the hardest transitions to make.

For quite some time, you've been part of a group with similar pay, work hours, interests and job responsibilities. Even if your relationships have been confined to work hours, these relationships will be greatly affected because of your promotion. This may cause your co-workers—and you—to question your loyalties. Your former co-workers will expect you to make changes on their behalf, and your new peers will expect you to see their point of view. This can make it difficult to remain friends with your former co-workers. For example, if you're going to supervise a friend you had prior to your promotion, you may want to look into a shift change for either you or your friend. This does not mean that you can't keep your old relationships; it does mean that you must remain objective. You must decide the type of interaction you will have and ensure it doesn't affect the execution of your new responsibilities. One way to help ease this transition is to examine how your relationships might change with a promotion while you're still in the exploration stage.

RESOURCES ~

APCO has an array of informational, Web-based seminars and on-site courses that can help prepare you for leadership. *Example:* The Registered Public-Safety Leadership certification program will be offered in fall 2007. Look for information on this dynamic collection of courses in the spring.

No matter what discussions you have with your friends about your promotion, it can be very difficult to maintain both professional and personal relationships. In all cases of argument, hurt feelings and resentment, be the better person and do not succumb to pettiness.

Another trap to avoid in this change of relationship is trying to be popular. In the effort to be liked, some new supervisors are tempted to make promises about implementing change. Be careful. Even if you were given certain assurances, during an interview perhaps, practice care when communicating this to your subordinates. In many agencies, change comes slowly, and if you start making grand promises, you may end up looking like a failure when those

changes either take longer than expected or don't happen at all. While it may make you popular in the short run to make grandiose promises or give friends preferential treatment, it will catch up with you, and ultimately you will fail as a supervisor.

As a supervisor, you will most likely need to make decisions that could positively affect some and negatively affect others. This will not win you friends. The key is to maintain objectivity and keep lines of communication open so your subordinates understand the reasons behind any decisions or changes you make.

Don't confuse popularity with respect. You don't have to be popular to be a good supervisor, but you must have the respect of those you supervise. The only promises you may want to make are those of character. It is one thing to promise that you will do your best and quite another to guarantee hourly breaks and paid lunches. It's better to prove yourself by your actions, not your words.

Responsibility changes: Even if you're convinced you won't change after a promotion, you will change. You may have been a dispatcher, a calltaker, a records clerk or served in any number of frontline positions, but you will change because your responsibilities will change. You need to know how to plan, negotiate and delegate. Now the decisions you make affect more than just yourself. You are responsible for more than just you. Just as you will be doing different things, you won't be able to do the same things you did. This can be difficult, especially for those who get promoted because they're good at what they do.

For a position that has been recently created or never-before filled, the first person to hold it often sets the precedence for the role. Make sure you have a job description and know what's expected of you. Don't rely on the spoken word. If there's not an official job description, take measures to have one formalized.

During any transition where you are learning a new role and new responsibilities, it can take time to develop confidence and stability. Most agencies provide for a probationary period to allow for that adjustment. Don't take that time for granted. It's during your probationary period that you should learn as much as you can as fast as you can about how to do your job. At the same time,

however, don't make excuses for yourself (e.g., "You'll have to forgive me; I'm new."). Instead, decide upfront to handle difficult situations with grace and patience. It's fine to admit you don't know something, but better to have a plan in place to ensure you learn about it.

Asserting your authority: With this change in responsibility comes authority. This may have been one of the reasons you applied for the position. Up until now, you've been on the outside looking in and have most likely formulated your own opinion about how things should be run. Keep in mind that you must be careful in how you assert this newfound authority. You might have the authority to dictate when your staff goes on break or who to schedule for overtime or order to stay late. How you handle these situations, with grace or petty ruthlessness, is a true test of a good supervisor. You must understand your authority and decide how you will act before a situation arises.

One challenge with a change in authority is learning the difference between perceived authority and real authority. Make sure you know your true authority. Real

give you the right to deny them the same consideration you would give anyone else.

DON'T GIVE UP

It won't be easy. As you adjust to your new relationships and responsibilities, you may think, "What have I gotten myself into?" This is a natural reaction similar to "buyer's remorse." It will take time for people to accept you in your new role. Any transition can be difficult. Think about when you were the new person. How did you conduct yourself? What worked and what didn't?

▶ RECOMMENDED READING ~

- *Every Officer Is a Leader: Transforming Leadership in Police, Justice, and Public Safety* by Terry D. Anderson; published 1999 by CRC Press; available from Amazon.com.
- *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* by Stephen R. Covey; published 1989 by Simon & Schuster; available from Amazon.com.
- *Essentials of Management* by Andrew J. DuBrin; published 1997 by South-Western College Publishing; available from Amazon.com.
- Duke University's Personal Assistance Service Web site: www.hr.duke.edu/eohs/pas/supervisor.html.
- Free Management Library (easy-to-access, comprehensive resources regarding the leadership and management of yourself, other individuals, groups and organizations): www.managementhelp.org.

authority comes from your job description and assignments from your supervisor. Perceived authority comes from your subordinates' perspective. What you thought your supervisor had the "power" to do may or may not have been accurate. Likewise, your subordinates may assume you have the power to make decisions that may or may not be supported by your actual authority. If you really don't have the authority to tell a subordinate to leave for the day, but do so anyway, they will most

likely comply (perceived authority) and it will be you who gets into trouble. If you start out in your new role by being conscientious about what is truly your responsibility and under your scope of authority, it will keep you from overstepping your bounds.

The way you assert your real authority can also get you into trouble. Just because you may now have the authority to tell people when they can and can't go on break does not mean you can abuse it. Having a problem with one of your subordinates does not

What did you learn from that experience that will help you now? Your core being has not changed, but, over time, your attitude and demeanor may have. Make sure you have a firm grasp on what the position requires and how you will proceed with issues before they occur.

Don't rely on word of mouth for making decisions. It's OK to rely on others' expertise during your transition, but eventually you'll have to stand on your own and prove you were the right choice. Remember, you would not have been promoted if you did

not have the right stuff. If you do your research, continue to develop yourself professionally as well as personally and plan ahead for how you will deal with issues and assert your authority, you'll have the tools to make the successful transition into a model supervisor. || **PSC** ||

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1. If you want a promotion you should:

- a. First look outside your agency.
- b. First look within your agency.
- c. Create a position.
- d. Just wait and see.

2. Hiring authorities look for candidates who:

- a. Know and perform their job well.
- b. Are good at giving orders.
- c. Want to leave and go elsewhere.
- d. Are adequate but bored employees.

3. The best way to go about creating a new position is to:

- a. Complain that there are no opportunities for promotion.
- b. Describe how inadequate the job descriptions are.
- c. Look for what needs to be done but isn't getting done.
- d. There is no way to create a new position.

4. When you become a supervisor, it will be easy to keep your old relationships because nothing has really changed except your title.

- a. True
- b. False

5. If you are promoted above a friend, you should:

- a. Realize you cannot maintain friendships any longer.
- b. Favor your friend in your decision-making process.
- c. Not worry because your friendship won't change.
- d. Not let the friendship affect the execution of your duties.

6. Popularity is the same thing as respect.

- a. True
- b. False

7. As a new supervisor, you should use your probationary period to:

- a. Learn all you can about your new job.
- b. Lean solely on the good graces of others.
- c. Make excuses that you're new at this.
- d. Let others make your decisions for you.

8. Perceived authority comes from:

- a. The perspective of your supervisor.
- b. The perspective of your subordinates.
- c. Your job description.
- d. Orders from your supervisor.

9. As long as you have the authority, you can assert it any way you choose.

- a. True
- b. False

10. The best way to keep from overstepping your bounds is to:

- a. Not do anything that you don't have to do.
- b. Understand the scope of your authority.
- c. Make decisions based on perception.
- d. Use perceived authority to your advantage.

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